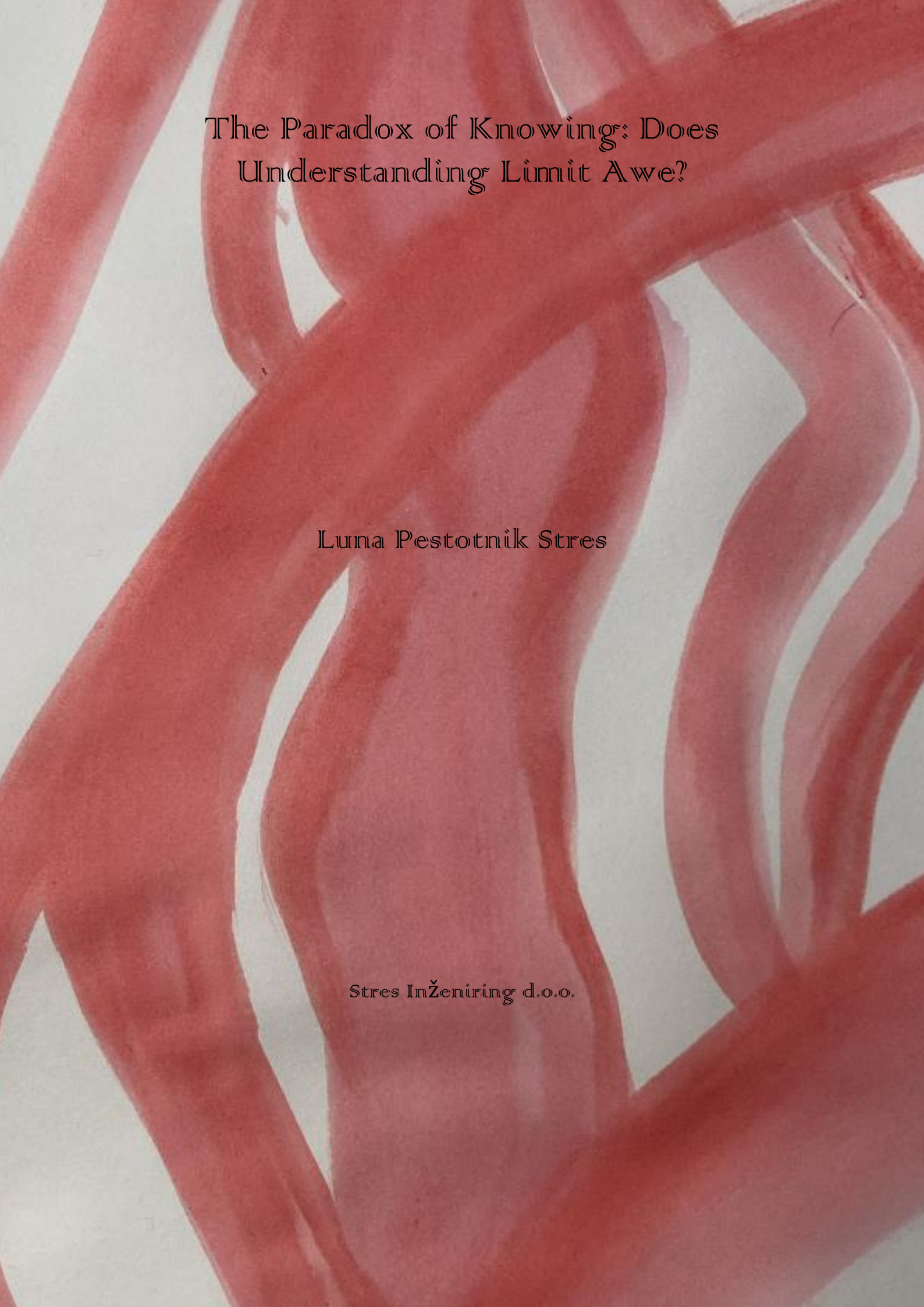

The Paradox of Knowing: Does Understanding Limit Awe?

