



Cover :

Me n Dor on the fridge with dust

Bella Milroy, 12ø Collective's 30/30, 2020

Cover Image description:

A digital photograph capturing the blurry reflection of a crouched figure with what looks like a small white westie dog sat on their knee. The image sits between capturing the space of the room, and the hard surface on which the space is reflected, which is grubby and marked. The reflection is caught on the silvery surface of the fridge, which is covered in dust and makes the image blurry. The figures sit to the right of the image with their heads pointed down and to the left, with the rest of the blurry domestic space to the left of the image. The only clarity in the image is found in the top right corner where a shiny metallic strip depicts what looks like the fridge door handle.

Access As Meditation

A love letter to image descriptions and closed captioning

Bella Milroy

When considering where image descriptions (also known as alt-text) and closed captions sit within cultural consciousness, it's fair to say that these aspects of online accessibility, like most forms of accessibility, are not well used, understood, or even considered by the world at large.

They are a function of crucial access for disabled people not just online, but across all formats of visual and audible media. In taking up the practice of creating image descriptions and closed captions for my Instagram posts and stories about two years ago, I found not only were these incredibly exciting forms of writing, but they were inadvertently creating small prompts for mindful, meditative reflection as to what it was that I was looking at, hearing and feeling in that moment.

When used in this way, image descriptions, closed captions and audio recordings are both a vitally important part of accessibility, and a way of evoking the less tangible qualities of what is being experienced.

They have the potential to explore what is visible in ways that encourage a sense of atmosphere, relying heavily on the sensory aspects of how these mediums are understood; layers of textures, structure and character are used to allude to possible scenes, objects or places. Images and sounds are drawn out to become wholly suggestive materials in ways that point to what they *could* be, but never fully take you to exactly what they are. It's a form of writing that attempts to stand entirely in the shoes of the observer.

This is particularly the case for alt-text writing.

Whilst remaining true to their format of describing an image, these texts are deeply uncertain in nature, only hinting at what might be there; *perhaps - looks like - has the appearance of*.

Considered but never explicit, this exercise in writing can be a beautiful jumping off point in prompting you to consider just what it is that you're looking at.

Then we have closed captions.

The subtitles that are used in visual media that translate dialogue and sounds.

Again, when we move beyond a simple transcribing of words being spoken or music being played, we can search for the other sounds occurring that evoke atmosphere or time of day. They are the essence of *ambience*, placing you much more in the moment, and offering what that moment actually *feels* like. Audio recordings of written work do this too, but in less direct ways. Here, atmosphere is drawn out through breath, a stutter in the sentence or a fumbling of a tricky word. The written word shifts to a performance where text is transformed; emoted, expressed, emphasised and played out through the lyrical enactment of paragraphs and chapter breaks. This, along with pauses at the end of sentences and varying tonal shifts give differing weights, creating an outline of what is being described that frames it in a space of softness, as if being read to at bedtime.

Never dictating or explaining, alt text, closed captions and audio recordings move as a gentle guiding hand, revealing a broader experience of the world around us.

Working with these written formats is both a very practical and a deeply conceptual practice. On the most basic practical level, this exercise asks you to pause for a moment, and really think; what is in this image, what am I looking at?

On the next few pages, you'll find some examples of this practice as featured in my participation in 12Ø's annual creative programme, 30/30.



Sun-Scanned Image (Spring Silhouette)

Bella Milroy, 12ø Collective's 30/30, 2020

Image description:

A digital landscape photograph showing the silhouette of a rose bush. The rose is lanky and gangly in structure with thorns sticking out along each of the stems. The plant only has about 6 or 7 long stems shown in the image and they are all pointing vaguely upwards. The leaves on the plant are backlit by a pale pastel grey/blue sky, and give the leaves a hint of stained glass. Colour is only faintly visible in the image and most of what is depicted is tonal. Two tiny birds fly in tandem with one below the other in the distance off to the right of the image with both sets of wings pointed upwards, giving the appearance of duck ornaments on a kitchen wall in a 1970's kitchen. There is flatness to the image in the way the sunlight gives it this silhouette, but because of the translucency of the light and the leaves, the image still holds a three-dimensional quality to it, sitting somewhere between a digital scan and photograph.



