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Opening Extract from...

Gold Fame Citrus

Written by Claire Vaye Watkins

Published by Quercus

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PREAMBLES

An essay by Claire Vaye Watkins

Westerners are doomsday people. When the Asian tsunami hit, my college boyfriend J started keeping the gas tank of his Saturn full, always. When I asked, J admitted he was primed to tear out of Reno, rip down the seam of the Great Basin back to our hometown if need be. His family had buried a junk shipping container somewhere in the Mojave Desert – where exactly he wouldn't disclose – and it waited, stocked with nonperishables. (J was not the only paramour of my youth whose parents had a shipping container buried in secret and stuffed with goodies.) I was not invited to J's family's refuge, in part because I was unsaved and they interpreted the tsunami as a potential preamble to the Rapture, and in part because they assumed my family had its own bunker somewhere beneath the sage scrub. We didn't – my people are quitters, succumbers; we are the wife in *The Road* who takes a flake of obsidian to her wrists.

A few years after the Rapture didn't come, J died in a car accident, risen or not the old-fashioned way: alone. I thought of him many years later, researching this novel at Manzanar, the internment camp in Owens Valley, California, where more than 100,000 Japanese Americans had been imprisoned. I was born in the Owens Valley of Chinatown fame – the California Water Wars and Cadillac Desert cast as long a shadow in the creation myths of my family as Ellis Island might in another. The raw materials of this book are mined from the terrain of my girlhood, both narrative and literal: Death Valley talc mines fashioned into end-times shelters, the Mormon Exodus, the bum blockades erected by militiamen at the California border to keep the Okies out, the bone-dry bathtub ring around Lake Mead, glimmers of stardom in Los Angeles, dowsers and mystical near-feral children in the desert beyond. *Gold Fame Citrus* tosses these legends somewhere into the future, at the culmination of the water crisis in the American West. Once there, I became curious about how we love and are loved in pre-apocalyptic places.

GOLD FAME CITRUS

Desert sands have laid waste to the south-west of America. Las Vegas is buried. California – and anyone still there – is stranded. Any way out is severely restricted. But Luz and Ray are not leaving. They survive on water rations, black market fruit and each other's need. Luz needs Ray, and Ray must be needed.

The night of the raindance, Ig explodes into their fragile family like a miniature missile. Two years old, undernourished, wild – the toddler needs Luz more than anyone. So they steal her.

The only way to save themselves now is to escape.

It's said there's a man on the edge of the Dune Sea. He leads a camp of believers. He can find water. Venturing into this dry heart of darkness, Luz thinks she has found their saviour. For the will to survive taps hidden powers; and the needed, and the needy, will exploit it.

Like Margaret Atwood, Claire Vaye Watkins uses dystopia to traverse the scarred frontier of the heart. In her bare and brilliant prose, nature and human nature, conspiracy and cult, motherhood and manhood are played out across the vast, indifferent, inevitable desert.

GOLD

FAME

CITRUS

Claire Vaye Watkins

Quercus

First published in 2015 in the United States by Riverhead Books
First published in Great Britain in 2016 by

Quercus Publishing Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

HB ISBN 978 1 78429 286 7
TPB ISBN 978 0 85705 480 7
EBOOK ISBN 978 0 85705 479 1

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businesses, organizations, places and events are
either the product of the author's imagination
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Lauren Kolm

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

FOR D.A.P.

BOOK ONE

There it is. Take it.

William Mulholland

Punting the prairie dog into the library was a mistake. Luz Dunn knew that now, but it had been a long time since she'd seen a little live thing, and the beast had startled her. She'd woke near noon having dreamed a grand plan and intending to enact it: she would try on every dress in the house. They hung like plumage in the master closet, in every luscious color, each one unspeakably expensive—imagine the ones the starlet had taken with her! In the dream Luz had worn every dress all at once, her breasts bestudded with rhinestones and drenched in silver dust, her ass embroidered with coppery alleyways of sequins, pleated plumes of satin fanning from her hips, pale confectioners' tulle floating like spun sugar at her feet. Of course, things went one-at-a-time in the lifeless waking world.

It was important to have a project, Ray said, no matter how frivolous. The Santa Anas winged through the canyon now, bearing their invisible crazy-making particulate, and Ray said she should try to keep

her hands busy. She should try not to sleep so much. Some of Ray's projects included digging out the shitting hole and siphoning gasoline from the luxury cars abandoned throughout the canyon.

