

FANTASTIC WOMEN

**18 tales of the surreal and
the sublime from Tin House**



INTRODUCTION by JOY WILLIAMS

Edited by Rob Spillman



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Introduction

Joy Williams

*All men say "What" to me
but I thought it a fashion.*

—EMILY DICKINSON

I once used the word *peculiar* to describe the fabulous Flannery O'Connor and her work and got spanked by a doyenne of the literary establishment. But what's wrong with the word *peculiar*? It means special, distinctive, different from the usual or normal or ordinary. It even means exemption from the power of an authority to interpret and control. (Perhaps the doyenne feared she wasn't peculiar enough.) In any case, the doyenne found the word to be mildly pejorative and condescending while going on to describe all the cool stuff it actually meant.

The stories collected here are peculiar, I say! As well as being witty, spooky, disorienting, and artful. It would be tempting to call many of them surrealistic, but in fact one of the limitations of that movement was that it was so male. WOMAN is the key to man's search, the surrealists cried. The great secret of nature, the incarnation of man's subconscious destiny. Women are manipulative muses. Sweet. Innocent of their mysterious power. Women are the answer. And an answer can't question itself. Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered cup and spoon, *Déjeuner en fourrure*, arguably the most important surrealistic work of all, is actually a notion named by naughty boys. (My favorite surrealism is Aube Elléouët's painting *Le Secret*, in which a woman and her squid lover lounge blissfully in a garret.)

The surrealists were deeply enchanted with transformations and correspondences and were intent on revealing the emptiness and falsity of reasonable discourse. Thoughts became objects, objects thoughts. They sought the emancipation of words from their worn and dreary meanings. They were always more playful and effective in their art than in their writing—with some extraordinary exceptions, of course, all among the poets. Perhaps their reign was so brief—twenty years—because they were forever trying to define their aims; they became pedantic. In the end, the surrealists decided not to be defined as a school at all, but as a way of thinking, of knowledge.

Such knowledge finds wild flowering in *Fantastic Women*, in the unschooledness of these writers, their “unhousedness,” in Kafka's term. These ladies don't lunch.

They're also divinely unmaterialistic. So much of American fiction can't seem to crawl out of the hole of stuff, the stuff that defines us, the stuff that codes. The drugs, the labels, the bands, the names of the machines, the foods, the annihilating oppressive numbing stuff of things.

“Things don't happen, it depends on who comes along,” Paul Bowles said.

The painter Ivan Albright said, “Things are nothing. It’s what happens to them that matters.”

Many of the women in these stories are *farouche*—they’re outsiders, they’re troubled, they lack polish, they dream too much. But they’re quite accepting of the strange whos who come along, bringing the situations that confound and confront them. Husbands and boyfriends are no help whatsoever, although the lawyer in Gina Zucker’s “Big People” does help his wife drag the clubfooted midget she’s been entertaining in their apartment when the time really has come for the little fellow to go. And the couple in Samantha Hunt’s “Beast” do manage to have a serious conversation or two before they both turn into deer:

“[W]hat’s the most adult thing?”

“Fucking?” he asks.

“No. Fucking’s for kids. Dying is adult.”

What begins in Judy Budnitz’s “Abroad” as a typical tourist holiday swiftly deteriorates into bedlam as the unnamed narrator’s boyfriend brings more and more people back to their room: “The hotel room now is just a mass of bodies, cookstoves, tents, shanties, music, dancing arms and bobbing breasts, boys pitching pennies, stray dogs, the burned smell of someone curling her hair, a bazaar of stalls selling rugs and copper kettles, laundry hanging on lines overhead The walls are grease-stained, the bare bulb a small sun. He is . . . among them, shaking hands, kissing men on both cheeks, kissing women on the lips, as is the custom here. His face is tanned mahogany brown, though as far as I can tell he never goes outside.”

Fathers are no better. No help, no hope of salvation. The dad in Aimee Bender’s “Americca” is cheerfully clueless: “Dad lost his job. Then he got a new job. Then he got his old job back and went back to it. They were all in the same building.”

In Lydia Millet’s no-nonsense update of “Snow White, Rose

Red,” the dad’s a gray suit, a groom doll, obsessed with business, while in Lucy Corin’s “The Entire Predicament,” the husband, home from work and making himself a peanut butter sandwich, doesn’t notice that his wife is gagged and suspended in the doorway within a network of ropes. The children seem okay. They’re outside, playing with the soldiers.