Patio

Bella Milroy, 12ø Collective's 30/30, 2020

Image Description:

A digital photograph of what looks like slabs of patio squares from a birds eye view. The left of the image is covered in a strip of shade and afternoon sunshine casts shadows over the slabs. In the cracks are weeds, some of which look like dandelions, lambs ear, moss and grasses. The shadows cast over them look like they are from a wiry hedgerow with vines and tendrils reaching across the slabs. These slabs are grey/beige in colour and some of the weeds are green, though everything has a dusty, muddy tone to it.



What a Powerful Coven!' (The only kind of magic I believe in)

Bella Milroy, 12ø Collective's 30/30, 2020

Image Description:

A digital landscape photograph of a scrub/mud-bank with twigs and leaves debris scattered. The mud-bank could be an exposed side of a compost bin but it isn't clear to tell. Semi-camouflaged is a large grey toad sat in the centre of the image clinging to the mud-bank. The toad is grey/brown in colour, with one yellowy eye pointing out on its right side. Even though it is small in the centre of the image, perhaps even overlooked blending in amongst the mud and leaves, it's shape and size hold a weight and heftiness to it that give it that brilliant toad-like quality; it's marbled, knobbly skin and paunch tummy with clinging webbed feet.

What happens in the simple practicalities of writing these descriptors, is that you begin to *notice* what is going on here.

You're stepping into the scene and inhabiting the surroundings in a way that feels no less than being mindful of the present moment (even if it happens to be one you're experiencing virtually).

What I love most about this process, is that whilst the nuts and bolts of this writing begin very much like a shopping list of what's included in the image - *a digital landscape photograph showing the silhouette of a rose bush* - the more details that are added, the more atmosphere is evoked, the more we step closer to nuance and ambiguity of what the image portrays. It's about what *could* be happening here, what *might* be felt in the scene. This process is an attempt to place you as close as you possibly can be to what appears to be revealed

My love affair with this process is very much motivated by wanting to write lengthy meanderings of describers, wandering about a scene and attempting to breathe in its air. But image descriptions don't always have to be these extended, (some *could* say tedious!) texts.

A beautiful example of this is an image found on the website of the writer and theatre director Maria Oshodi:



*Image Description:
Black and white picture of Maria sitting in a chair, head resting on a hand in contemplation.*

I love this beautifully simple marriage of image and descriptor. It in no way is hindered by the brevity of this single sentence, with the poetry of words like *contemplation* allowing for the scale of image to be communicated. It is full of mood, full of character, full of thought! I love how the use of this wording allows for vastness in such a succinct way. It is precise, and yet it is unbound. It shows how describers don't always need to rely on word count, allowing for a deliberate choice of words to make room for our own imagination as to what is being presented to us.

This process is an attempt to place you as close as possible to what appears to be revealed. It's about removing the presumptions of what our senses offer us, instead considering what the image or sound is communicating, right there in that moment. In this endeavour for objectivity, you are prompted to refrain from simply passing them off in reference to what you already know them to be, leaving behind the familiarity found in a matrix of memories and shorthand. It asks you to peel it right back to where it becomes a moment in time, where there is a weave of textures, colours and shapes that suggest other things, where there expressions given and mood felt.

This writing has the potential to say,

Take what you know before and leave it there.

Look at this thing now and really look at it.