Yesterday, Luz's project had been to present Ray with a gift of herself swaddled like a chocolate in a fur coat she'd excavated from one of the cavernous hall closets, though she was not so dark as chocolate. She'd roasted under the mink, her upper lip already jeweled over and trembling with sweat when she breached the backyard where Ray was working, into the ever-beaming, ever-heating, ever-evaporating sun. Sun of suns. Drought of droughts. These were their days now, Luz and Ray and the merciless sun up in the canyon, a family of light in this mansion cantilevered into the hillside, a bridge for a driveway. Luz had shucked the preposterous coat to the dirt and instead napped naked on a sun-stiffened chaise under the lines of a leafless grapevine until dinner. The once Ray approached her, sliding his hand between her knees, she'd groaned: too hot for sex. The mink was still heaped out back, sculpture of a failure.

This project was better, she confirmed, twisting before the easel mirror in a peachy silk shift, lovely even against her grimy skin. In the closet was a handwoven poncho of oranges and golds, perfect for the shift, except wool was suicide. Instead, a Hermès scarf—no, a delicate tennis bracelet whose tiny clasp gave her some trouble. Like dewdrops strung around her wafer wrist, something the photographers would have said. But practically everyone was thin now. Luz stepped out of the shift and wriggled into a clinging cobalt mermaid gown dense with beads. It was gorgeous and she was gorgeous in it, even with her filthy hair and bulgy eyes and bushy brows and teeth which jutted out from her mouth as if leading the way, the front two with a gummy gap between them which caused her to seal her thin top lip to her plump bottom lip, even when she was alone, even now

as she twirled and the dangly beads went *click click click*, softly. She looked liquid and wanted to show Ray.

Luz tromped down the floating railless stairs in the gown and rubber galoshes and a feather headpiece, baubles winking on every finger and one wrist. At the bottom of the stairs, she froze. Across the foyer, watching her, the tawny, beady-eyed rodent. It stood on its hind legs. It sniffed the air. Its nimble claws worked at something. Kind of cute. Except it dipped its head and maybe came at her. Luz panicked, shrieked, and executed a long-stride slo-mo kick of unexpected grace and force, some long-lost AYSO girlhood reflex risen from the resin of her quads.

They were a tired joke, the galoshes. Ditto umbrellas, slickers, gutters and storm drains, windshield wipers. This place had not seen so much rainfall as to necessitate galoshes in her entire life. But thank God for them, else the rodent might have ribboned her bare foot with its claws instead of flying through the open door of the library, going *scree*. A horrifying sound, that *scree*, and in her horror Luz slammed the blond wood door closed, setting it shuddering on its casters. A cruel instinct she was paying for hours later, for she was now plagued with a hefty boredom and the melancholy of finishing an excellent book—a biography of John Wesley Powell—and had nothing new to read.

The question, now, was whether to interrupt Ray—in the yard constructing a half-pipe from the plywood they'd pried off the windows and doors of the starlet's ultramodern château—or to handle this prairie dog situation herself. *Scree*, it said. She went out onto the balcony and called down to her love.

Ray squinted up at her and whistled. "Looking good, babygirl."

Luz had forgotten about her mermaid ensemble, and a little zing of delight accompanied the compliment. "How's it coming?" she called.

“What an embarrassment,” he said, shaking his head. “Ten million empty swimming pools in this city, and we get this one.”

The embarrassment was adjacent to his would-be half-pipe: the starlet’s long-drained swimming pool, its walls not smooth concrete but a posh cobble of black river stones, its shape not a scooped-out basin but a box. Hard edges and right angles. Patently unshreddable. A shame, was all Ray said when he first knelt down and felt it, though his eyes had gone a pair of those smooth, globular kidney pools in the Valley. Ray had been to the forever war—was a hero, though he’d forbidden the word—and he went places sometimes.

Here, he was shirtless, all but gaunt, torquing his knees against a pane of plywood. His unbound hair was getting long, clumped and curling at his shoulders. On the bottom of the dry pool were smeared a few dreadlocks of dehydrated slime, pea-colored and coppery. Hair-cuts, Luz thought. Tomorrow’s project.