“The Entire Predicament” says it all. Life is so perplexing. Things get strange fast. Chance rules. One second you’re listening to the comfy sounds of your dog drinking water from his bowl and the next you’re all ransacked. Or you find yourself boiling in a kettle in some god-awful kitchen. You bob around with others for a while but then you’re alone, the last to be chosen (Alissa Nutting’s “Hot, Fast, and Sad”). “I’m only going where others have already been,” you say pluckily.

The new heroine is the superadaptable woman, wanderer, perpetrator and acceptor of illogical action. In Lydia Davis’s “Five Fictions from the Middle of the Night,” a woman is escorted to a bathroom by a schoolboy: “[I]t’s a nice bathroom, with old fixtures and paneled in wood. As I sit on the toilet, the room rises—because it is also an elevator.” (Oh, that “because”!) “I wonder briefly, as I flush, how the plumbing works in that case, and then assume it has been figured out.”

One can only assume . . . Exactly! Or not . . . The important thing is to be alert to one’s surroundings, as we’ve been taught in these borderland, murderous, drug-crazed, netty, webby, clear-cut, schizoid times, even as those surroundings are morphing, melting, darkening, and shifting before our eyes.

What?

That’s right. Birds can swipe your incidentals to feather their omen nests and warp your present into some awful irrefutable shape (Karen Russell’s “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach”).

What!

Yes. The important thing is to be alert, aware, calm, and resourceful. When there’s nothing for miles and miles but pavement and your

momma won't sell to the highway department, the only correct thing to do is allow your friends and neighbors to drive through the house, accept donations, and sell 'em cookies, sort of like Toll House cookies but far flakier (Julia Slavin's "Drive-Through House").

When you're kidnapped by the swarm of little boys who live next door, don't struggle, show no fear: "Their chests glowed with fire-fly juice. They had steak knives strapped to their belts and some of them wore goggles. White cats strolled among them, sometimes sniffing their bare feet. 'Move,' yelled a small Wild, no older than six, a butter knife dangling from his Cub Scout belt." (Julia Elliott's "The Wilds")

There's little desperation or rage in these stories. (Kelly Link's Lindsey can get cranky in freaky Florida's "Light," but she's dealing with pocket universes and too many iguanas. Gin can help only so much. The important thing to know is she had a happy childhood.) The angriest female here is Miss Pretty in Stacey Richter's "The Doll Awakens," who, after suffering the final humiliation of penetration of her long-suffering plastic self by two meth heads in a trailer, hauls off and takes a bite "the size of a crab apple" out of one of them.

Nor is there much sex. Oh, a crush or two. A little vampirish nip here or there or a difficulty arising from postcoital good organic dope blessed by monks. Rikki Ducornet does explore longing among the bivalves in "The Dickmare," a wildly gorgeous tale told by a . . . what is not exactly clear. We do know that this what once found her husband admirable: "Admirable his thorny cone, his sweet horny operculum, his prowess as a swimmer, the beauty of his sudden ejections, the ease with which he righted himself when overturned." But he's not what he was and our feminine what, really quite attractive in her luminosity, her roundness, her smoothness, finds herself noticed by the somewhat godlike Dickmares, who "are known to unspool and push their pistons forward with such alacrity a subconical cavity will be stunned into service before it has a chance to ignite."

Fantastic!

Writers create the myth of their age's concerns, finding forms in which the concerns can be felt if not understood. These stories do not take up environmental or political or spiritual issues and I'm not going to find excuses for that. That's not their nature. Their take on the psychological viewscape is that it's endlessly curious and exploration is never fatal as long as one is able to keep afloat in the magical waters of the imagination. They are fictions neither moral nor immoral. Rather they are involved contrivances, preposterous in conception, logical in presentation, quite delightful and askew.

In Kate Bernheimer's "Whitework," her elegant retelling of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait," an injured woman rests in a cottage in a deep forest avidly reading from a small book that describes the delicate paintings on the walls of her sickroom. The room is a curious one—a turret, a circle, but with inexplicable corners. In one corner, suddenly illuminated, is a tiny, bizarre, but perfectly executed portrait of a young girl. Concerning this, the little book offers a frightening and wondrous assessment.

