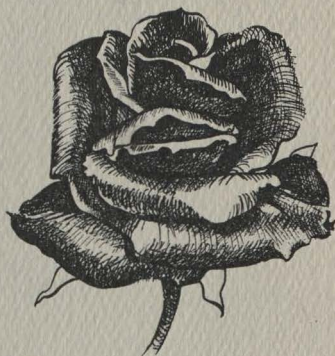


FOR ERATO:

The Meaning of Life



Fanny Howe

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Printed at TUUMBA PRESS
as Tuumba 48
April 1984

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THE AMERINDIAN COASTLINE POEM

ALSACE-LORRAINE

Cover drawing by Diane Andrews Hall

to J. V.

June 4, 1982

ISSN 0146 - 2083

ERRATUM

Tonight the wet sky prepared the way with dyes of many colors: gentian, magenta, gold and orange. They dripped into the East, the name for one span of nowhere, as if they too wanted to speak in the dark.

I walked alone through hills outside his window, sick of fruit & gender, but still on guard against reptiles. The hills wound up & down like optimism's optical illusion. The sky was as varied as the man inside; the eyes of his house were watching me.

Dear Former master! Soon you'll have a domestic spirit, bound to you by contract, just what you wanted. Be comfortable. But I must let you know what the suffering you caused signifies. The forceful person, after all, in the act of forcing is invisible to the victim.

Now I can tell you that your little victim is only at home among nobodies, since she learned the meaning of 'lost'. The little chick is warm within the wings of the mother hen. The side of the mountain is long: a mountain of feathers!

There was a time when your mouth -- the matrix of your attachment to the world -- blew lies into my ears, till I cried I'm safe, safe! But those were lies from lies, and they made a bruise which lay in the air between us. An unease, which you couldn't heal with more lies. You skirted this dark area, but we both knew it was there. On the right.

Silence creates such a bruise; but deliberate cruelty leaves another sort. This is the sort of bruise which makes a person become excited by his or her stupidity, when he or she has done something right. That's the bruise you left on my other side.

Why you didn't let me participate in the ruin of our union, I'll never understand. This was certainly your sin against humanity. Your sin against Divine precepts was, of course, far worse; but I won't name it, for fear of forgiving you.

Sometimes I wanted revenge. Then I wanted to track you down with love. Finally I made up the victim's prayer which sometimes reads like this: Go on. Keep at it. Never suffer. Get what you want. You're killing me with freedom.

It also goes other ways, but see if you can find it!

"Imagination's greater than skull. Its skills can't be eaten, either. If you can see your muse for miles away, with the dog, you are extended and inedible," I heard you call.

I nearly turned, but temptation's the time that loathesome inventions are entered into a common act, and ruin it. Better be bored than burning.

Today while beseeching our source to speak for me, the world was a creature and the difference between us.

And before going on, I want to say that you should consider a soul in grace, because she proceeds from this murk, always going about begging someone not to let her fall back in.

That things can't be ourselves is something so important that I don't want any part of it.

No. I feel it too keenly. It's like wit is a form of stigmata. You have to pass through eons of space, terror and shock to get it. With open hands.

These ways we spoke together, against goodbye, like sailor

boys in the olden days who'd be on a fleet together, then apart. It's not a failure of love, you said by the wall, but of choosing place over person. Hope rolls like an ocean, too, and breaks.

You made chains, meantime, from lovers. This was rotten work. Ants are real little troopers, for instance, but trash is the thing that turns into more living matter. I don't understand it's really flies. It's like you turn your feet away from loving eyes, and your ears increase the rate of separation. Around you was, once, summer, red cabbages pilfered in your hands. The field was full of cows as restaurants are full of tables; these your trees came at a very high price. Gourds grabbed a tangle. From that day's colorful angle, it didn't matter why you smiled. Now that litter matters.

Some souls think that all terrors stem from misunderstanding.

And elsewhere they have said a great deal about the harm done us by cursing, incontinence, promiscuity and such.

