Incapacity

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Incapacity
Jeanne Heuving
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> *To write. I can't. No one can. We have to admit: we cannot. And yet we write. Writing is the unknown. Before writing one knows nothing of what one is about to write. And in total lucidity.*
> —Marguerite Duras, *Writing*

Incapacity, Jeanne Heuving's new work of poetry-fiction-autobiography, is a slim volume numbering under ninety pages. This carefully wrought book is the product of ten years' work, whittled down from drafts of over three-hundred pages and incorporating writing taken from the author's journals going as far back as thirty years. Despite its marathon scope, the text itself is small and precise, made up of dense, neat boxes of text interrupted occasionally with grainy black and white photographs of sidewalk curbs, imposing mountains and catastrophic mudslides. The discrepancy between the mundane and the extraordinary in these photos is an instance typical of the dimensions engaged by the book and is indicative of one of its overarching concerns: vulnerable human existence within the context of the incalculable. The picture chosen for the cover of *Incapacity* looks like a snapshot taken on a family vacation gone wrong. There are mountains and a bright blue lake in the far background, but in the foreground miniature looking people wander among massive crevasses that look as if they have just torn open. Small wooden cabins, upturned at odd angles, look ready to fall over. The people, dwarfed by the dramatic landscape, wander near rifts in the earth gazing in silence. The photo metonymically reminds us that the planet on which we live is hot at the core and still boiling and churning. In an age overrun with skyscrapers, highways and invasions of human destruction into every corner of the globe, we are humbled in the wake of earthquakes, mudslides and major natural disasters—reminded of human incapacity and

the frailty of our place on earth. Similarly, in the face of the masterwork Heuving has written a modest, precise book that seeks precision over grandiosity. *Incapacity* is no tome; it is made up of fragments, narratives and meditations that instead of seeking some resolution, open out onto dimensions of immensity, danger and power.

Incapacity employs a number of innovative writing modes and techniques, including collage, found text, photography, raw journal entry and quotation. While requiring a great deal of formal skill, it is a passive authorial voice that these modes have in common. The insights this work offer emerge through an engagement with the processes of the text, rather than through the author's imposition of a particular point of view; and yet *Incapacity* still manages to be highly personal and content driven.

Incapacity is divided into six sections that alternate between what the author has called "documentary" pieces and what she calls "written" pieces. The documentary pieces are composed of short excerpts taken largely from journals (more or less immediate writings collected over thirty years' time), while the "written" sections, as she says in an email interview with Dodie Bellamy, are more "literary": "By 'written' I mean that I let my desire to write what I wished have sway; I let myself take on deliberately literary voices and modes of writing" (n.pag). The formal construction of the book—the alternation back and forth between old writing and new, journal entries and crafted pieces—participates in the project of examination that is autobiography. For Heuving, one of the dangers of autobiography is that it risks creating a narrative of the self that is false. Indeed, self destruction rather than self description holds a place of privilege in this work. In terms of content, there is an examination of the author's own self-destructive acts. However, Heuving's self destructiveness is textual as much as anything, as it occurs within the workings—the palimpsest of writings excavated and juxtaposed—of the book itself. In other words, Heuving has written an autobiography that renders, but also seeks to wreck, socially/linguistically constructed versions of self. Self destruction here is not only a kind of negative damage, but a mode of writing the self that opens up the possibilities of self. Heuving comments: "In most impulses for self destruction, there is often a real thirst for life. […] Poets' 'love of death' is really a kind of destruction of

[the] social self that almost all of us feel at some level is a fabrication that leaves us out of things" ('Interview'). Here the life of the poet and the work of writing in the poet's life are inextricably intertwined. We see this link between the pleasures of writing and the pleasures of self destruction in the book's very first lines: "Perhaps the pleasure you seek as you write, this wrenching of yourself into an old and familiar scene, this making of almost meaningless meanings, is the pleasure of self-destruction" (12). Incapacity is a sort of textual excavation site where the author exposes her struggles with her own incapacity as a gendered body, as a human body, and as a writer. The difficulty with which Heuving struggles remains for her readers; it is not resolved and framed for easy consumption from a position of fixed comprehension. Rather than a contrived coherent narrative of her life, Heuving has composed a work that exposes the rifts, confusions, longings and failures that compose a writing life and determine the processes of literature.

Heuving's book navigates two general categories of incapacity. On the one hand there is ontological incapacity, which is grounded in the very nature of our existence as woundable, transient bodies. This condition of powerlessness is part and parcel of human power, a seeming incongruity that is articulated in the epigraph by Giorgio Agamben: "To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's incapacity" (6). "Potential" indicates a condition of potency and powerlessness both. To have potential, by definition, entails a lack of power. This is power's paradox, that it is defined by lack. The other facet of incapacity explored in this work (though the two are interconnected) is legal or official disqualification, incapacity in its socio-political aspect. This is very much a book concerned specifically with women writers' disentitlement at the level of language. As Heuving comments in her interview with Bellamy:

> I am at a certain amount of peril to describe my existence, particularly sexual experience, since it is inevitably misunderstood, reappropriated through narratives which create false identities—innocent or monster, wife or whore. I think that a lot of people like to think we are beyond this gender stereotyping, but in the areas of sexual experience, it is still rampant, vicious really, in both subliminal and not so subliminal ways. ('Interview')

In order to access the power to "describe my existence," Heuving moves into an area of negativity, which is often overlooked as the flipside of power. Incapacity, Heuving makes clear, for women writers is both an impaired social condition as gendered speakers and a domain of hidden force. Twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy, linguistics and psychology have been particularly interested in the domain of lack for precisely this reason—lack is the secret source of the manifestation of articulate intensities.

