New Nonfiction by Evan Balkan: In Praise of Awe

I was floating through the Milky Way when a cat jumped on my lap. Slammed back to earth—in this case, the backyard of a modest adobe home a few kilometers outside San Pedro de Atacama, Chile—I had to concede that at least I'd gotten my daily allotment of awe. For the previous hour, I'd watched the arc of shooting stars piercing Orion's belt and skittering through the perpendicular lattice of the Southern Cross; after a short time, the shooting stars had been too numerous to count, an extraordinary thing considering that where I live spotting any shooting star at all is virtually impossible. When I go camping a few hours west of my home, if I see one shooting star I consider myself lucky. But I am in the Atacama Desert, staring straight up until my neck protests.

Here, time compresses. Not just the millions of years it's taken to create this landscape. But my own eye-blink personal

history, too. Here, I can bring a foundational evening from some forty-five years ago to precise recall: the smell of the summer night, a certain softness in the breeze. My father has woken me from deep sleep. There's a meteor shower, he tells me. As he carries me to the open window, I ask him what that means. He points skyward in response. A flash of blue, and then another, reddish, then yellow. A night sky was black with little points of white. I hadn't known until then that there were colored things there, too, nor things that streaked across the sky. Nor the fact that the sky is curved. I have never seen enough of it to know these things. We watch, silent, counting, thrilling. I've been chasing that feeling ever since.

It's hard to define, awe. But certainly we know when we feel it. It's a rare thing, buried under the onslaught of daily routine and the indignities of, say, a red traffic light when we're late for work. Our ego—that most human of qualities—screams at us: "I am the universe. The universe is me." How dare an obstacle be thrown at my plans? Awe, ironically, slingshots us to the polar opposite sentiment which, it turns out, has precisely the same endpoint: *I am the universe. The universe is me*. But this time, such as in this place, with a cat burrowing into my lap as I turn my gaze from the sky, it's an acknowledgement of my own insignificance even as I know that I am part of this great cosmos, made up of the same stuff: me, star, cat. We are all of a piece, denoting our limitlessness while also reinforcing our infinitesimal nature, both at once.

I am two months removed from my fiftieth birthday. I have endured a difficult year and so for this milestone birthday, I've requested of my family only one thing: time and space to explore on my own, to drop myself in one of earth's most forbidding landscapes to allow it to subsume all that ails me. I want to know that my problems are very small. I want to return home a gentler person. I want to stand on a precipice

or plop myself into the sand and gaze out over the millennia, to listen to the sound of the desert silence, to be changed. I want to stare into a sky unobstructed by light and cloud and humidity and see the heavens, just as I did that night so many years ago.

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This part of the world demands superlatives, true, but it also, perhaps inevitably, invites cliché. *Otherworldly, alien, lunar*: these are the easy and ready-made adjectives for the Atacama. It is here, after all, where NASA tested its Mars rover, reckoning there was no better place on earth to replicate the Martian surface. We never outrun what troubles us, yes, though one imagines Mars an effective distance to try. I can't survive on Mars, though. The Atacama is easier. Still, while traversing a place that defies easy description, the pull toward the overused becomes great. I am not immune to this and I find myself spouting such unimaginative phrases before I even touch the ground. Staring out the plane window on the flight from Santiago to Calama, my eye follows the forbidding brown and tinges of orange as they ripple toward the far horizon, a haziness in the air that I will soon come to understand is from the constant churning of dead sand whipped into funnels and sheets by the ever-present wind. Indeed, I'll spend most of my days here clogged to the hilt, my inhalations a rhythmic whistling.

From the air, Calama is uninviting, an impression that doesn't change much upon landing at its tiny airport. The moment I walk outside to my rental car, I can feel that there's literally something in the air. The dust and wind, yes, but also a sensation as if I am little more than an ant desperately fleeing a cosmic magnifying glass, held without mercy by an unseen hand shifting its concentrated laser to bore into me no matter how scattershot my movements.