She watched him work a while, leaning on the balcony rail as the starlet might have. It was impossible to be original and inspired living as she was, basically another woman’s ghost. Ray could dismantle the starlet, splinter her, hack her up and build with her bones, but Luz languished beneath her. They wore the same size everything.

When Ray said *up in the canyon* Luz had seen porticos and candelabra, artisanal tiles, a working bath with a dolphin-shaped spigot patinaed turquoise with matching starfish handles, birds’ nests in chandeliers, bougainvillea creeping down marble columns and dripping from those curlicue shelves on the walls of villas—what were they called? But the place they found was boxy and mostly windows. All slate and birch ply, its doors slid rather than swung, the wrong style for columns. Any and all vinery was dead. Plantwise there were the dried pool slime and the gnarled leafless grapevine and spiny somethings coming through the planks of the deck, too savage to kill.

Below her Ray's hammer went *whap whap whap*.

Sconces, they were called, and there were none.

Where were the wild things seeking refuge from the scorched hills? Where was the birdsong she'd promised herself? Instead: scorpions coming up through the drains, a pair of mummified frogs in the waterless fountain, a coyote carcass going wicker in the ravine. And sure, a scorpion had a certain wisdom, but she yearned for fauna more charismatic. "It's thinking like that that got us into this," Ray said, correct.

Nature had refused to offer herself to them. The water, the green, the mammalian, the tropical, the semitropical, the leafy, the verdant, the motherloving citrus, all of it was denied them and had been denied them so long that with each day, each project, it became more and more impossible to conceive of a time when it had not been denied them. The prospect of Mother Nature opening her legs and inviting Los Angeles back into her ripeness was, like the disks of water shimmering in the last foothill reservoirs patrolled by the National Guard, evaporating daily.

Yet Luz yearned for menagerie, left the windows and doors open day and night to invite it, even when Ray complained of the dust, even when he warned that the Santa Anas would drive her insane. Maybe true, for here was this varmint scurrying in her head. Here, finally, was a brave creature come down to commune in the house that wasn't theirs—it didn't belong to anyone!—and what had she done? Booted the little fellow in the gut and locked him away.

Air hazy and amber with smoke. Malibu burning, and Luz's old condo with it. Ticks clinging to the dead grass. Sand in the bedsheets and in her armpits and in the crack of her ass. Jumping bugs nesting in the mattress, all the more pestilent for being probably imagined. Some ruined heaven, this laurelless canyon.

Luz had read that they used to fight fires by dangling giant buckets from helicopters, filling the buckets at a lake and then dumping the water on them. The skies were batshit back then: bureaucrats draping valleys under invisible parachutes of aerosols, engineers erecting funnels to catch the rain before it evaporated, Research I universities dynamiting the sky. Once, an early canyon project, Luz and Ray hiked up the mountain called, horrifically, Lookout, and came upon a derelict cloud seeder, one of those barn-size miracle machines promised to spit crystalline moisture-making chemicals into the atmosphere. Another time they hiked up a back ridge and picnicked above that colorless archipelago of empty and near-empty tanks strung throughout the city. They ate crackers and ration cola and told stories about the mountains, the valley, the canyon and the beach. The whole debris scene. Because they'd vowed to never talk about the gone water, they spoke instead of earth that moved like water. Ray told of boulders clacking together in the ravine, a great slug of rubble sluicing down the canyon. That's what geologists called it, a slug, and Luz was always waiting for the perfect slug, slow and shapeless and dark, filling all spaces, removing all obstacles. Scraping clean their blighted floodplain.

Ray often went up to the ridge with the notebook he kept in his pocket, but Luz had not been back. Some things were beyond her, such as opening the door to a seldom-used library walled with biographies of Francis Newlands and Abraham Lincoln and Lewis and Clark and Sacajawea and William Mulholland and John Muir (whom she had her eye on) and capturing the small gnawing mammal inside.

She went back to the starlet's closet, dumped a pair of never-worn espadrilles from their box and brought the empty box to the yard. "I think there's a prairie dog in the library," she told Ray.

Ray stopped his hammering. "A prairie dog."

Luz nodded.

"How'd it get in there?"

"I don't know."

"Did you put it in there?"

"More or less."

"When?"

"Can you get it out?"