Awakening from her reflections and recognitions, the woman finds herself in another place, a hospital room, with a doctor by her side who tells her that prognosis for recovery is good but it depends on one thing alone—she must eliminate every gloomy thought: "He pointed toward a room I had not noticed before. 'You have the key to the Library,' he said. 'Only be careful what you read.'"

We know of course that our woman would rather not "recover" than be limited in what she can read. The fabulous, the otherworldly, the odd, the incomprehensible, the *peculiar*, must be sought out and absorbed. We enter a story, and when it's a good one we emerge, however briefly, as another self.

The world we think we know doesn't exist anyway.

So don't be careful. Read.

AIIMEE BENDER

Americca

When we came home from the movie that night, my sister went into the bathroom and then called out to our mother, asking if she'd bought another toothpaste as a hint.

I know I have major cavities, she said. But do we really need two?

Two what? asked my mother.

Two toothpastes, said Hannah.

My mother took off her sweater for the first time in hours and peered into the bathroom, where, next to the grungy blue cup that holds the toothbrushes, there were now two full toothpastes.

I only bought one, she said. I think. Unless for some reason it was on sale.

We all shrugged in unison. I brushed my teeth with extra paste and went to bed. This incident would've been filed away in non-memory

and we would just have had clean teeth for longer, except that in the morning there was a new knickknack on the living room side table, a slim abstract circle made of silver, and no one had any idea where it came from.

Is it a present? asked our mother with motherly hope, but we children, all too honest, shook our heads.

I don't know what that is, I said, picking it up. It felt heavy and expensive. Cool to the touch. Nice, Hannah said.

My mother put it away in the top of the coat closet. It was nice, but it felt, she said, like charity. And I don't like too many knickknacks, she said, eyes elsewhere, wondering. She went to my grandmother and brought her a lukewarm cup of tea, which Grandma accepted and held, as if she no longer knew what to do with it.

Drink! my mother said, and Grandma took a sip and the peppermint pleased her and she smiled.

Happened again the next evening when, while setting up for a rare family dinner, my mother stood, arms crossed, in front of the pantry.

Lisa, she said, you didn't go to the market, did you?

Me?

Hannah?

No.

John?

No.

Grandma never shopped. She would get lost in the aisles. She would hide beneath the apple table like a little girl. Our mother, mouth twisted in puzzlement to the side, found soup flavors in the pantry she swore she never would've considered buying. She held up a can of lobster bisque. This is far too bourgeois for me, she said. Anyone else buy this? We all shook our heads. Wild rice and kidney bean? she said. What is this? I would never buy this—lemongrass corn chowder? They sell this stuff these days?

Yum, yelled Dad from the other room, where he was watching tennis.

Who put these here? asked Mom again.

Hannah paused, placing spoons on napkins. I don't really like soup, she said. I shook my head. Not me, I said. I definitely hate soup.

Our mother tapped her fingers against the counter, nervous.

What is going on? she said.

Hannah lined up the spoon with the knife. We've been backwards robbed, she said solemnly.

I laughed but her eyes were serious.

Alls I know is, she said, I did not buy that soup.

Neither did I, said Mom.

Neither did I, called Dad from the other room.

I could tell I was still the main suspect, just because I seemed the most interested in all of it, but as I explained repeatedly, why would a person lie about bringing food and new knickknacks into the house? That is nice. That is something to get credit for.

Dad cooked up the corn chowder after he found an enormous piece of gristle in his mustard chicken. We all watched him closely for choking or poisoning but he smiled after each spoonful and said it was darned good and very unusual. Like Southwestern Thai, he said, wiping his mouth. Like . . . the Empress meets Kimosabe, he said. Like . . . silver meets turquoise, he said, laughing. Like . . . we all told him that was enough. Hannah checked the inside of the can for clues. After dinner, Dad collected water glasses from the rooms, singing.

That night I kept a close eye on the back door, but it stayed locked, and I even fixed a twig at its base to see if it got jigged during the night, but in the morning, the twig was just as before. I was walking to the bathroom to get ready for school when Mom cried out, and I ran over, and she was standing over the kitchen table, which held an extra folded newspaper. Hannah found a third pewter candlestick that matched the previous two, standing tall in the bookshelf. We ate our breakfasts in silence. Although being robbed would suck, there was nothing appealing about getting more items every day, and I felt a vague sense of claustrophobia pick up in my lungs, like I might get

smothered under extra throw pillows in the middle of the night. Like I might wake up dead under a pile of a thousand tiny wind-up toys. And we couldn't even sell the new stuff for extra cash because everything we got was just messed up enough to make it useless—the pewter candlestick was flaking into little slivers, and the silver circle thing had a subtle, creepy smell.

