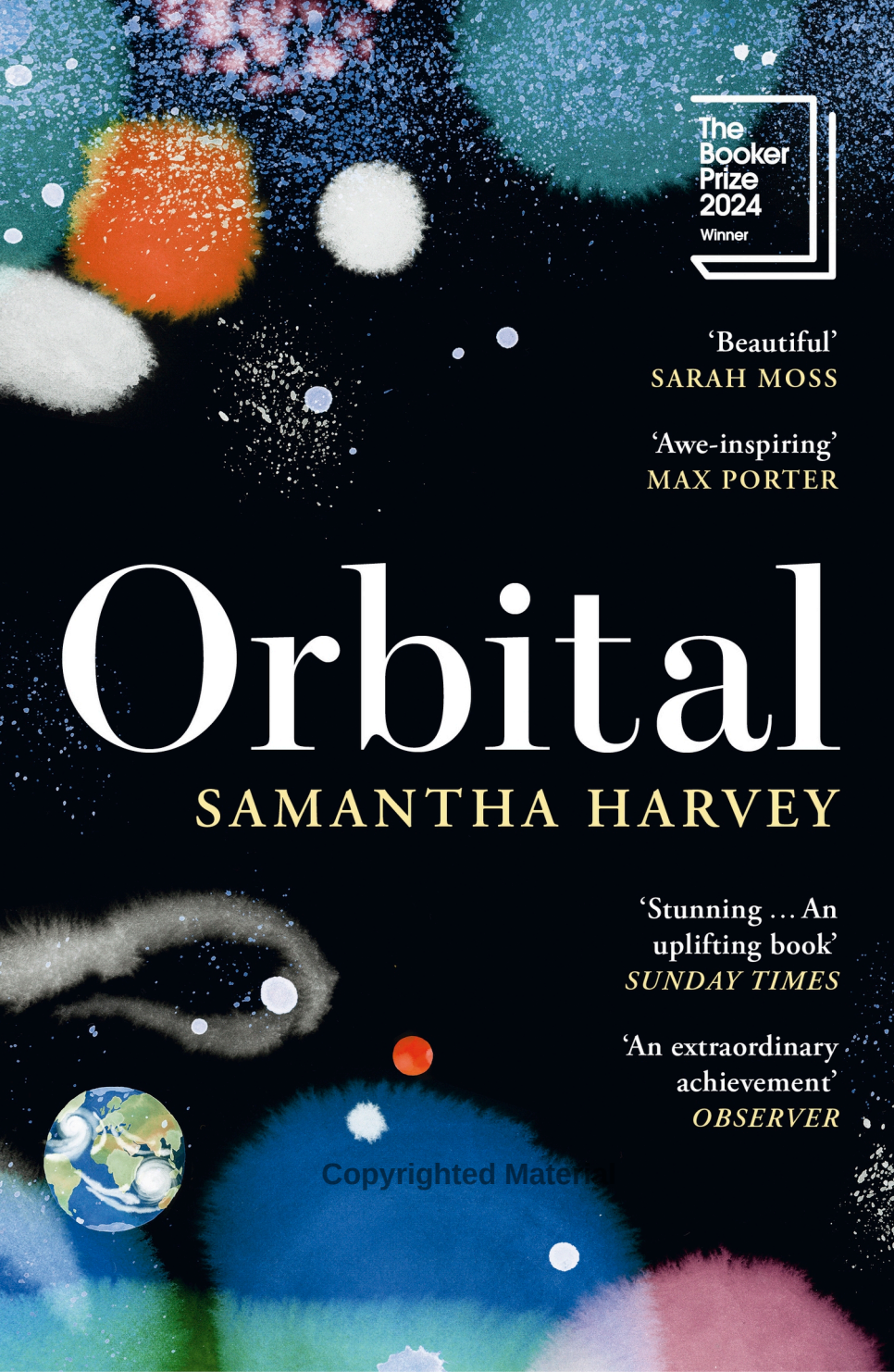
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Samantha Harvey is the author of the novels *The Wilderness*, *All is Song*, *Dear Thief* and *The Western Wind*, and a work of non-fiction, *The Shapeless Unease: A Year of Not Sleeping*. Her work has been longlisted for the Booker Prize, and shortlisted for the James Tait Black Award, the Women's Prize, the *Guardian* First Book Award and the Walter Scott Prize. *The Wilderness* was awarded the Betty Trask Prize. She is a tutor on the MA course in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University.