But not how, from pain's cold-fingered vise, do you rise.

The close covers hold. Inside, shoots, as tenderlings. There

are no numbers where there's heavy snow, just numbness in the counting fingers, and a closed circuit.

How far must the snowdrops travel, sealed with a pit of dust, before they settle on our separate bodies, and join us again by the force of weatherly weight?

You might as well ask, when will the atmosphere vaporize and a chill carry us abroad, after we're both dust and dry.

If you stack things up, one here, one there, you can be sure transformation will, finally, occur on the part of the 'grown-ups'. It won't. But they'll lay you all in rows, feet side up, where you'll get the giggles at each others' human faces, and worry about the sounds you might let out of the adjoining bathroom. If you put a pillow here, a box there, a set of blocks on an untreaded tire, then, for balance, you can be positive that the 'grown-ups' will figure out a way, in their room, how to change. They won't. Often thanks to you! And yet you still wait on, greedily, all the way until it's your turn. Then one by one you guys take to the streets; keep being friends, so you can study each others' human faces, for signs of imminent transformation. It's all very disappointing, really, until you realize how happy these forces of resistance are, on their own, without your attention.

You often said through a mouthful: "People with vices are creatures of habit; they take, therefore, more naturally to virtue than others do."

Or, from your chair: "The guardian of the world's system of injustice is the one who is kind and honorable. This one takes the frontal and protective position, and sits there, remembering how innocent its charges were one day, when comfort was a shield."

A soul who's not in grace moves among the cupboards, sobbing. Brutality's back, and she knows it.

She's like a chalkboard's fingernail; when the slate of heaven's squeaked, it showers ashes in the cold ground.

On account of my stupidity, I have let someone too close, though G-d is said to grant favors to those who through their own efforts have neighbors in the house.

How can you dare to demand, when riven by ideologies of brain and sin, some sure possession?

Tonight, taught by masters in cruelty, the crude clock of my

features turns, accusing.

You got more blues for your roses than I, but yours was never the garden of difficulty. Opulent, yes; but insincere. I grew Albas, Centifolias, Damasks, Portlands and Rugosa hybrids. Tenderlings, never. Shrubs like Sarah Van Fleet, Schneezwerg and Conrad Ferdinand Meyer -- those are oppressor-derived, easy enough for you to stick to, and win by.

To knock out a victorious rose garden requires cash. But the cost of a hard life can't be measured with coins or teeth. The cost is its own reward, no scattered roses.

Gates of snow crumble, whole nets tumble and feathers of the fierce beard fly. You stole my secrets, smiling gratefully. And two weights became the same one was before. It's like helping someone out, lightens a burden, rather than adding on. But the opposite, just.

Then do yourself a service, you are a service.

Yes, it's you & you, where sex & jealousy make out together. But I won't peek, who didn't do.

The instinct for resistance,
the instinct for no,
the instinct for solitude,
the instinct for escape,
the instinct for imagining
rather than living out:

often a mistake, but never fake.

I want quickly to say that there is no Other Life, but from here to there is the same all the way. Consequently, you must delight the source, until it orders you to please get up.

Yes, so good a G-d to commune with such tiny creatures!

But why does a muse fall into service sometimes for a person cold-blooded, bad and even rich? Why does a muse protect him or her with an innocent, Delight me?

Then one day she gets lost, is lost and finds her home. It's the donkey she follows, thenceforward, across the hopping hills. And later, a little sleep, with folded hands, in a field no one can find. She knows, at last, when her eyes are closed, who she was all along: G-d's little secret.

CHILDE ERATO

On a silver plain, we met. Rays of frost rose off a polluted river; bridges were weighted down to the water with icicles; and tables of ice, in consequence, rose up to meet them.

You appeared as a mane of air and called out my name. "She has a moderate gift for lyricism."

In that hoary light, we talked about technology and expectation, order and creationism, then back to sickness and machines, a calling to androgyny, poetry and an intake as spare as prisoners of war.