The drive to San Pedro only reinforces the feeling that I've

landed on some other planet. Just outside the city, the horizon is studded with gargantuan turbines, looming creatures piercing the sky in slow, ominous turns—dozens of them, so close to the road you can see the lettering stenciling their columns. Coupled with the trajectory and speed of my car, the effect is to completely disorient. But this is a mere warm up to the disorientation from the vast bowl of desert that awaits: it's almost impossible to make out distance and direction between here and San Pedro. Several times I'm convinced that my car is dying and only after panic do I realize I'm steeply climbing in altitude. A waypoint on the horizon, a beacon to measure progress, appears to stay fixed no matter how long one drives. Then it disappears into a shimmer of white, seemingly sucked into the sky, or the desert floor, and I become acutely aware of my own smallness, before it magically reappears and I try to reorient myself. But all the mechanisms for doing so, second nature back home, are obliterated here. I'm in a different universe. It's thrilling, and terrifying, all at once.

After I arrive at the house where I'll stay during my time in the Atacama, I immediately set out again. I get on *Ruta 27*, connecting this part of Chile with the pass at Jama into Argentina. The road climbs. The air thins. I haven't seen anyone else for some time. I'm unsure how long; I haven't yet made a habit of gauging how long a wait it might be before someone comes along should my rental car break down. I don't yet realize that it's not wise to simply consign myself to the terrible fate that awaits one dependent upon machine first, fellow human second, and then, ultimately, the cold indifference of the stars.

Eventually, I do see other people. But they're inside a white van with a tour company logo emblazoned on it. And this van, I can't help but note, has multiple, full-sized spare tires and is carrying containers on its roof: no doubt extra food, water, and other necessities should things go wrong. Should

they, the driver most likely has the capability of calling co-workers for rescue. I, on the other hand, am armed only with a flip phone in a place that pulls no reception anyway. But this is all part of that awe thing again: throw yourself out there, give in to the grand places, breathe in a limitless sky. Easy in theory. In reality, in the Atacama, it's not easy. I've come here precisely to feel insignificant, to be subsumed by vastness and emptiness. I've gotten that. But I've gotten it to such a degree that it's terrifying, and I have to wonder now at my own recklessness.

Nevertheless, I pull off the paved road for the unpaved, drawn by the "Bolivia" sign and the fact that straight up, at 14,700 feet, in the shadow of snow-capped volcanoes, sits the border. I turn off my engine and step out. The ground crunches below my boots. I pick up a handful of pebbles and listen to the wind and the sand and the space between. My ears sting with the cold while my face burns from the sun. I walk. I am the only human on the planet. I am part of this and yet completely apart. I look up, see the snow on the tops of the volcanos, while the valley below blisters at almost one hundred degrees and so thoroughly desiccates the landscape that nothing grows or lives. And yet where I stand, there is life, the altiplano studded with tufts of grass, herds of vicuñas wandering the plain. Vicuñas have comically cute faces but can appear arrogant in their unthinking and unblinking adaptability. The searing heat, the thin air, the blinding cold; these elements are little to these animals, and their loping away from my car in vast herds is sweet and wonderful but a stark reminder of their utter indifference to any plight I might have to endure.

I know the mechanics of this. The snow up there is no different from the snow I get at home. Intellectually, I get that. But here intellectualism is a lodgepole at the back of my brain, a thing that gets in the way. Here, I live in the real, the actual, a liminal space usually inhabited only by infants and animals. Here, I absorb. I do not intellectualize.

But I cannot help myself: it is snow. I know snow. Its miraculous wonders remain in my earliest memories: of stilled cities, of mundane shapes—car hoods and winter-denuded bushes. But I sit in a desert. I have thrown myself into elements before: ocean, jungle, banks of snow and driving rain. Each reminds you that you are a visitor, a granule to be buffeted. You steady yourself, try not to impose, let your body move with the rhythms of elements much bigger and stronger. You ask permission. All here, too. But this is different. I try to meld myself with this sere landscape. I gleefully allow its passage into my pockets and ear canals and nasal passages. But it remains elusive: how can this place host two such opposables simultaneously?