"Leave it," he said, turning back to the half-pipe skeleton. Ray was not a reader. He used to read the newspaper every morning, but now that the newspapers were gone he said he was through with the whole reading and writing thing, though Luz had read the secret poems in his notebook.

"It's not . . . humane," she said, offering him the box. "Plus it's probably crapping everywhere."

He sighed, unbuckled his tool belt—some long-gone handyman's—took the shoe box and loped into the house. She followed. He paused outside the library door. "How big was it?"

"Like, a football? I think it was rabid," she lied. She was beginning to feel ridiculous.

He slid the library door closed behind him. Luz listened. The canyon was hot and still and so was the house. Then came a clamorous ruckus from the library. Ray said, Shitfuck. He said, Jesus.

He emerged like a wildman character making an entrance in a play, vexed and slamming the door behind him.

Luz asked, "Where's the box?" Ray raised a silencing hand and strode from the foyer into the cavernous living room. Luz followed. He paced madly for a minute before seizing upon the sooty black poker by the fireplace and returning to the library.

Luz sat on the second step of the staircase and waited. There was

more ruckus, a crash, the screeching of a desk chair shoved along the exposed concrete floor. Swears and swears. Then quiet. She wanted to open the door but would not.

“Did you get it?” she called eventually.

The door slid open a sliver and Ray’s red and sweaty head poked out. “You better not look.”

Luz put her face in the basin of her hands, then immediately lifted it. She gasped. Ray was before her. Aloft at the end of the poker, the throbbing body of the prairie dog, impaled. Its mouth was open and its forepaws twitched once, twice. Ray hustled outside.

Luz stood, queasy and overheated. She hovered above herself and saw that she was undergoing one of those moments in which she was reminded that Ray—her Ray—had, as part of his vocation, killed people.

She turned around and lurched up the stairs. She did not want to be around when he returned. Halfway up, she tripped. The floating stairs had always unnerved Luz and now they enraged her. She kicked the leaden galoshes from her feet down to the living room with some effort, staggered barefoot to the darkened bedroom, peeled off the suddenly chafing mermaid gown, climbed into the massive unmade bed and wept in the sandy nest of it.

She wept briefly for the creature, and then at great length for all her selves in reverse. First for Luz Dunn, whose finest lover and best friend was a murderer and perhaps always would be, then for Luz Cortez, mid-tier model spoiled then discarded. Emancipated at fourteen, her father’s idea, something he’d prayed on, amputated from him and from child labor laws. Then, finally and with great relish, she wept for Baby Dunn. Poster child for promises vague and anyway broken, born on the eve of some symbolic and controversial groundbreaking ceremony, delivered into the waiting blanks of a speech written for a long-forgotten senator:

Conservation's golden child arrived at UCLA Medical Center at 8:19 this morning, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Dunn of San Bernardino, California. Eight pounds, eight ounces, the child has been adopted by the Bureau of Conservation, which embarks today on an heroic undertaking which will expand the California Aqueduct a hundredfold, so that Baby Dunn and all the children born this day and ever after will inherit a future more secure, more prosperous, and more fertile than our own. We break ground today so that there will be fresh water for drinking, irrigation and recreation waiting for Baby Dunn and her children . . .

Baby Dunn, born with a golden shovel in her hand, adopted and co-opted by Conservation and its enemies, her milestones announced in press releases, her life literal and symbolic the stuff of headlines, her baby book lousy with newspaper clippings:

GOVERNOR SIGNS HSB 4579;

EVERY SWIMMING POOL IN CALIFORNIA TO BE DRAINED BEFORE
BABY DUNN IS OLD ENOUGH TO TAKE SWIMMING LESSONS.

BABY DUNN STARTS KINDERGARTEN TODAY WITHOUT
GREEN FIELDS TO PLAY IN.

LAST CENTRAL VALLEY FARM SUCCUMBS TO SALT: BABY DUNN,
18, NEVER AGAIN TO TASTE CALIFORNIA PRODUCE.

BERKELEY HYDROLOGISTS:

WITHOUT EVACS BABY DUNN WILL DIE OF THIRST BY 24.