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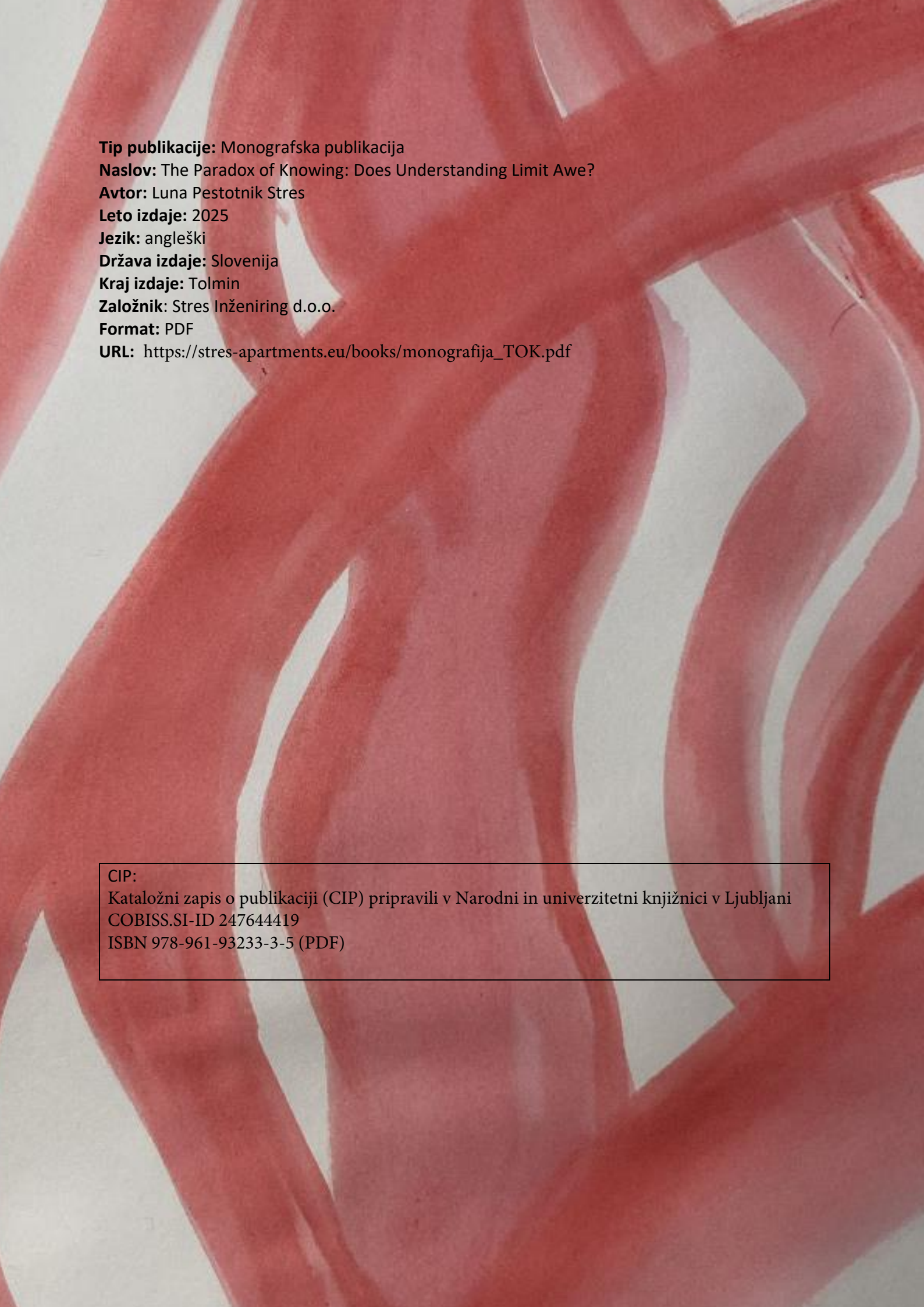
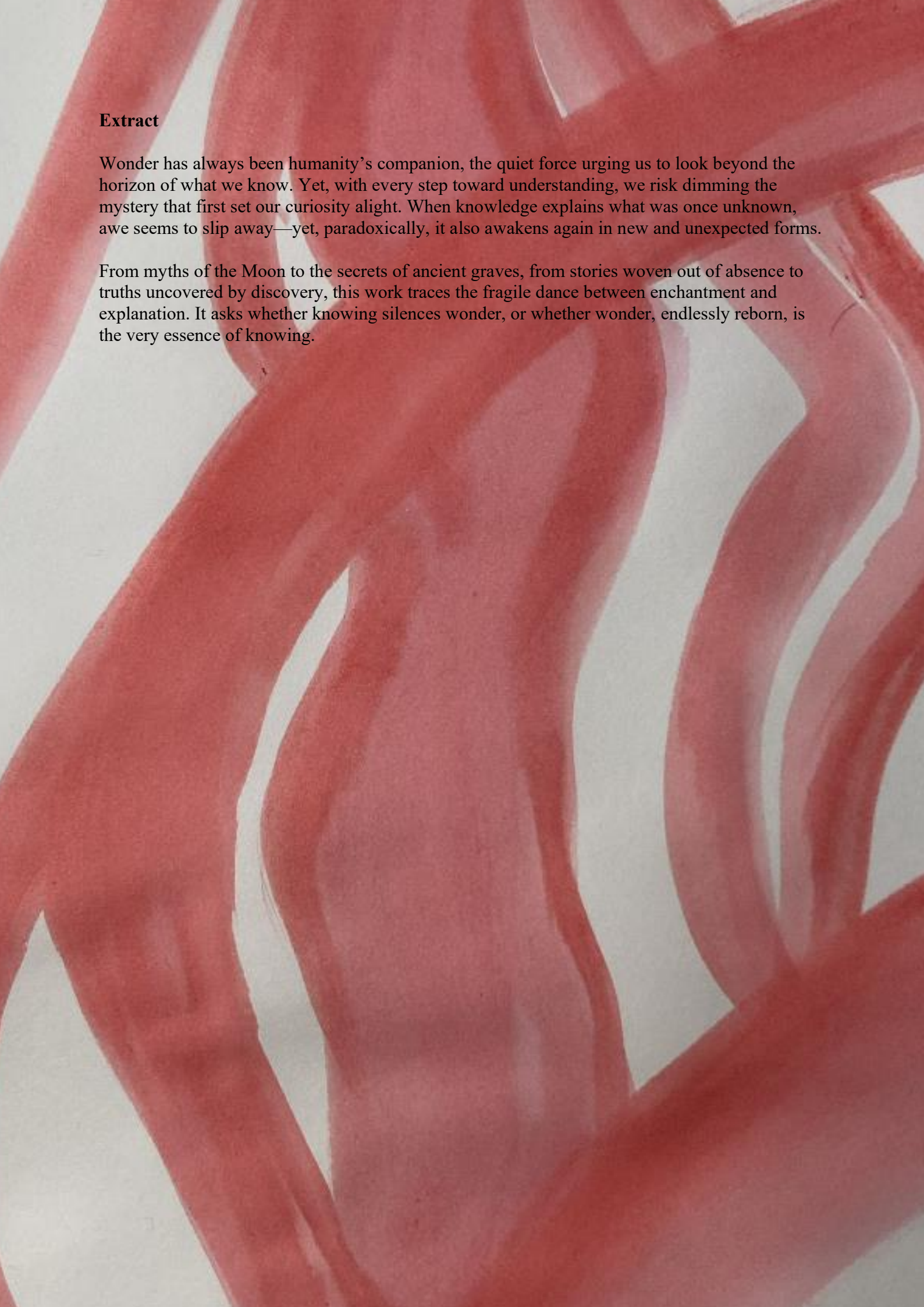