For the first time in my life, I cleaned my room after school. I threw out tons of old magazines and trash and dumb papers for school with the teacher in red pen stating: Lisa, we all know you can do better than this. I had the cleanest closet in years, which is why it was once again bad when I found, an hour later, a new mug on my side table of dancing cows holding balloons that said Happy Birthday! that ONLY could've been purchased by Hannah, but when I showed it to her she started to cry.

They're trying to kill us! she sobbed, wiping her nose on her T-shirt.

Who? How? How are they trying to kill us?

The people bringing this stuff in.

But who's bringing it in? I asked. We've been home the whole time.

Ghosts, she said, eyes huge. She stared at the mug. It's not even your birthday, she said, not for months and months.

I stuck the mug in the outside trash can along with the extra newspaper. I kept my eyes carefully on all the doors. The twig stayed put.

We had a respite for a week, and everyone calmed down a bit and my mother went to the market and counted how many cans so she'd know. We ate the food we bought. We stared at the knick-knacks that represented our personalities. All was getting back to normal until the next Sunday, when Hannah opened the towel closet and screamed at the top of her lungs.

What? We all ran to her.

The towel closet had towels in it. Usually it had small, thin piles—we each had a towel and were expected to use it over four days for all towel purposes, and there'd be a big towel wash twice a

week, one on Thursday, one on Sunday. We never stuck to the system and so usually I just used my towel as long as I possibly could until the murky smell of mildew and toothpaste started to pass from it onto me, undoing all the cleaning work of the previous shower.

Now the towel closet was full, not of anything fluffy, but of more thin and ugly towels. Tons of them. At least ten more towels, making the piles high. Countless piles of worn towels.

Well, I said. I guess we can cut the Thursday/Sunday wash cycle.

My mother went off to breathe into a paper bag. Hannah straightened taller, and then put one towel around her hair and another around her body, a very foreign experience in our family.

I'm going to just appreciate the gifts, she said, even though her face looked scared. I've always wanted to use two at once, she said, even though her hair was dry and she was fully dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and the towel looked like she was getting a haircut.

At school the next week, it was past Halloween and we had to bring in our extra candies for the poor children of Glendora. Bags and bags came pouring in and, aside from candy, I brought in an extra bag of stuff for the poor children, full of soup cans and knick-knacks I'd salvaged from the trash. Everyone in the family felt funny about it; maybe it was like passing on poison. But at the same time, throwing out whole unopened cans of lobster soup struck my mother as obscene. How often does a homeless woman who lives nowhere near salt water get lobster? she asked, hands on hips, as I packed up the bag. We all shrugged. We liked how her guilt looked in this form of benevolence. I repeated it to my teacher. It's not a Snickers bar, I said, but it's got a lot more protein.

I think I saw my teacher take that soup can for herself. I watched her closely that week, but she seemed healthy enough, and my dad had never had a single negative symptom from his lemongrass corn chowder. I didn't eat any Halloween candy. I didn't want anything from anyone else.

I got a note from the shelter saying my bag was the best.

Hannah got a boyfriend. She didn't tell anyone but I could tell

because she was using so many towels, making the bathroom a pile of towels, and for some reason I knew the towels were happening because of a boy. Why did she need to be so dry all the time? I asked her about it, when she came home for dinner and looked all pretty with her eyes bright like that. I had to set the table because she was late, and she apologized and said she'd take dish duty for two days.

It's okay, I said. Who is he?

She blushed, crazily. Who is who?

The reason you are late, I said.

I had to study.

Mom stood in the doorframe, but she wasn't listening. She wasn't out to bust Hannah.

How was your math test? Mom said, brushing the side of her hair with a soup spoon.

Okay, said Hannah, glaring at me. I got an A.

What did you hear? she asked, dragging me aside and cutting into my arm with her budding nails.

Nothing, I said. Ow. I just guessed.

How? she said.

No reason, I said. Towels. Who is it?

She said no one, but then she barely ate at dinner, which is rare for her, and usually I have to fight my way to the main dish to even get any because she is so hungry and that let me know she really liked him.