This was not all about ideas, since the infusion of human need, in you, was there also--the blackness behind your pallor was a sort of socialist conscience.

All the while we were, at heart, reciting "Farewell, Earth's bliss," to moments like this, dreamed out of drawn water. To you, thanks, that you appeared in the correct hour, absolutely, and straining how to remain.

But why did you ask me, "What does all this creation matter?"

*

In a modern monastery garden, each tangible is dry, even the fountain. Terra cotta, mariposa, roses, tourists and sweet Or-

thodox incense—are linked by the parching air.

It's quiet, until a woman covers her mouth of laughs. The Bishop is laughing, now, too, at his own joke: that an asp is both a poison, and a snake! The shadow of time turns around a stone sun dial, though we can't see its motion: as if to prove the intention is the shaper of result, regardless of attention.

I had driven both length and breadth, looking for you again. But my breath broke down where the hills spread out like bread and pies on a bakery shelf.

And you did not even consider it queer, as I had expected, that I was born in a land of thick fogs, and they have enveloped me so completely, I should be happy. But this is a favor I have tried NOT to obtain.

For years I have not belonged. And yet I am at peace, until I reflect that my little acts run contrary to Divine precepts, frequently. Without a cloak of fog, it's easier to run, or walk. But such speed causes suffering.

I discovered only recently the hidden meaning of these words: *Thou shalt love thy neighbor*. They mean, "It might be me!" regarding every human face and gesture.

One day, crushed by the disapproval of institutions both mighty and mundane, I stood on an unfolding meadow which fell into a dark forest fulminating with secrecy, money and a violent history. I was dizzy from a desire to be understood, which was, more precisely, a desire to be MISunderstood—but loved. It was winter again, and the green needles were gleaming under thick leaves of snow. Why do you think you're so big, you asked, in a rush of face.

After pointing out the rudeness of the question, I was tempted to answer you sharply, but made haste to smile. After all, I exist vaguely, and as my points of reference disintegrate, others see me go. This may be too big, indeed.

Later, when you riddled this little palm with pin-pricks, how different was my hand! No suffering is too big a price to pay for a sore palm. But my very weakness made me long for yet another storm of pain.

A no-win situation is only human. When you want what you can't, ever, have, you can't win. No one's to blame if you can't face, or find, the absent facts. But what happens, then, is the same as when panic begins to accumulate with the inability to fatigue.

For me also will come one last night. It has grown with my

growth, as being and knowing do, and the Holy Spirit will raise it to the end of time. This is a striking example of the power of the Divine. A place with an earthly beauty; but no rays.

There was this feast, not unlike a picnic or symposium, on a Sunday out of doors, where a crowd of us imitated the life of Socrates, not doing too much of this or that, because of the sun, and the food was not all that good, nor the wine warming on redwood boards. Temperance came easy to some, under the tropical trees, but not to me. Temptation hovered, as it always does, where there's more than one person gathered, at the margins of our mouths, though each mind was focussed on the discussion at hand: temptation.

See, our very own ideas, the fruit of our mind and the highest inspirations, were of no value without good works. Knowing what you know knowing to be to being, you must judge others by a history, not a hope, but judge yourself conversely.

A thick-set rose dangled at a ninety-degree angle off a shrub overlooking a thin branch of water. It was one of those so red, it's nearly black, and fiercely scented. Like a certain brand of Czech wine, popular that summer, the rose was too thick for its own good, and before the petals had a chance

to express their individuality, the whole clump fell on the checkered cloth. Every rose that falls is not free from the attention it desires, like ears, to escape.

You were quick to join the white-robed band for a tiny bunch of grapes that you would have to steal. (To you I'll certainly leave my little heart!)

We all were not really friends, of which there are so few, it's true all along what I once heard. With each disagreement came the recognition of our separation. It was all in a summer afternoon, dull in a way, only mildly distracting, empty of a customary sweetness, until the subject of Erato arose.