Tip publikacije: Monografska publikacija
Naslov: The Paradox of Knowing: Does Understanding Limit Awe?
Avtor: Luna Pestotnik Stres
Leto izdaje: 2025
Jezik: angleški
Država izdaje: Slovenija
Kraj izdaje: Tolmin
Založnik: Stres Inženiring d.o.o.
Format: PDF
URL: https://stres-apartments.eu/books/monografija_TOK.pdf

CIP:
Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani
COBISS.SI-ID 247644419
ISBN 978-961-93233-3-5 (PDF)



Extract

Wonder has always been humanity's companion, the quiet force urging us to look beyond the horizon of what we know. Yet, with every step toward understanding, we risk dimming the mystery that first set our curiosity alight. When knowledge explains what was once unknown, awe seems to slip away—yet, paradoxically, it also awakens again in new and unexpected forms.

From myths of the Moon to the secrets of ancient graves, from stories woven out of absence to truths uncovered by discovery, this work traces the fragile dance between enchantment and explanation. It asks whether knowing silences wonder, or whether wonder, endlessly reborn, is the very essence of knowing.

Humans have always been driven by an internal sense of wonder, igniting the desire to pursue new knowledge. Our species has developed because of the sense of wonder, resulting in our determination to seek new knowledge and use it to our advantage. Wonder's driving effect has significantly impacted how we interpret knowledge and how our world functions today. Wonder, as the force behind acquiring new knowledge, can result from two distinctive but interconnected approaches. Firstly, the world has revolved around the many mysteries that have captured the human imagination since its beginning, which man's limited knowledge has transformed into myth. The natural sciences have helped us unravel many of those mysteries and demystify the myths by transforming wonder into systematically pursuing knowledge and providing explanations. A similar pattern is noted in historical discoveries, where the sense of wonder steers us to analyse and interpret historical events. Wonder encourages the search for new knowledge but also leads us to a reduction of the unknown. When the mysteries that once sparked curiosity are replaced by understanding, the enchantment of the unknown, fueling our wonder, is reduced or disappears. However, newly gained knowledge also leads to new openings, discovering previously unknown perceptions, creating a space for new curiosity, and thus recreating wonder. Wonder can, therefore, be associated with mysticism and belief in mystical powers, as well as a desire to know more and a curiosity about the unknown, which transpires through knowledge acquisition.

The role of historians has always been associated with the responsibility to investigate and preserve the past. Acquiring knowledge in the field of history potentially destroys our sense of wonder, as factual evidence overrules the previous speculations and various interpretations.

In the 1947 Roswell event (“What really happened”), an unidentified object crashed into the town. As the U.S. Army quickly removed the debris, claiming it was a weather balloon, the mystery sparked many conspiracy theories but was not discussed further. Decades later, with

UFO (unidentified flying object) theories gaining popularity, residents claimed alien autopsies were conducted in the military morgue, leading many to believe that the object was alien-owned. Eventually, historians were able to prove that the object was part of the secret Project Mogul, designed to carry measuring equipment, and the alleged "aliens" were casualties of a nearby plane crash. In this case, the lack of concrete knowledge surrounding the event created a sense of wonder, sparking imagination, which led to the creation of many different theories. Once historians were able to make a thorough analysis of the evidence, utilised testimonies and reconstructed events, the uncertainties regarding the event were resolved.

Consequently, they left little to be wondered about and destroyed the created wonder around the event. Such a disappointing transition from mystery to mere facts may sometimes be challenging for some, as their beliefs lose credibility. Instead of embracing facts, they consequently cling to their alternative realities. This proves that profound curiosity and wonder, both normal human responses to events, can lead to deeply rooted assumptions, which, once formed, may override the contradictory evidence as individuals start to prioritise their version of reality over objective findings. Wonder, therefore, thrives in ambiguity, and sometimes, transparent, objective truth feels less satisfying than the alternative explanation provided.

On the contrary, some historical discoveries instigate the opposite pattern. Wonder is not destroyed with knowledge acquisition but acts as a base for new knowledge, introducing discoveries, which again inspire wonder, and the connection between new knowledge and wonder becomes an interconnected cycle. In history, this sequence can be seen in many ongoing discoveries, where historians can discover only parts of the truth in seemingly unrelated events. Additional analysed and interpreted data offer ever-new insights into the bigger picture. In turn, new questions arise, and wonder based on newly known facts stimulates the research through the desire to learn more.

A great example illustrating such a claim is the 1878 discovery of a grave belonging to a great Viking warrior in the city of Birka (“DNA suggests”). The worrier has then been pronounced as a male. In the 1970s, the first contradictory evidence of the warrior’s gender was presented, and in 2013, the mistake was confirmed. The discovery sparked doubt about the gender roles in Viking culture, which has further spread to other cultures of the Stone Age. It provided a

foundation for reevaluating the already existing knowledge about the Viking's warriors. After examining the discovery, the contradictory evidence between the existing beliefs and the newly discovered knowledge about female warriors acted as a base for creating wonder regarding the significance of gender roles in Viking culture. Moreover, the created wonder has not only influenced the particular case but has sparked discussions about the credibility of evidence in proving the beliefs about gender roles in other cultures.