Dad lost his job. Then he got a new job. Then he got his old job back and went back to it. They were all in the same building.

We didn't get any more items for a few weeks. I started to miss them. I mean, I felt like I would die of claustrophobia and I had become paranoid about all things coming into the house including bathwater and I had made a checklist for market items, shopping items, and all school items, but when I opened the refrigerator and saw all the same old stuff, I wanted to cry sometimes.

I left a few baits: I cleared my nightstand of all things so that it was ready for a deposit. Nothing. I bought a lobster soup with my

own allowance, which made my mother shriek, but I assured her I'd bought it and I'd even saved the receipt to prove it. I brought it out of my bedroom, and she stared at the curling white paper and then looked at me, in the way she rarely did, eye to eye.

Are you okay, Lisa? she said. Ten-year-olds don't usually save receipts.

I'm trying to trap a ghost, I said.

Would you like to go to the mall? she asked. Her eyes were tired. She looked pretty with tired eyes, so I didn't mind so much.

We went to the nearest mall, over in Cerritos, which had been built twenty years ago and was ugly. I liked that about it. It was like a relative nobody liked but still had to be related to anyway. We went to the kids' store and she bought me two shirts, one orange, one red, and then I got very attached to a particular cap with an octopus on the cap part and I felt if I left it in the store I might dissolve. I didn't have much allowance left due to the spenditure of the lobster soup, and so I asked my mom as nicely as I could if I could have an advance and get the octopus cap because I loved it very much.

That? She was holding the store bag and trying to stop the salesperson from talking to her by staring out the door. Thanks, she was saying, thanks, thanks.

I love it, I said, putting it on my head. It was too big. I couldn't see well underneath it.

Please? I said.

We just got you two new shirts, she said. Do you really need a cap?

It's good for skin cancer, I said. Of the face.

She laughed. She was tired these days because she was having job trouble too; her job trouble meant she did not know how she could be useful in her life. Dad's job trouble was he had too much to do with his life. Sometimes I just wanted them to even it out but I couldn't think of how. That afternoon, I didn't want to bother her more, but I wasn't certain I could leave the store with that cap still in it. If someone else bought it, I might tear in two.

I will pay you back, I said. I swear. Or we can exchange it for one of the shirts?

She got me the cap because I hardly ever asked for much, and at home, I slept with it on, and I wore my new orange shirt to school and back and I was ready to charge ahead when I noticed the octopus cap on my dresser.

I thought it was the one on my head except then I realized that one was already on my head. So this had to be a new one? I took the one on my head off and held them both side by side. Two octopus caps. I had two now. One, two. They were both exactly the same but I kept saying right hand, right hand, in my head, so I'd remember which one I'd bought because that was the one I wanted. I didn't want another octopus cap. It was about this particular right-hand octopus cap; that was the one I had fallen in love with. Somehow, it made me feel so sad, to have two. So sad I thought I couldn't stand it.

I took the new one, left hand, to the trash, but then I thought my mom might see it and get mad that I'd thrown out the new cap she had bought especially for me, so I put the one I loved on my head and put the one I hated in the closet, behind several old sweatshirts. I went out to play wearing the first one. I played kickball with Dot Meyers next door but she kicks cockeyed and it was hard to see out of the cap and when I went inside, I scrounged in the closet for the second cap and it fit. That's what was so sad. It was the right size, and I put it on, and it was better. The ghosts had brought me the better cap. I put them both on, one after another, because at least by size now I could tell which was which, but it was just plain true that the one I loved did not fit and kept falling off and the one they brought did fit and looked better. Dot Meyers thought I looked dumb in a bad-fitting cap but she's dumb anyway and can't spell America right.

I saw Hannah kissing a boy I'd never seen before outside our house in the bushes.

That night, I put a bunch of stuff in Hannah's bedroom to freak her out but she recognized it all as mine so it wasn't the same as the

ghosts who came in with their own stuff, and I had no allowance to buy anything new.

I wore the good new cap to school.

I ate the lobster soup. I liked it. It had a neat texture. I liked it better than the usual plebeian chicken noodle my mom got. I liked the remaining wild rice one that hadn't made it into the Halloween bag; it was so hearty and different. I used the cow cup I'd salvaged from the trash, and the truth was, I liked the cow holding a balloon; it was cute. When I looked in the mirror, I sneered my upper lip and said, Benedict Arnold, Benedict Arnold, your head is on the block.

