

Nell had dreams of flying when she was a child and then later a teenager. The others did too, each one of them. Short dreams of surging flight or long and languid dreams of discovery, in any case dreams of breaking or being free. The flying they did, or still do, in dreams is the closest analogy they have to moving in space, these dreams share the same weightless ease and the same

sense of miracle, because it ought to be impossible for a heavy wingless body to be gliding this freely and smoothly and yet here it is and it seems that you are finally doing the thing for which your being was born. It is hard to believe. At the same time, it is hard to believe in anything else. It is hard to believe the quality of blackness that is the entirety of space around a day-lit earth, where the earth absorbs all the light - yet hard to believe in anything but that blackness, which is alive, and breathing and beckoning. If Nell had ever been afraid of nothingness, once she was in it she was consoled by it inexplicably and yearned - if she yearned for anything out there - to drift into it and for her tether to reel out some thousands of miles.

You look down the length of your own body hanging to the rig while you grapple with the pistol-grip tool and the torque multiplier and the old bolts that have got stuck and which you have no force of gravity to remove, and two hundred and fifty miles beneath your feet the buffed orb of earth hangs too like an hallucination, something made by and of light, something you could pass through the centre of, and the only word that seems to apply to it is *unearthly*. It can't possibly be real. Forget all you know. You look back at the vast spread of the space station and in this moment it, not earth, feels like home. Inside the craft the four others. But out there, forget all you know. Her heart and Pietro's the only ones to beat in space between the earth's atmosphere and as far out beyond the solar system as anyone can guess. Their two heartbeats speeding peacefully through it, never in the same place twice. Never to return to the same place again.

When the six of them talked about their spacewalks afterwards, they described déjà vu - they *knew* they'd been there before. Roman said that perhaps it was caused by untapped memories of being in the womb. That's what being floating in space feels like for me, he'd said. Being not yet born.

Here is Cuba pink with morning.

The sun bounces everywhere off the ocean's surface. The turquoise shallows of the Caribbean and the horizon conjuring the Sargasso Sea.

To be out there, Nell thinks, to have no glass or metal between her and this. Just a spacesuit filled with coolant to ward off the sun's heat. Just a spacesuit and piece of rope and her slender life.

Just her feet dangling above a continent, her left foot obscuring France, her right foot Germany. Her gloved hand blotting out western China.

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At first they're drawn to the views at night - the gorgeous encrusting of city lights and the surface dazzle of man-made things. There's something so crisp and clear and purposeful about the earth by night, its thick embroidered

urban tapestries. Almost every mile of Europe's coastline is inhabited and the whole continent outlined with fine precision, the cities constellations joined by the golden thread of roads. Those same golden threads track across the Alps, usually greyish blue with snowfall.

At night they can point to home – there's Seattle, Osaka, London, Bologna, St Petersburg and Moscow – Moscow one enormous point of light like the Pole Star in a shrill clear sky. The night's electric excess takes their breath. The spread of life. The way the planet proclaims to the abyss: there is something and someone here. And how, for all that, a sense of friendliness and peace prevails, since even at night there's only one man-made border in the whole of the world; a long trail of lights between Pakistan and India. That's all civilisation has to show for its divisions, and by day even that has gone.

Soon things change. After a week or so of city awe, the senses begin to broaden and deepen and it's the daytime earth they come to love. It's the humanless simplicity of land and sea. The way the planet seems to breathe, an animal unto itself. It's the planet's indifferent turning in indifferent space and the perfection of the sphere which transcends all language. It's the black hole of the Pacific becoming a field of gold or French Polynesia dotted below, the islands like cell samples, the atolls opal lozenges; then the spindle of Central America which drops away beneath them now to bring to view the Bahamas and Florida and the arc of smoking volcanoes on the Caribbean Plate. It's Uzbekistan in an expanse of ochre and brown, the snowy mountainous beauty of Kyrgyzstan. The clean and brilliant Indian Ocean of blues untold. The apricot desert of Takla Makan traced about with the faint confluencing and parting lines of creek beds. It's the diagonal beating path of the galaxy, an invitation in the shunning void.