Some of my favorite memories involve days of damp and cool fog in sodden, gray places; the Vigeland sculpture garden in Oslo, for instance: nude gray figures in various tormented poses speckled with rain and snow. Or the Place Royale in Brussels, in muted colors, the sky the color of a battleship's hull and the cobbles beneath my feet offering variation only in their pockets of accumulated rain; the way they reflect barely perceptible shading in the slithering sheet of cloud. Or a rock beach on the North Sea when everyone wears sweaters and the wind whips and the sky and sea are the same slate color, rendering it impossible to discern where one ends and the other begins. Why do these appeal to me so much? I realize now, here in the Atacama, that those places carried life in their wind and skies—literally. Distended clouds and air swollen with moisture hold fecundity. We seek life, obviously and understandably, in the most rudimentary way. Deep within us, embedded by thousands of years of evolutionary thrust. But it is psychological and emotional as well: we respond to the laughter of a child and the bullhorn yellow of a flower asserting itself from a sliver of cracked cement. So why then my attraction to the barren Atacama? Back home, if I were to plunge my fingers into cool soil and drop a seed, the black earth set deeply beneath my fingernails, the elements will

cohere and life will come. Here, amidst air with no moisture, on sand with nothing but more of itself, there will be none of that. It has taken millions of years to transform this place to what it is now. Everything here suggests it will still be like this in another million years. We look to life, for life. We look to transformation. But when there is none? Just maybe that, ironically, is the most life-affirming thing imaginable.

I trace my finger in the rocks and sand, carving my name. No different than scratching in wet cement: an impress to prove that I was here, some highly ineffectual shot at immortality. But then I watch as my name sweeps away in a gust. I am small. Here, I simply am. There is no reckoning. No figuring things out, I tell myself. The mind goes empty. Time disappears. I want to stay, perhaps never leave.

There are times and places when pulling away, giving it up, feel almost impossible—the embrace of a first love or the lap of waves replicating our first sentience; the womb itself. We get so few of these moments, so we cling to them, and it's why the decision to leave is such a difficult one. It's an acknowledgement that all things—beauty, comfort, excitement, love—are fleeting. I don't know how many minutes or hours have elapsed when I float back to my car and make my way again.

The next day, staring at 10,000-year-old petroglyphs, it's the same thing, and also very different. Yes, I am fleeting. We all are. And yet the record exists. This is another way the Atacama both strips and preserves. What ekes its way here can remain—a bleached bone, perhaps, or a preserved mummy or, in the case of the petroglyphs at Yerbas Buenas, a canvas of art and message: alpaca, llama, flamingo, monkey (despite there being no monkeys in this area; never have been). Back home, water will oxidize and transform and traces will be obliterated in short time. Here, the picture stays just as it was when it was created, a span as inconceivable as the beginning of time and yet as near to me as the first night I looked into the sky and saw what was *really* there.

Yerbas Buenas is reached after a forty-minute drive from the main road on an aggressively unpaved one. A steady climb above 11,000 feet. Luckily for me, the growling machine that has taken me to Yerbas Buenas has done its work, allowing me to beat back the lingering fear that the engine, hammered by unrelenting sun, taxed by high altitude and dizzying inclines, jarred and rattled by roads seared into undulating chunks of cement, will simply quit. There's the matter of the brakes, too: after white-knuckling straight up a mountain or volcano, eventually I plateau and that means coming down the other side—narrow, curving roads where one wrong turn can send me hurtling out of control. I have to mash those brakes hard and I'm assuming all that coursing adrenaline is somehow felt by this car to the point where it, too, shaken and terrified, decides it will simply give it all up and conk out.

But to my immense relief, I've made it, just as the Atacamenos who created these glorious petroglyphs had been here, back sometime around 8,000 B.C. Again, I tell myself: I don't matter in the face of this, and that is a good thing. If I don't matter, what then of the problems that have pushed me to seek solace here? There is no invisible barrier in the desert to keep them out. It's just that this austere and limitless place acts as a sort of shrinking serum, taking those problems and troubles and squeezing them into something much smaller and concentrated, as opposed to living, breathing elements that back home expand to fill every corner of one's familiar life and surroundings. Just as I had discovered earlier at the confluence of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina, here, too, I am the wind. I am the sand. And I am, ultimately, the stars as well.