Mom came home from taking a class called Learning How to Focus your Mind, and she seemed kind of focused, more than usual at least, and she sat with Grandma on the sofa and talked about childhood.

After awhile I sat with them. There's nothing to do after homework and TV and creaming Dot Meyers.

You were a quiet child, said Grandma.

What did I like to do? asked Mom.

You liked to go with me to the store, said Grandma.

What else? asked Mom.

You liked to stir the batter, said Grandma.

What else?

I don't know, said Grandma. You liked to read.

Even as they were talking, I saw it happen on the dining room table. Saw it as they were talking, but it wasn't like an invisible hand. Just one second there was a blank table, and I blinked, and then there was a gift on the table, a red-wrapped gift with a yellow bow. It was in a box, and I went to it and sat at the table. I knew it was for me. I didn't need to tell them, plus they were talking a lot, plus Dad was at work, plus Hannah was out kissing.

It had no card, but it was really good wrapping, with those clean-cut triangular corners, and I opened it up and inside was a toy I had broken long ago. Actually, I hadn't broken it; Hannah had. It was a

mouse, made of glass, and Hannah had borrowed it without asking and dropped it in the toilet by accident—so she said—and broken off the red ball nose. I had been so mad at her I hadn't spoken to her for a week and I'd made a rule that she couldn't come in my room ever again and I asked Mom for a door lock but she didn't think I really meant it so I got one myself, at the hardware store, with a key, with money from my birthday, but I couldn't figure out how to put it on. Here was the mouse, with its nose.

What was next? Grandma?

Thanks? I said, to the air.

I took the mouse and put it on the shelf it used to be on, next to the mouse that had no nose, retrieved from the toilet. The mouse without the nose looked pathetic but a little charming, and the mouse with the nose, well. It had never been in the toilet.

When Hannah came home, I showed her. Mom's taking a new class, I said. That's good, she said. Her face was flushed. She seemed relieved, once she paid attention, that the new mouse had arrived. Sorry about the toilet thing, she said, for the fiftieth time. It's cute, she said, patting the new one.

Let's flush it down the toilet, I said.

What?

My eyes were pleading. I could feel them, pleading.

Please, Hannah.

Hang on, she said. She went to the bathroom and splashed her face and spent a minute in there with her crushiness, and then opened up. I brought both mice in.

Both, I said, the old and the new.

Fine, she said. Whatever.

How'd you do it?

I just dropped it in, she said.

On purpose?

Yeah.

I didn't blame her. Right now, it seemed like these mice were just made for the toilet. I sat next to her on the edge of the bathtub

and dropped in the new guy. He floated around in the clean white toilet water.

Flush away, said Hannah, her eyes all shiny from kissing.

I flushed. He bobbed around and almost went down but didn't. He was slightly too big. The toilet almost overflowed. But still, the nose.

That's just what I did, she said. She was putting on lip gloss and smacking at herself in the mirror.

I picked up the wet new mouse and broke his nose right off. It took some pressure, me holding him good in one hand and then snapping it off. You can ruin anything, if you focus at it. There, I said.

I put both mice in the trash and washed my hands. Hannah broke up with her boyfriend a few weeks later because he'd started calling her honey, and I got picked for the kickball team, and we didn't get any more gifts. Not for years.

Mom found some work downtown as a filing clerk, and Dad almost got that promotion. Hannah went to college nearby but she lived at home because of the price of rent. Grandma got older and eventually died.

When I was about to graduate high school, I did notice a packet of yellow curry in the pantry while I was rummaging around, looking for a snack. It was in a plastic yellow envelope that just said Curry on it in red letters. I asked my mom if she'd bought it, and she said no. Hannah? No. Dad? No. I don't like curry, I said out loud, although I'd never tried it. As an afterthought, I brought it with me to college, where I had a scholarship, so I was the first one to leave home, it turned out, and it sat in the cupboard in the dorm for four years, alongside the oregano and the salt and my roommate's birth control pills. I took it with me to my first apartment that I shared with the utilities-shirker, and my second apartment with the toxic carpet, and in my third apartment, when I was twenty-seven, living alone across the country, I opened it up one night when I was hungry and made a delicious paste with butter and milk, and then I ate it over chicken and rice and cried the whole way through it.