So then come discrepancies and gaps. They were warned in their training about the problem of dissonance. They were warned about what would happen with repeated exposure to this seamless earth. You will see, they were told, its fullness, its absence of borders except those between land and sea. You'll see no countries, just a rolling indivisible globe which knows no possibility of separation, let alone war. And you'll feel yourself pulled in two directions at once. Exhilaration, anxiety, rapture, depression, tenderness, anger, hope, despair. Because of course you know that war abounds and that borders are something that people will kill and die for. While up here there might be the small and distant rucking of land that tells of a mountain range and there might be a vein that suggests a great river, but that's where it ends. There's no wall or barrier – no tribes, no war or corruption or particular cause for fear.

Before long, for all of them, a desire takes hold. It's the desire – no, the need (fuelled by fervour) – to protect this huge yet tiny earth. This thing of

such miraculous and bizarre loveliness. This thing that is, given the poor choice of alternatives, so unmistakably home. An unbounded place, a suspended jewel so shockingly bright. Can humans not find peace with one another? With the earth? It's not a fond wish but a fretful demand. Can we not stop tyrannising and destroying and ran-sacking and squandering this one thing on which our lives depend? Yet they hear the news and they've lived their lives and their hope does not make them naive. So what do they do? What action to take? And what use are words? They're humans with a godly view and that's the blessing and also the curse.

It seems easier on balance not to read the news. Some do and some don't, but it's easier not to. When they look at the planet it's hard to see a place for or trace of the small and babbling pantomime of politics on the newsfeed, and it's as though that pantomime is an insult to the august stage on which it all happens, an assault on its gentleness, or else too insignificant to be bothered with. They might listen to the news and feel instantly tired or impatient. The stories a litany of accusation, angst, anger, slander, scandal that speaks a language both too simple and too complex, a kind of talking in tongues, when compared to the single clear, ringing note that seems to emit from the hanging planet they now see each morning when they open their eyes. The earth shrugs it off with its every rotation. If they listen to the radio at all it's often for music or else something with an innocence or ultimate neutrality about it, comedy or sport, something with a sense of play, of things mattering and then not mattering, of coming and going and leaving no mark. And then even those they listen to less and less.

But then one day something shifts. One day they look at the earth and they see the truth. If only politics really were a pantomime. If politics were just a farcical, inane, at times insane entertainment provided by characters who for the most part have got where they are, not by being in any way revolutionary or percipient or wise in their views, but by being louder, bigger, more ostentatious, more unscrupulously wanting of the play of power than those around them, if that were the beginning and end of the story it would not be so bad. Instead, they come to see that it's not a pantomime, or it's not just that. It's a force so great that it has shaped every single thing on the surface of the earth that they had thought, from here, so human-proof.

Every swirling neon or red algal bloom in the polluted, warming, overfished Atlantic is crafted in large part by the hand of politics and human choices. Every retreating or retreated or disintegrating glacier, every granite shoulder of every mountain laid newly bare by snow that has never before melted, every scorched and blazing forest or bush, every shrinking ice sheet, every burning oil spill, the discolouration of a Mexican reservoir which signals the invasion of water hyacinths feeding on untreated sewage, a distorted

flood-bulged river in Sudan or Pakistan or Bangladesh or North Dakota, or the prolonged pinking of evaporated lakes, or the Gran Chaco's brown seepage of cattle ranch where once was rainforest, the expanding green-blue geometries of evaporation ponds where lithium is mined from the brine, or Tunisian salt flats in *cloisonné* pink, or the altered contour of a coastline where sea is reclaimed metre by painstaking metre and turned into land to house more and more people, or the altered contour of a coastline where land is reclaimed metre by metre by a sea that doesn't care that there are more and more people in need of land, or a vanishing mangrove forest in Mumbai, or the hundreds of acres of greenhouses which make the entire southern tip of Spain reflective in the sun.

The hand of politics is so visible from their vantage point that they don't know how they could have missed it at first. It's utterly manifest in every detail of the view, just as the sculpting force of gravity has made a sphere of the planet and pushed and pulled the tides which shape the coasts, so has politics sculpted and shaped and left evidence of itself everywhere.

They come to see the politics of want. The politics of growing and getting, a billion extrapolations of the urge for more, that's what they begin to see when they look down. They don't even need to look down since they, too, are part of those extrapolations, they more than anyone -on their rocket whose boosters at lift-off burn the fuel of a million cars.

The planet is shaped by the sheer amazing force of human want, which has changed everything, the forests, the poles, the reservoirs, the glaciers, the rivers, the seas, the mountains, the coastlines, the skies, a planet contoured and landscaped by want.