

Orbital by Samantha Harvey, shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2024. An extract from the opening chapter (from the Booker Prize website)

5 *Introduction on the website : Together they watch their silent blue planet, circling it sixteen times, spinning past continents, and cycling through seasons, taking in glaciers and deserts, the peaks of mountains and the swells of oceans. Endless shows of spectacular beauty witnessed in a single day.*

Yet although separated from the world they cannot escape its constant pull. News reaches them of the death of a mother, and with it comes thoughts of returning home.
10 *They look on as a typhoon gathers over an island and people they love, in awe of its magnificence and fearful of its destruction.*

The fragility of human life fills their conversations, their fears, their dreams. So far from earth, they have never felt more part - or protective - of it.

15 Orbit minus 1

Rotating about the earth in their spacecraft they are so together, and so alone, that even their thoughts, their internal mythologies, at times convene. Sometimes they dream the same dreams - of fractals and blue spheres and familiar faces engulfed in dark, and of the bright energetic black of space that slams their senses. Raw space is a
20 panther, feral and primal; they dream it stalking through their quarters.

They hang in their sleeping bags. A hand-span away beyond a skin of metal the universe unfolds in simple eternities. Their sleep begins to thin and some distant earthly morning dawns and their laptops flash the first silent messages of a new day; the wide-awake, always-awake station vibrates with fans and filters. In the galley are the remnants of
25 last night's dinner - dirty forks secured to the table by magnets and chopsticks wedged in a pouch on the wall. Four blue balloons are buoyed on the circulating air, some foil bunting says Happy Birthday, it was nobody's birthday but it was a celebration and it was all they had. There's a smear of chocolate on a pair of scissors and a small felt moon on a piece of string, tied to the handles of the foldable table.

30 Outside the earth reels away in a mass of moonglow, peeling backward as they forge towards its edgeless edge; the tufts of cloud across the Pacific brighten the nocturnal ocean to cobalt. Now there's Santiago on South America's approaching coast in a cloud-hazed burn of gold. Unseen through the closed shutters the trade winds blowing across the warm waters of the Western Pacific have worked up a storm, an engine of heat. The
35 winds take the warmth out of the ocean where it gathers as clouds which thicken and curdle and begin to spin in vertical stacks that have formed a typhoon. As the typhoon moves west towards southern Asia, their craft tracks east, eastward and down towards Patagonia where the lurch of a far-off aurora domes the horizon in neon. The Milky Way is a smoking trail of gunpowder shot through a satin sky.

40 Onboard the craft it's Tuesday morning, four fifteen, the beginning of October. Out there it's Argentina it's the South Atlantic it's Cape Town it's Zimbabwe. Over its right shoulder the planet whispers morning - a slender molten breach of light. They slip through time zones in silence.

They have each at some point been shot into the sky on a kerosene bomb, and then
45 through the atmosphere in a burning capsule with the equivalent weight of two black bears upon them. They have each steeled their ribcages against the force until they felt

the bears retreat, one after the other, and the sky become space, and gravity diminish, and their hair stand on end.

50 Six of them in a great H of metal hanging above the earth. They turn head on heel, four astronauts (American, Japanese, British, Italian) and two cosmonauts (Russian, Russian); two women, four men, one space station made up of seventeen connecting modules, seventeen and a half thousand miles an hour. They are the latest six of many, nothing unusual about this any more, routine astronauts in earth's backyard. Earth's fabulous and improbable backyard. Turning head on heel in the slow drift of their hurtle, head on
55 hip on hand on heel, turning and turning with the days. The days rush. They will each be here for nine months or so, nine months of this weightless drifting, nine months of this swollen head, nine months of this sardine living, nine months of this earth-ward gaping, then back to the patient planet below.

Some alien civilisation might look on and ask: what are they doing here? Why do they go
60 nowhere but round and round? The earth is the answer to every question. The earth is the face of an exulted lover; they watch it sleep and wake and become lost in its habits. The earth is a mother waiting for her children to return, full of stories and rapture and longing. Their bones a little less dense, their limbs a little thinner. Eyes filled with sights that are difficult to tell.

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Orbit 1, ascending

Roman wakes early. He sloughs off his sleeping bag and swims in the dark to the lab window. Where are we, where are we? Where on earth. It's night and there's land. Into
70 view edges a giant city nebula among reddish-rust-nothing; no, two cities, Johannesburg and Pretoria locked together like a binary star. Just beyond the hoop of the atmosphere is the sun, and in the next minute it will clear the horizon and flood the earth, and dawn will come and go in a matter of seconds before daylight is everywhere at once. Central and East Africa suddenly bright and hot.

Today is his four hundredth and thirty-fourth day in space, a tally arrived at over three
75 different missions. He keeps close count. Of this mission it's day eighty-eight. In a single nine-month mission there are in total roughly five hundred and forty hours of morning exercise. Five hundred morning and afternoon meetings with the American, European and Russian crews on the ground. Four thousand three hundred and twenty sunrises, four thousand three hundred and twenty sunsets. Almost one hundred and eight million miles
80 travelled. Thirty-six Tuesdays, for all that, this being one. Five hundred and forty times of having to swallow tooth-paste. Thirty-six changes of T-shirt, a hundred and thirty-five changes of underwear (a fresh set of underwear every day is a storage luxury that can't be afforded), fifty-four clean pairs of socks. Auroras, hurricanes, storms - their numbers unknown but their occurrence certain. Nine full cycles, of course, of the moon, their
85 silver companion moving placidly through its phases while the days go awry. But all the same the moon seen several times a day and sometimes in strange distortion.

To his tally kept on a piece of paper in his crew quarters, Roman will add the eighty-
eighth line. Not to wish the time away but to try to tether it to something countable.
90 Otherwise - otherwise the centre drifts. Space shreds time to pieces. They were told this in training: keep a tally each day when you wake, tell yourself this is the morning of a new day. Be clear with yourself on this matter. This is the morning of a new day.