"Could you ever touch Erato, find a face, a band of warm flesh between rib and hip—would you?"

"Why don't skeletons have noses, then, except to prove you can't follow your nose to the invisible."

"I blame it on the mailman how often, often, OFTEN goes Erato in a stranger's guise."

The river jingled dry as silver. Sandals slapped away under the table, and the way a jar with a hole in it will leak, if you don't know it, my attention, given factual information, drifted, and I forgot everything I heard, as I heard it.

You might say my mean estate is prey of the mental eagle. But inaccessible light, in the semblance of a snowy substance, will one day swoop down upon me and plunge me into an abyss -- a happy victim at last.

When we expect nothing but suffering, joy becomes the greatest suffering of all.

I am the little brush chosen to paint likenesses of pain in a strong city. And you have an answer for everything, which makes me want to puzzle you. I have hung onto a parking meter for support, when visibility sprawled through the fog like a malignant terror. Yet I felt, from earliest childhood, that I was like a small bird in some way.

So I have forced myself to love suffering, like little ikons of the Pieta and doves. And I feel it most deeply towards the end of September, when something about my thirst for suffering rings really true.

I was told, by a stranger, somewhere on paper, that Erato is so thin, there's no gender there, just a plate of light rays criss-crossing the sky. And it's this very form of androgyny which attracts me. (I hope I may fly from this darkness so bewildering by being able to laugh at my story!)

The paper also noted that to be androgynous you must be:

1. untempted by sex
2. solitary
3. busy every minute
4. occupied half the time with philosophy;
the other half with trivia
5. a service to others
6. self-absorbed
7. so still, no one can see you
8. so fast, everyone wants you
9. petrified
10. above suspicion

Aristophanes, on the other hand, said that the word 'androgynous' is preserved as a term of reproach, but that, once, upon a time,

"the sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which once had a real existence, but is now lost. The primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely a-

like; also four ears, two privy members and the remainder to correspond. He could walk upright as men do now, backwards or forwards as he pleased, and he could also roll over and over at a great pace, turning on his four hands and four feet, eight in all, like tumblers going over and over with their legs in the air; this was when he wanted to run fast."

This is the velocity which venders illusions, the speed which dazzles the void.

A tabernacle of scruples keeps a soul from frequent communion with big desires. Littleness lives there. You tell me you wish to see the fruit of your labors. And so you hide yourself in the hiding-place like a peach tinted rose, and your nectar velvety; but you the stone inside possess nothing but what is essential to your being. Love to be unknown! "I scatter flowers, behold my flowers nowhere."