"Offering" is the centerpiece of *Incapacity's* "written" sections and the longest piece in the book. "Offering" seamlessly moves between different narrative landscapes, from Seattle to Guatemala, from the Midwest to terrains of the author's childhood, from the illness of her pet cat to an affair with her writing professor. All of these environments are on the verge or in the midst of geologic or emotional upheaval. From within these narrative landscapes the protagonist's struggle to write emerges. In a mist-enshrouded Seattle landscape she wanders both as a character and, in a tangle of narrative lushness, as an author full of desire to write precisely the work she produces by documenting her experience of longing to write: "I wanted to write a story that began enshrouded in mist. I was walking through the quiet streets of a residential neighborhood to a coffeehouse in a mist so thick and mysterious that even the noise of the freeway rushing overhead was blocked from hearing" (28). Abruptly the text switches to an account of the author's visit to Guatemala, which is interrupted by an earthquake: "One van parked near the shore with sometimes four, sometimes six, people sleeping in it, sank to their death in swirling mud. She, her companion, and the man with whom they were riding made love in order to end any separation among them. […] During the earthquake, large urns with beautiful succulent plants were knocked over and busted open" (29). In all these landscapes there is a conflation of sexual experience and natural disaster. Almost imperceptibly discrete narratives begin to overlap and interlace, drawing in themes and narrative spaces from the rest of the book. For instance, an obsession with mist in the Seattle landscape that dominates "Offering" is gradually linked to a larger obsession with snow as a figure of writing, which weaves throughout *Incapacity* and dominates the section titled "Snowball." The book's opening "written" section, "Snowball," occurs against the backdrop of Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* which begins with a snowball fight in

the Cité in Paris covered, gorgeously, with fresh fallen snow. In "Snowball" the seedy hotel room existence from which the narrator struggles to write is linked to this dream landscape in Paris by way of snow and shades of white and grey. Toward the close of "Offering," a Parisian snow covered landscape moves into the world of mist enveloped greenness:

> She wanted to write a story that began enshrouded in mist because of its airy vaporousness. Walking through the mist, she was reminded of the beauty of softly falling snow. It fell over everything, on the rooftops, the porches, the streets, drifting in small gusts of wind as the entire Cité sunk into oblivion. (54)

This fusion of Heuving's own writing with what she has read—specifically as landscapes that abruptly, but with seeming seamlessness, move into one another—is evocative of the way cataclysmic events like earthquakes can relocate and unite layers of earth from incongruent terrains of both time and space. Seismic disruption dislocates the order of things, rearranging fossil layers from millions of years ago and plateaus of the present. Just as these zones of geological disturbance can make visible the complexities of past and present, so too in "Offering," Heuving constructs geological rifts in her textual and personal universe in order to break up zones of rigid dominance and control. In one of the "Daybook" sections the protagonist/writer reflects on this: "That is why the earthquake scene in *Offering* is so central—it is the breaking up of some dominance" (54).

The book closes with the human world engulfed by the vegetal world and dwarfed by the cosmic reaches of the universe: "Bushes overcoming house. Bougainvillea hiding fence. […] Fast moving sky. Shot through with heat and luster. Heavens teeming with black holes" (89). These lines contextualize the human world by foregrounding its vulnerability and smallness. Here, bushes (an unexceptional flora in both literature and landscaping) silently reclaim the territory of the human on a globe that floats in infinite space among black holes. It is no accident that this book ends with the words "black holes." If our sun is the star around which the earth circles and which serves both literally and figuratively as the heart of warmth, stability and power, then black holes are the inverse image: figures of negativity, collapsed stars with infinite power of gravity from which neither

heat nor light escape. These final lines are shot through with the language of incapacity. Whereas works of art characteristically seek to dramatize human power, in this work Heuving seeks to explore human power's opposite. Strangely, what we find, following the labyrinth mysteries of these meditations on incapacity, is that inside powerlessness there is a world of uncanny force and intensity.

Works Cited:

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Alicia Cohen lives in Portland, Oregon, where, in 2000, she helped establish the art space collective Pacific Switchboard. She has published a book of poems, *bEAR*, with Handwritten Press and last year wrote, directed, and produced a multimedia opera and gallery installation for the Core Sample exhibition titled *Northwest Inhabitation Log*. She earned her doctorate at the University of New York, Buffalo, writing a dissertation on vision and epistemology in the work of Jack Spicer, Emily Dickinson, Leslie Scalapino, and Robert Duncan. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Ecopoetics*, *Bird Dog* and *Traverse*. She is poetry editor for the *Organ Review of Arts*.