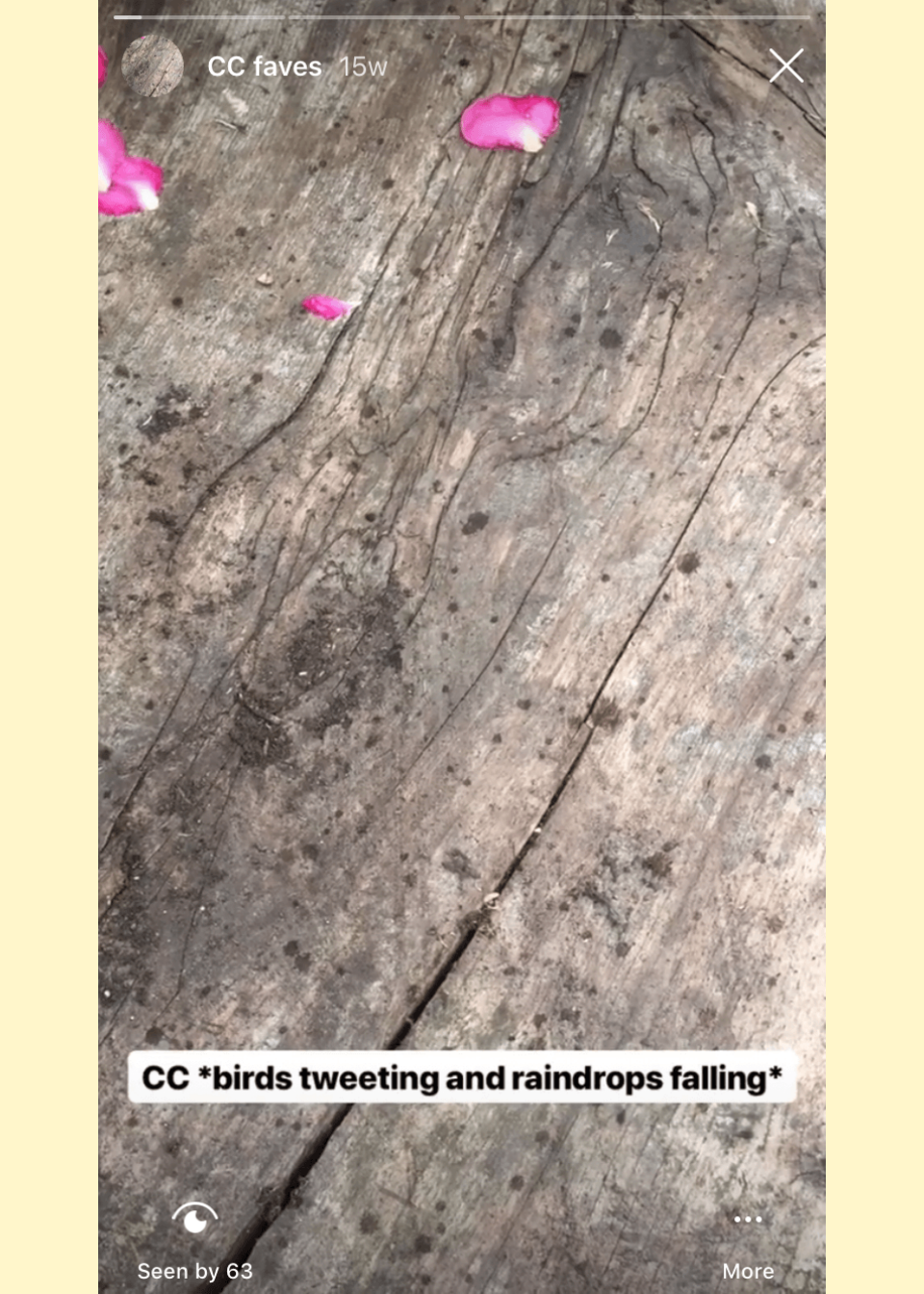
Listen to it.

What is happening here, right here, what does it look like?

What does it sound like? What does it feel like?

What does it appear to be?

Could it be...something? Perhaps? Maybe?



CC faves 15w



CC *birds tweeting and raindrops falling*



Seen by 63



More

Image description:

*Image description: a still of a video taken from my Instagram Stories capturing the ambience of the environment using closed captions. The image shows what looks like a plank or board of roughly sawn wood that is aged grey and brown. There are splits in the board, with large knots and cracks. A handful of large, bright pink rose petals are scattered on the board at the top left of the image, and dark splatters of what look like raindrops are dotted across the wooden surface suggesting this scene is outdoors. At the bottom is a caption in black text with a white background that reads: "CC *birds tweeting and raindrops falling*". Other features of the online feed are visible such as the viewing counter, the title of the feed "CC Faves", and the three dots in the bottom corner indicating "more"..*



CC faves 31w



Cc: *blackbird singing its heart out in all its midsummer glory, a pure, summertime tune that drifts so effortlessly through the wind; lyrical and magic*

Image Description:

*A still of a video taken from my Instagram Stories capturing the ambience of the environment using closed captions. The image has a perspective of peering over a tall green hedge to show a large green tree in the distance. Both the hedge and the tree appear to be common conifers, and in the foreground of the image you can see the greenery is covered in dew, with the sky above looking as if it has just finished raining; a wash of watery grey. Sat on top of this cone shaped tree is a small bird, grey/brown/black in colour. At the bottom is a caption in white text with a black background that reads: "Cc *blackbird singing its heart out in all its midsummer glory, a pure, summertime tune that drifts so effortlessly through the wind; lyrical and magic*". Other features of the online feed are visible such as the viewing counter, the title of the feed "CC Faves", and the three dots in the bottom corner indicating "more".*