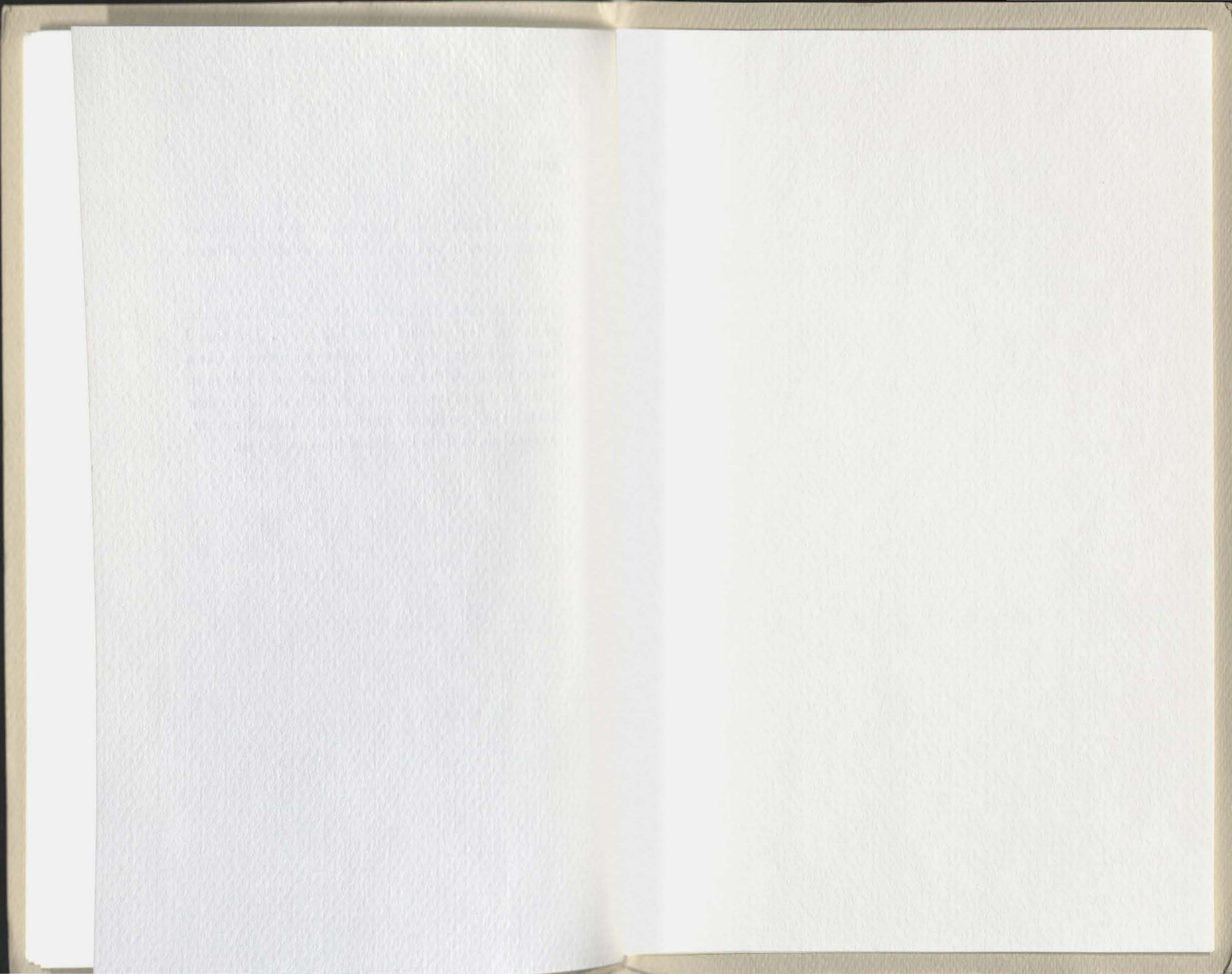
I sometimes think I am abandoned, and my role gives me much anxiety because it lasts five years. I keep a close watch upon spendthrifts and cherubim and murmur pro-Magdalen into a zephyr of walls. This takes years, as I report, to work, but it works.

In two and three days the dove will enter. My *little* dove. And startle me. After a night spent in some wretched sin. No matter how goodbye is earthly spousing, many like me

return.

In a land of exile, words have a beginning and an end, and you must glory in your own infirmities, which are littleness.