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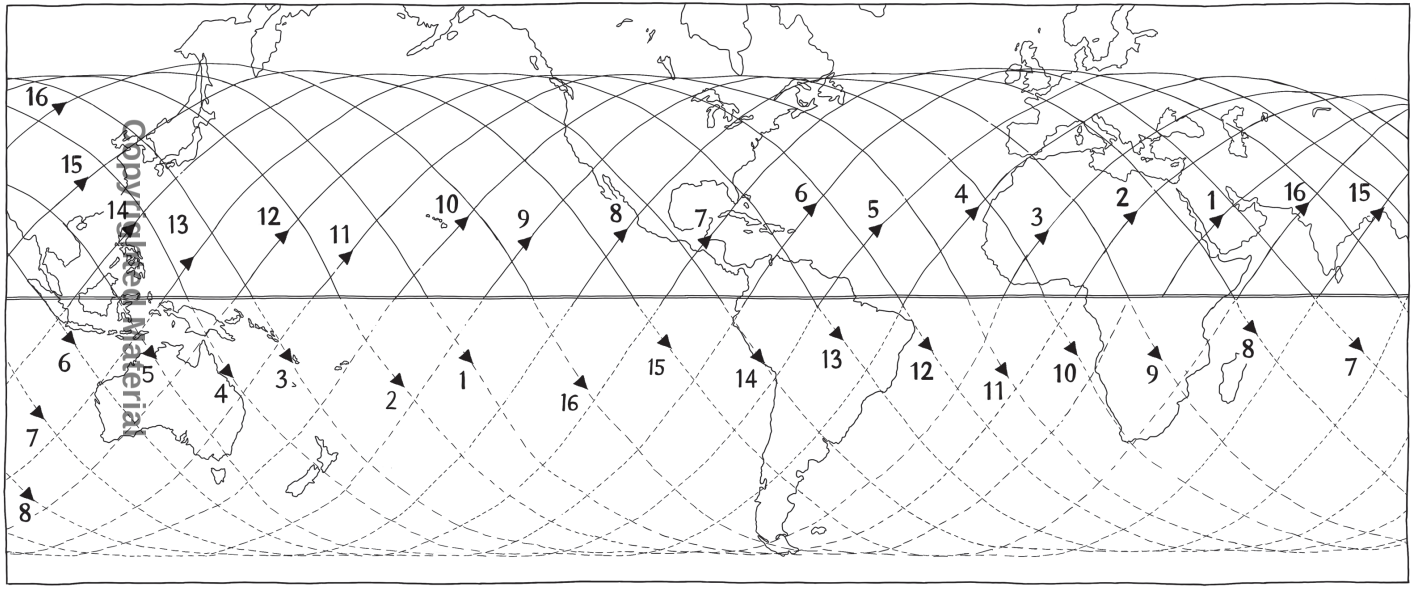
24 Hours of Earth Orbits with Daylight in the Northern Hemisphere



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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 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 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.

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 winds take the warmth out of the ocean where it gathers as clouds which thicken and

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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.

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 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.

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 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 earthward 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 nowhere but round and round? The earth is the answer to every question. The earth is the face of an

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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 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 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 travelled. Thirty-six Tuesdays, for all that, this being one. Five hundred and forty times of having to swallow toothpaste. 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 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.

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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. 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.

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 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.

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.

In this last minute of darkness the moon is near-full and low to the glow of atmosphere. 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 condensated and stiff casement, leaning into the Moscow air, and seeing it, the same moon, like a 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

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that brief comprehension he had of his bedroom, his home, is gone.

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. 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 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 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 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 in it and a mirror?

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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 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 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 precis 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.

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, 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 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.

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