

# *Magic Eye*<sup>1</sup>

Ashleigh Young

Earlier this morning, before getting on the plane, I went out running. I crossed the bridge. In the river a pair of ducks were leaving their tiny ribbons of wake, and a houseboat was moored in total stillness. Around the corner from my parents' house a white-haired man was walking towards me. About 100 metres away I saw that it was my father. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him walking along a street – usually he's sitting down, or padding around the kitchen in socks. It was almost unnatural, like when you see someone standing perfectly upright as they glide down the road on one of those electric unicycles. I kept running, and the man got closer and eventually he slowed to a stop – and it was Dad again. I felt a great awkwardness between us, as if this moving about in the world was supposed to be private, and then the feeling rearranged itself, like a magic eye, into an inconvenient rush of love. We said hello, then passed.

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On my flight home, hundreds of dolphins were in the Cook Strait. The water was leaping with them. Their bodies gleamed silver and white. The sea was more dolphin than water. I thought I would remember the crossing forever. The man sitting beside me on the plane – the same man I'd sat next to on the way over – was looking down at them too. We were at the part of the crossing where you can't see either island. The dolphins went for miles and miles, leaping all the way out to the horizon, and then I saw they weren't dolphins after all, they were just waves that had a dolphin-like aspect – combining and dividing, appearing and disappearing, becoming neater and more orderly as they followed each other away from us.

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Most weeks, we hear someone expressing disbelief about the passing of time. 'I can't believe it's only Tuesday.' 'How dare it be June.' 'How is it ten o'clock already?' We're indignant as we say it, as if time is refusing to adapt to the realities of people's lives now.

Doesn't it know how fast we have to go to keep up with it? I say I don't believe it either, even though the passing of time is one of the few things I do believe in, unwaveringly. We all know what time is up to, even when it tries to do it in secret – it's passing.

I wonder how time would have to behave for us, truly, not to believe it. It would need to start glitching. Maybe we see slivers of the past in every surface, like noticing a run in a stocking and seeing your skin through it: you'd be walking along and a bit of the street would peel back and show you what used to be there, the shopfronts and bars, then the concrete, then the bare earth, then a dark, rushing stream. What else would it take, for us truly not to believe in the passing of time? Maybe your phone never becomes obsolete. Your rent never rises. Your cat never dies. Twenty, thirty, forty – still snoring, making a sound exactly like that ancient mummy with the vocal tract that scientists reconstructed with a 3D printer. 'I don't believe it,' the vet keeps saying. 'I just don't believe it.' Or, maybe, on a few days each year, time stretches out each of its seconds, all the way to the horizon, and all of our hope and all of our waiting for each other grows so thin as to be a ghost that we forget we are living with.

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My brother in London is trying to find out what has happened to his baby. He knows that the baby is in Norway – this is certain – but not when he will see his baby next, or if he will again. He calls and calls, and no one answers, or if they do they hang up quickly. It has been two years now. The distance between him and his son stretches around him and far into the future, like a sea with no horizon. The closer you get to its surface, the more visible the turmoil, the water wringing itself out over and over. But from high above it is unbroken, as quiet as a table, as if it has always been this way. He keeps trying, but he talks about the trying less and less, and soon the rest of us do as well.

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If we don't talk about that, then what do we talk about? Well, we talk about UFOs – as we always have. There are new developments. The Pentagon is about to release its detailed analysis of UFO data and intelligence, and this may well give us some clear answers. And we've been talking again about our uncle, who saw a UFO in the 1970s in Oamaru. He was lying on the lawn near the pine hedges. He called out to his father, and his father ran out of the house, and together they watched as objects like ball bearings zipped at tremendous speed from the horizon and then clustered above them in the sky. The ball bearings hung there about 40,000 feet up: my grandfather estimates it was this height because he'd been a pilot in World War II. (We must repeat this detail every time we tell each other the story.) Then the ball bearings started spinning around and around, and they disappeared again with astonishing acceleration and speed! My uncle and grandfather had never got on well, they often had terrible arguments, but this UFO sighting immediately strengthened their bond.

'Well, I don't want to burst your bubble,' my brother JP messages, after my other brother, Neil, has repeated the story, 'but I seem to recall a story about some Russian space debris landing in that area around 1973. A farmer found one of the silver balls in a paddock.'

'This wasn't space debris,' Neil messages back. 'These balls were speeding all over the place! They were also hovering and slowly circling each other.'

'OK! I believe you. I believe,' JP messages.

I don't want June to end, bringing with it this intelligence from the Pentagon, which will no doubt confirm that all of the sightings were of weather balloons, drones, and space junk. Because then what will we talk about?

Ashleigh Young is a writer based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. She is the author of two books of poetry and an essay collection titled *Can You Tolerate This?* This was published by Victoria University Press in 2016 and won a Windham-Campbell Prize from Yale University and the Royal Society Te Apārangi Award for General Non-Fiction.

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1 This text was written for the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi's exhibition *Crossings* (a group show about intimacies and distances), and read by the author at the opening on 18 June 2021.