

Condensity

by Ash Kilmartin

It's not a large room. Maybe bigger than I remembered it being, though. Grubby walls, lino-tile floor. No more and no less than required. No ventilation, so every time I cook or shower, it becomes humid and the air turns thick. The volume of clear airspace decreases noticeably, losing territory to a kind of cloud. It's too cold to open the fogged windows, and even when I do, the cloud doesn't dissipate. When I go out for supplies the cloud comes too.

This fog has been following me around me for two weeks now, loitering, dense and energetic, a diffuse image that moves along languorously and springy like a greyhound on a day off, needing a walk, stretching and contracting just for the enjoyment of that elegant motion. Most of the time it's just out of sight behind me, but sometimes if I stop suddenly, it tumbles over itself having failed to react quickly enough to retain its usual casual distance from me. Then I see parts of it clearly in close proximity, both image and I surprising each other when we connect unexpectedly. But within a few seconds it has collected and dispersed again.

I can't tell whether all of this fog is mine, somehow generated by my activity, or just spontaneously becoming attached; maybe it has accumulated here over a long time and I've just unknowingly moved into its domain. Either way, it seems to only ever grow bigger. I began doubting whether it can even be possible to gauge this vapour, hanging out at the fringes of vision.

The International Bureau of Weights and Measures is just outside the city (officially on the other side of an administrative border, but considered part of the same; the borders have shifted outwards so many times anyway). They keep there the original metre: that is, the first hundred centimetres, the hundred contiguous centimetres of cast platinum and iridium that all other instances of a hundred contiguous centimetres are based on. They also hold the prototype of the kilogram. I wanted to see these objects, to just look at the tangible evidence of abstract qualities, so I wrote to the Bureau. A few days later, the Bureau wrote back; their answer was no. As a small intergovernmental organisation, running scientific labs and upholding entire worldwide systems of measurement, they haven't the time or space to receive me. As it was explained,

"incidentally, the 'cave' where the International Prototype of the Kilogramme (and the historic Metre) are preserved are opened very rarely indeed (usually only on one occasion a year when our governance body by statute must check we have not lost them!). To open the vault requires three people to be present with their keys; the BIPM Director, the Chief Archivist of France, and the President of the CIPM (our governance body) who resides in Australia."

Apparently the kilogram (also made of cast platinum and iridium) is slowly losing weight, seeping into the atmosphere around itself. Which means that the weight of the metre must be changing too, trading ions with other nearby atoms, becoming blurry around the edges. I don't know whether that's any less problematic. The Bureau's metre hasn't been used as an official metrology standard since 1960, replaced by newer and less contingent modes. But the light kilogram remains as the definite article. Since hearing from the Bureau, rather than wondering what the metre and the kilogram look like, I've started to worry more about the three keys and the cave.

Right now I have the two keys to the foggy studio. Mitch, who resides in Australia, once had these keys too - the same ones, but at a different time. Which makes it a different room. And at an earlier time, I had the three keys to the gallery, which he has right now. Even if each room were only opened once per year, to check that they were both still there, they will have changed in a way that we can't measure, because each thing being measured is the standard unit of measurement which itself keeps changing (that's the problem metrologists have with "artefact-based units".) The cloudy mass slinks slightly closer each time I think of this.