It's the way in which these texts sit so inherently unsure of themselves which occupies such potential for truth in writing. You are forced to teeter around what you *think* you know an image or sound to hold, and never step all the way across, never betraying the familiarity of your senses. And yet, it is in this striving for objectivity, in evoking the tone and tenor of our surroundings, we realise we are of course describing *our own, very subjective feelings* about it. These descriptions are a kindling of our felt experiences, a literal transcription of sensory stimulus. When approaching this writing from this visceral perspective, it's hard not to fall in love with the richness of what these texts offer us. And it's not as if objectivity and subjectivity have to be mutually exclusive in this context either. I often consider this process a lot like how an art critic presents the experience of an artwork; leading and guiding you as to what is before us and what it consists of. It begins with simple descriptors of what took place, what it looks like, how it moves and what is hidden. It then builds up to offer a sense of feeling, energy and dynamism as to what this artwork - *this scene* - is doing. It's imagining the experience of what is presented to you as a conversation, a back and forth between what seems to be there, and what is interpreted as such. Humour, tension, temper and temperament all become key components of this experience; it is objectivity cloaked in the subjective voice.

It is holding a thing and saying:

it appears to be this, and this is what it feels like.

"As soon as you walk in, immediately on your left is a wall covered in little clips of text from floor to ceiling. I stood back, it is Eburn Sodipo's 'in the thick of it';

***“though you embarked a long time ago
the deep is all this form remembers’ //
‘this body made to look
this body made to look upon
this body shudders and falls’ //...***

"I think I love it, always, this deep textual exploration, this repetition, of describing a body in grammar and word. It is spiced (u know how adding spice is a careful, accumulative process, balancing and slowly bringing things out in relation to each other). This work kind of begs the presence of a body near it; be it in reading the words, stitching them together into cogent sense, or of the artist as an authorial memory. It begs a body's presence, but it kind of also rly rejects it when it's close... It wants to feel you close, but not have you compromise a vulnerability. It wants your proximity to not compromise its opacity, which is never at any point rendered able to be punctured. It is a gentle arms length, veiled. I am glad to be handled with this kind of care."

Extract from Zarina Muhammed's review of **BBZ Black Book: Alternative Graduate Show 2019** at Copeland Gallery. The White Pube, August 2019.

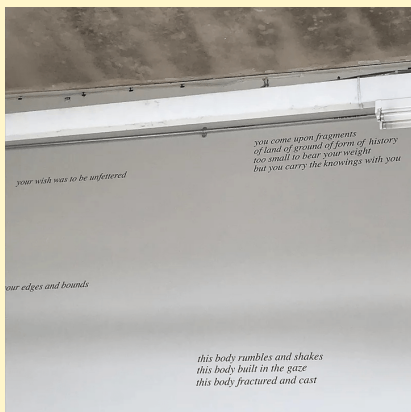
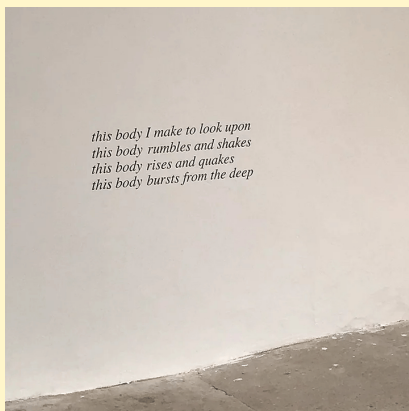


Image Description:

Two images showing vinyl text on a wall. The space appears to be large and industrial, with concrete floors, white walls and harsh strip lighting. The text written in black, word processed font in italic segments.

'In the thick of it' Eburn Sodipo 2019.

BBZ Black Book: Alternative Graduate Show 2019

When we consider these descriptors as a form of narrative storytelling, we suddenly place ourselves in the picture. We find ourselves embedded in these scenes, our versions of that place acting as a retelling of a point of contact with that environment; a parable of layered, tangible space. These texts act as witnesses to moments in time, placing our own authorial voice as an integral component of this. In making room for our own expression of these spaces, the descriptions become beautiful, flawed retellings. They illustrate the continuous tensioning between the objective and subjective, seeking to hold them in a moment in which space is made for them both. It's in these practices that the texts avoid being a lengthy, paint-by-numbers list of what is in front of us, but instead creating a point of stillness. It's here where we can strive for a description to be as interpretive as images and sounds themselves.