Furthermore, an essential consideration of the influence of bias in the creation of wonder should be acknowledged. In the 19th century, the gender roles were clearly labelled. Therefore, it is plausible that historians of the time, driven by a sense of wonder created under the assumption that the warriors could only be males, were inclined to interpret evidence in a way that supported their beliefs. However, with the development of the world, our perceptions of gender roles have changed, and society has been able to approach such discoveries from a different perspective, not being driven by any expectations.

In natural sciences, wonder is associated with curiosity and the endless drive to keep discovering and delving into the unknown. It is the pillar of our development and has enabled us to pursue the path of a better understanding of the world. Wonder arises from our ability to create connections between known knowledge, critically evaluate it, and use it to reach discoveries. Consequently, wonder inspires knowers to continue searching and improving our lives. Without wonder, the growth of our civilisation would be nearly impossible, as it is the leading reason why we strive for a better, more developed world.

In the past, the Moon has been covered in a veil of mystery and a source of wonder. For centuries, it has been perceived as a guiding spirit or a god, influencing people's actions ("OpenAI"). Each culture perceived the moon differently, adapting its function to its mythological history. The initial wonder about the Moon is rooted deep in humanity. It encouraged scientists to pursue research on the Moon's surface, culminating in the 1960s with the Apollo missions ("History"). The Apollo astronauts discovered valuable materials on the moon's surface, such as Olivine, Silicon and Titanium ("The value"). The discoveries have sparked more questions regarding the potential use of the moon's surface, which led to further, more complex research, resulting in the discovery of a light and stable isotope, Helium-3, exhibiting specific chemical features. The rarity of the isotope led scientists to

wonder about its prospective uses, which resulted in the recognition of its potential for the operation of fusion reactors. This connection between the two distinctive sky objects, the Moon and the Earth, implies that our wonder can not only revolve around a specific situation but can create complex interdependence between two seemingly unconnected environments.

Even though wonder may generate new knowledge, leading to a better world, it can further lead to detrimental effects in the context of ethical issues or in relation to the environment. While the outcomes of moon research imply its positive impact on society, the discovery process stemming from our irresistible wonder can cause harm. The research of the moon produces large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions, significantly contributing to climate change. While the discovery of Helium-3 is a possible solution to the ongoing energy emission crisis ("Helium"), the processes connected to it are an ongoing environmental threat. Simultaneously, space research produces significant amounts of debris that damage the Moon's surface. This could make the Moon difficult or impossible to inhabit in the future. Wonder can, therefore, be beneficial for some of those involved but harmful to others. Nevertheless, it is impossible to direct the consequences of wonder while reaching for new knowledge in a way that eliminates all harmful effects.

Furthermore, wonder encourages us to explore, but it often leads to ethical concerns. While presently, no country has a unique ownership of the Moon and all nations are accorded equal rights and access ("Who owns"), we must acknowledge that this might change. Today, knowledge of the Moon's surface and its accessibility is still relatively small, and therefore, such discussions might be needless. However, as knowledge evolves, the absence of rules and boundaries for using the lunar surface could lead to conflicts on Earth (and the Moon).

In conclusion, knowledge can both enhance and destroy our wonder. In history, the lack of evidence might lead to the creation of wonder, which is based on people's internalised expectations. Contradictory evidence might, therefore, destroy the wonder associated with an event, as it brings clarity and offers an additional, factually supported storyline. However, human response to discoveries can also showcase the complexity of human emotions associated with wonder, as some refuse to believe the real nature of events. On the contrary, acquiring knowledge of history can also lead to the creation of new wonder, which can

consequently spark new debates, uncover underlying biases and mistakes and encourage investigations to search further. Similarly, in the natural sciences, wonder, arising from curiosity, drives scientific discoveries. The interconnection between knowledge and wonder can reveal the significance of continuous research, which is crucial for the world's advancement. However, the processes originating from wonder might, without consideration for the consequences, benefit some while damaging others. Moreover, the wonder-based explorations might also raise ethical concerns, which pose a significant threat in the future.

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