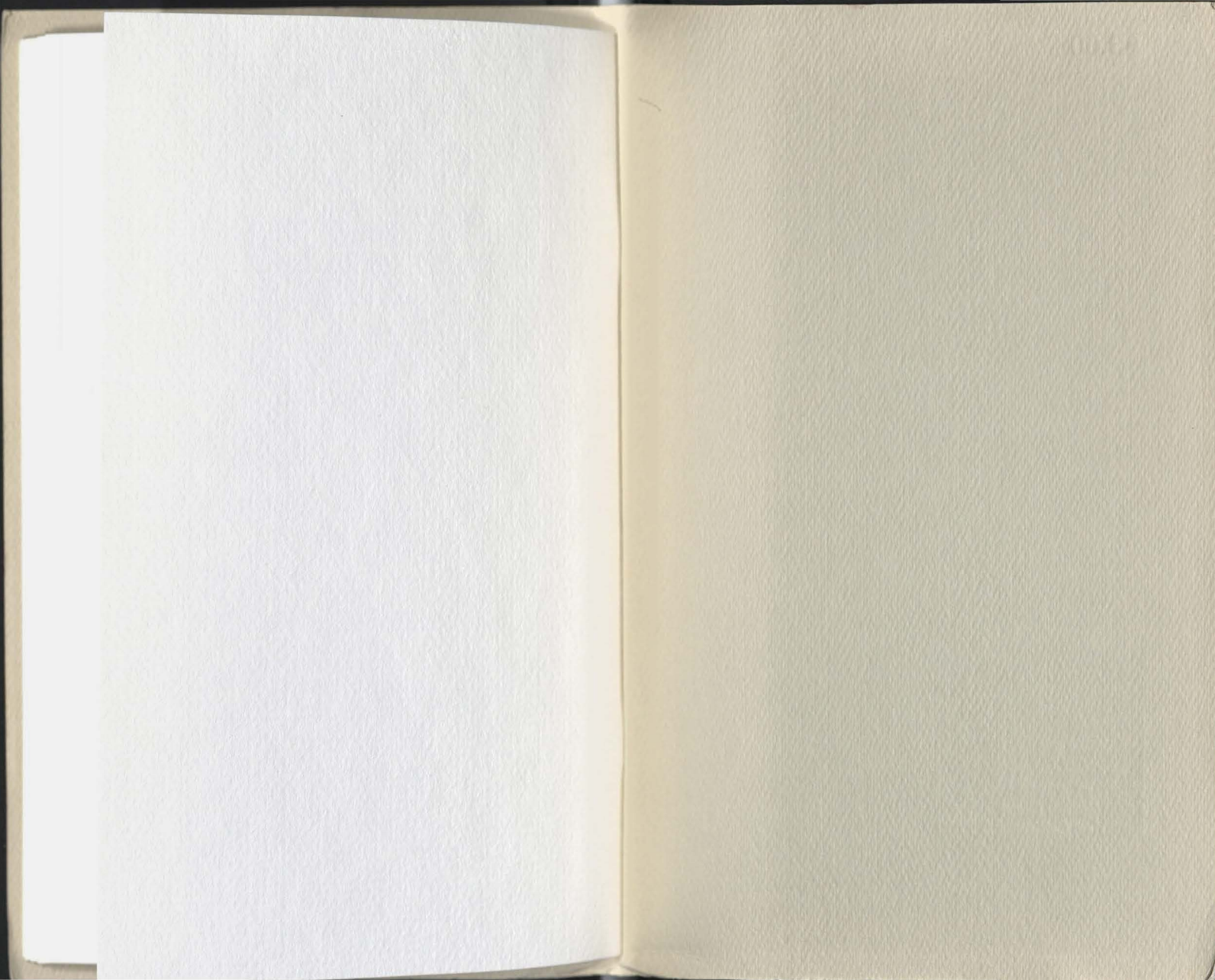
I mowed the snow. The frost was fallow. Snowflakes the size of unsifted flour signified a long bad storm. This time I heard you, rushing, say, "The kingdom of heaven is like a woman walking with a jar of flour, which has a hole in it. When she gets to her destination, she finds she has no flour left in her jar." So then the snowflakes flew through my hair, a mane of air, as if the kingdom of heaven was a jar.



THE STATE OF NEW YORK
IN SENATE
JANUARY 1, 1901.
REPORT OF THE
COMMISSIONERS OF THE LAND OFFICE
IN RESPONSE TO A RESOLUTION
PASSED BY THE SENATE
MAY 1, 1899.

FOR ERATO was designed and
printed at TUUMBA PRESS by Lyn
Hejinian. Of an edition of 450 this
is No. 426

THE
JOURNAL
OF
THE
AMERICAN
MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION
PUBLISHED WEEKLY
CHICAGO, ILL., U.S.A.



\$5.00

Subscriptions: \$10 series
Individual copies: \$3
Free catalogue available
TUUMBA PRESS
2639 Russell Street
Berkeley, California 94705