I will leave. Here. Chile. Earth. I'll be gone. And that is fine.

In the expanse of a lifetime, you show up, you leave an impress of some kind (or hope to, like the makers of this art I gape at now) and then you exit.

It’s what happens in between in that very finite space that defines whether we are simply screaming into a void, mere vibrations that dissipate without ever reaching another’s ears or heart or soul. Or, if we are lucky, our utterances find a landing spot, no matter how fleeting. Next to a carving of a very pregnant llama, a deep cream-colored groove of line hewn into the red rock, I speak a wish into the wind, unsure if it will reach the ears of another, shuttled across this red earth along the icy breeze. The weather dictates all in these parts: heat, cold, wind—all the unrelenting elements that carve this landscape, and I think yet again about my internal landscape, also carved and sculpted by forces that still feel larger than I am but that are shrinking by the moment.

But now, back in my rented space outside San Pedro, as I prepare my dinner with all the windows open, I’m not sure I can feel more profoundly grateful and content to be in this place at this time. The wind rattles through, slaying the last remnants of daytime heat. I’m pleasantly buzzed from a bottle of Chilean red, product of one of the vineyards I passed through just a few days earlier from Santiago to the coastal city of Valparaiso. After a satisfying meal, and the temperature dropping considerably, it’s a return to the backyard to take in the overhead light show. But it’s not nearly as spectacular this evening. Orion’s belt still shines from its prominent position, but to the west, the wash of reds and oranges of the Milky Way appears smudged. I wonder if the periodic flashes of light on the far horizon are in some way related. Unless I’m going mad, they look very much like lightning flashes. But is such a thing possible here, in the driest place on earth? I know that the Licancabur Volcano, stretching just shy of 20,000 feet elevation and straight ahead to where I’m staring, is snow-capped just about all year. But these flashes look like the product of a serious rainstorm.

It’s the next day, when I investigate, that I find out that

what I had been seeing were in fact lightning flashes, residue of massive storms originating from the humid exhalations of the Amazon, sent sweeping over La Paz and Sucre to here, yanked toward the line of the Andes and the coast by the Humboldt Pacific current to thrash against the snow-capped cones and burn themselves out in torrents. In most years, the volcanic stretch of the northern Andes keeps its formidable line intact and renders these storms little more than the flashing I've observed. Indeed, a mere forty miles away, lifetime precipitation has been measured in millimeters, with only three years in the last half century measuring any precipitation at all. In some years, however, the storms manage to snake their way over the line of demarcation near San Pedro and pour their contents into the valley, making mud of the sand and filling homes with water. But it's never long before the dust devils are active again, choking the otherwise crystalline sky with fine particulates that embed their way into every crack and crevice.

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The next night, I head into San Pedro and walk the dusty streets to *Las Delicias de Carmen*, a small restaurant off the main drag: low-slung, whitewashed adobe buildings melding in a long view with the valleys and volcanoes that ring it. I know when I enter that I'm in good hands: a woman at the stove, a crescent of black sweat-soaked hair adhered to her forehead—Carmen, I am guessing. She looks like every mother everywhere: a woman who sustains, who does it from recipes handed down through generations. I am venerating a stereotype, I know, and yet in this one is something every human being, stripped to the essentials, needs to harbor in some deep recess. She is nourishment incarnate.

I order *choclo*, a mishmash of seemingly incongruous ingredients in a crock—corn pudding, chunks of chicken and pork, an egg cooked to a hard yolk, a single black olive. The food is so perfect, as is the cool breeze shooting through the

rafters, setting the stuffed vicuñas hanging from the ceiling to sway, underscored by the indigenous music piping through the speakers. It’s a meal I will never forget. I need not tell myself that I was here, for I *am* here. Right now. And I cannot forget that. It’s a gift.

I can’t resurrect being five years old, looking into the night sky for the first time while my father holds me. I realize now that I don’t need to. I have this meal. I have this place. I can go back home.

Yes, I am small, and in that smallness, I am the universe.