When we create space for the way these experiences are felt, we can make room for what they mean to us. Taking notice, and in turn, offering a sense of care and attention to our surroundings allows for a deeper understanding of how we interpret the world around us, and what that world feels like, be it virtually or in-real-life. We can start to consider not only the importance of this in recognising what it means to us, but how we can better communicate it to others. The cold, harsh and often unreliable nature of screen readers and automated captioning leaves so little to the imagination, at best only ever offering the bare minimum of descriptors and translations that fail to convey the bare bones of what is captured. If a picture paints a thousand words, you need more than an automated algorithm to describe it. What we're dealing with here are the very components in which imagination is fed and felt. Without careful and considered dedication to these essential access features (particularly of online spaces), the way we imagine what something looks, sounds or feels like is lost. It's about considering these mediums not only as visual or audio documents, but rich catalogues of living moments, placing our experience of them at the centre of how they are presented. When we centre the importance of these access functions as urgent elements of how we convey image, sound and story, we can explore, nurture and enjoy this as a practice that meditates upon what is around us. It's a practice which reveals our surroundings to be vast, gorgeous lyrics steeped in the desire to communicate our own experience of it, contemplating how then meaning can be expressed through this rich and critical lens of accessibility.

With thanks:

To Maria Brewster, Niamh Riorden and Laura Yates of Human Libraries, who gave me all the time in the world to let this work grow at its own pace.

To Maria Oshodi and Hannah Wallis, with whom I was lucky enough to be able to consult with these artists on the nature of image descriptions and closed captions, and their thoughts were of great influence in writing this piece. The time we spent together was deeply nourishing and creatively inspiring, and I am so grateful for the generosity of their time in this way.

To Paige Ockendon, whose studio assistance was invaluable in transforming my original words into the finished piece it is today.

*Written by **Bella Milroy**, this zine was produced as part of Soft Sanctuary, an ongoing project with Bootle Library. In 2019, the first iteration of Soft Sanctuary existed as a series of workshops marking World Mental Health Day, bringing together artists, library users and librarians. We focused on the idea of a 'sick day', what it means to take time to rest and give ourselves permission to relax. 2021's Soft Sanctuary is accessible online, via a series of podcasts, articles, recipes and downloadable artworks.*

Supported by Arts Council England and Human Libraries.

This text is just one exploration of this area of accessibility, with so many other brilliant projects which have done incredibly important work on these themes.

A selection of further reading/useful links can be found below:

Maria Oshodi - a writer, theatre director and disability arts consultant based in London.

<https://mariaoshodi.com/>

Hannah Wallis - Artist, curator and researcher.

<https://hannahwallis.com/>

Zarina Muhammed's review of BBZ Black Book: Alternative Graduate Show 2019 at Copeland Gallery, The White Pube, August 2019:

<https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/bbzblkbk>

Shannon Finnegan - A multidisciplinary artist whose work, particularly that on image descriptions, has been of great influence on my own writing practice. Her continuing project, Alt Text as Poetry is a collaboration between herself and Bojana Coklyat, supported by Eyebeam and the Disability Visibility Project.

<https://shannonfinnegan.com/>

<https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/>

<https://uxdesign.cc/how-to-write-an-image-description-2f30d3bf5546>

<https://accessguide.io/>

Back Image Description:

*A video still taken from my Instagram Stories capturing the ambience of the environment using Closed Captions. The image shows what looks like a closeup of a garden scene, with a hand holding a flower. The flower is star shaped with a stamen in the centre pointing out. The petals are a deep, dark sanguine colour fading to pale purple in the centre. There are leaves and stems in the background, and you can make out that there is garden soil beneath the foliage. The hand holding the flower has white skin, and it appears to be holding the flower gently, tenderly caressing it. The scene looks like it has been raining, as the surrounding leaves and stems are covered in dew. The flower is also wet and shiny, with water droplets hanging on the end of its petals. At the bottom of the image a caption (white text, black background) reads: "Cc: *Birds tweeting in a frenzy of chirps and chirrups*".*



Cc: *Birds tweeting in a frenzy of chirps and chirrups*