

(Following Booker Prize page excerpt.) And so it is, but in this new day they'll circle the earth sixteen times. They'll see sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets, sixteen days and sixteen nights. Roman clasps the handrail by the window to steady himself; the southern hemisphere stars are fleeting away. You're bound to Coordinated Universal Time, ground
5 crews tell them. Be clear with yourself on this matter, always clear. Look often at your watch to anchor your mind, tell yourself when you wake up: this is the morning of a new day.

10 And so it is. But it's a day of five continents and of autumn and spring, glaciers and deserts, wildernesses and warzones. In their rotations around the earth in accumulations of light and dark in the baffling arithmetic of thrust and attitude and speed and sensors, the whip-crack of morning arrives every ninety minutes. They like these days when the brief bloom of daybreak outside coincides with their own.

15 In this last minute of darkness the moon is near-full and low to the glow of atmosphere. It's as if night has no idea it's about to be obliterated by day. Roman has a sense of himself a few months hence staring from his bedroom window at home, moving aside his wife's array of dried - and to him unnameable - flowers, forcing open the condensed and stiff casement, leaning into the Moscow air, and seeing it, the same moon, like a
20 souvenir he's brought back from a holiday somewhere exotic. But it's just for a moment and then the sight of this moon from the space station - lying squashed and low beyond the atmosphere, not really above them but across, like an equal - is everything, and that brief comprehension he had of his bedroom, his home, is gone.

25 There was a lesson at school about the painting *Las Meninas*, when Shaun was fifteen. It was about how the painting disoriented its viewer and left them not knowing what it was they were looking at.

It's a painting inside a painting, his teacher had said - look closely. Look here.
30 Velázquez, the artist, is in the painting, at his easel, painting a painting, and what he's painting is the king and queen, but they're outside of the painting, where we are, looking in, and the only way we know they're there is because we can see their reflection in a mirror directly in front of us. What the king and queen are looking at is what we're looking at - their daughter and her ladies-in-waiting, which is what the
35 painting is called - *Las Meninas*, 'The Ladies-in-Waiting'. So what is the real subject of this painting - the king and queen (who are being painted and whose white reflected faces, though small, are in the centre background), their daughter (who is the star in the middle, so bright and blonde in the gloom), her ladies-(and dwarves and chaperones and dog) in-waiting, the furtive man mid-stride in the doorway in the background who
40 seems to be bringing a message, Velázquez (whose presence as the painter is declared by the fact of him being in the painting, at his easel painting what is a picture of the king and queen but what also might be *Las Meninas* itself), or is it us, the viewers, who occupy the same position as the king and queen, who are looking in, and who are being looked at by both Velázquez and the infant princess and, in reflection, by the king and
45 queen? Or, is the subject art itself (which is a set of illusions and tricks and artifices within life), or life itself (which is a set of illusions and tricks and artifices within a consciousness that is trying to understand life through perceptions and dreams and art)?

Or - the teacher said - is it just a painting about nothing? Just a room with some people
50 in it and a mirror?

To Shaun, who, at fifteen, did not want to take art classes and already knew he wanted
to be a fighter pilot, this lesson was the height and depth of all futility. He didn't like
the painting particularly and he didn't care what it was of. Probably, yes, it was just a
55 room with some people and a mirror, but he didn't even care enough to put his hand up
and say that. He was drawing geometric doodles on his notepad. Then he drew a picture
of somebody being hanged. The girl sitting next to him saw those doodles and nudged
him and raised her brow and smiled, a small fugitive smile, and when she became his
wife many years later she gave him a postcard of Las Meninas, it being, to her, an
60 emblem of their first real exchange. And when, years after that, he was away in Russia
preparing to go into space, she wrote in a cramped hand on the back of the postcard a
précis of everything their teacher had said, which he'd entirely forgotten but which
she'd remembered with a lucidity that didn't surprise him, because she was the sharpest
and most lucid human he'd met.

65 He has that postcard in his crew quarters. This morning when he wakes up he finds
himself staring at it, at all of the possibilities of subject and perspective that his wife
wrote out on its reverse. The king, the queen, the maids, the girl, the mirror, the artist.
He stares for longer than he's aware. There's the lingering sense of an unfinished dream,
70 something wild in his thoughts. When he climbs out of his sleeping bag and puts on his
running gear and goes to the galley for coffee, he catches sight of the distinctive
northerly point of Oman jutting into the Persian Gulf, dust clouds over the navy Arabian
Sea, the great Indus Estuary, what he knows to be Karachi - invisible now in daylight, but
by night a great, complex, cross-hatched grid that reminds him of the doodles he used to
75 do.

According to the arbitrary metric of time they use up here where time is blasted, it's six
in the morning. The others are rising.

80 They look down and they understand why it's called Mother Earth. They all feel it from
time to time. They all make an association between the earth and a mother, and this in
turn makes them feel like children. In their clean-shaven androgynous bobbing, their
regulation shorts and spoonable food, the juice drunk through straws, the birthday
bunting, the early nights, the enforced innocence of dutiful days, they all have moments
85 up here of a sudden obliteration of their astronaut selves and a powerful sense of
childhood and smallness. Their towering parent ever-present through the dome of glass.

But now, more so. Since Chie came to the galley on Friday evening where they were
making dinner, her face colourless with shock, and said, My mother has died. And Shaun
90 let go of his packet of noodles so that it floated above the table, and Pietro swam the
three feet towards her, bowed his head and took both of her hands with a choreography
so seamless you'd have thought it was prepared, and Nell muttered something
indecipherable, a question - what? how? when? what? - and watched Chie's pale face
flush crimson suddenly as if the speaking of those words had given heat to her grief.

Since that news, they find themselves looking down at earth as they circle their way around it (meanderingly it seems, though that couldn't be less true), and there's that word: mother mother mother mother. Chie's only mother now is that rolling, glowing ball that throws itself involuntarily around the sun once a year. Chie has been made an orphan, her father dead a decade. That ball is the only thing she can point to now that has given her life. There's no life without it. Without that planet there's no life. Obvious.

Think a new thought, they sometimes tell themselves. The thoughts you have in orbit are so grandiose and old. Think a new one, a completely fresh unthought one.

But there are no new thoughts. They're just old thoughts born into new moments - and in these moments is the thought: without that earth we are all finished. We couldn't survive a second without its grace, we are sailors on a ship on a deep, dark unswimmable sea.

None of them knows what to say to Chie, what consolation you can offer to someone who suffers the shock of bereavement while in orbit. You must want surely to get home, and say some sort of goodbye. No need to speak; you only have to look out through the window at a radiance doubling and redoubling. The earth, from here, is like heaven. It flows with colour. A burst of hopeful colour. When we're on that planet we look up and think heaven is elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful lonely light shows could well be it.

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