Now Luz was twenty-five and hung up on the logistics. Had her parents been paid? Was her envoyery prearranged or hatched last-

minute? Some intern of the senator's staked out in the maternity ward? Some go-getter do-gooder from a public Ivy, recorder in his coat pocket, scouring the waiting room for a photogenic and verbose new parent? How this young gunner must have delighted at finding Luz's father, big German teeth, a pastor and a salesman, moved by the spirit to join the Rotary Club, to hit the gym by six every morning, to display the apple of his eye in church talent shows, to spend his wife's financial aid on very good hair plugs. Billy Dunn would not have been in the delivery room, certainly not. Not his business to witness his wife's woman's body undergo its punishment. Not permitted by his temperament to acknowledge anything uterine, vaginal, menstrual, menopausal, pubescent. Not here, on the day of his only child's birth, nor later when Luz's mother was dead and Luz got leggy and bled purple and shreddy brown, when he could have said what was happening to her and what to do about it, when he could have said, as any man could have, what lay ahead for her. But he did not say, and instead she had stolen a plaid dishrag from the kitchen and cut it into strips with her dead mother's scalloped scrapbooking scissors—such that the rag strips shared the peppy border of her baby book clippings—and tucked these strips up between her labia. Instead, she had learned from the other girls and from the photographers, often.

Luz, said Billy Dunn, is my cross to bear.

It was this she always landed on: her father pious and a chatterbox, maybe nervous, approached by a statesman's underling in the hospital waiting room. Saying her name so it rhymed with *fuzz* before her mother, channeling Guadalajara, had a chance to correct him. Random, how she became the goddesshead of a land whose rape was in full swing before she was even born. Baby Dunn.

The ration hour came and went; Luz heard the hand pump screeching and Ray beneath her, filling his jug and hers. She lay in bed a long time, snotty and damp and staring at the dark drawn curtains

and the heaps of clothing she'd mounded all over the room which were the millions of holes that pocked every hillside of the canyon, each with a tiny grainy dune at its mouth. She had thought the holes to be the burrows of chipmunks, but knew them now to be snake holes. Mammals were out. LA gone reptilian, primordial. Her father would have some scripture to quote about that.

After some time, Ray came into the bedroom and set a glass of lukewarm water on her nightstand. He stayed, silent, and Luz said, "Can you bring me John Muir?"

"Sure." He went out, came back, and set the volume on the nightstand, beside her undrunk water. He perched himself on his edge of the bed and leaned over to touch her, gently.

"Say something," she said. "Make me feel better."

"I love you?"

"Not that."

He offered the glass. "Drink this."

She did.

He tried, "I think it was a gopher. Not a prairie dog."

This did make her feel a little better, somehow. She rolled to face him. "What did you do with him?"

Ray bit his cheek. "Threw it in the ravine. I can go down and get it if you want."

"No," she said. She would have liked to bury the little guy properly—make a project of it—but she was certain that if Ray went down into the ravine he would never come back.

"Come here," Ray said, and hoisted Luz, nude and fetal, onto his lap. He took each of her fingers into his mouth and sucked the starlet's rings off. He extracted the feathered headpiece from her hair and began tangling and untangling it with his fingers, something she loved immeasurably. "It's Saturday," he said.

"I didn't know."

"We could go down to raindance tomorrow. Try to get berries."

She sucked up some snot. "Really?"

"Hell yeah."

They laughed. Ray said, Here, and led Luz from the bed and into the master bathroom. He held Luz's hand as she stepped naked into the dry tub, a designer ceramic bowl in the center of the room, white as a first tooth. Ray went downstairs and returned with his jug. He moistened a towel at the jug's mouth and washed her everywhere. When he was finished he left her in the tub. "Stay there," he said before he closed the door. She stayed in the dark, fiddling with the starlet's bracelet, the diamonds having found some improbable light to twinkle. When Ray finally retrieved her, he carried her over his shoulder and flopped her down on the bed and only when she slipped her bare legs between the sheets did she realize that the cases, the duvet, every linen was smooth. He had snapped the infinite sand from them.

The sun had gone down and the doors to the balcony were open; she imagined the sea breeze making its incredible way to them. Tomorrow they would eat berries. They lay together, happy and still, which was more than anyone here had a right to be. She could tell Ray was asleep when the twitches and whimpers and thrashes began, the blocking of nightmares he never remembered. She held him and watched the bloodglow pulse in the east, the last of the chaparral exploding.