

Whitedirt.com

A. Laurie Palmer

Wishing you health happiness excitement and good fortune!

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This is the pure white dirt you grew up with, the dirt you are made out of because you dug it up in the back fields and secretly ate handfuls of it as a young child, and because your mother ate it when she was pregnant with you—though it was only later you found out that your mother ate dirt—and after that you didn't have to be secret about it. You could dig together then, heading out to the tender spot in the back fields where no grass grew because the ground grew instead. This cache of pure white clay, a clay so smooth and creamy, so fine-grained, that your tongue ached to push it against the surface of your mouth, and feel it crush and fall apart, the inarticulate flavors of the ground releasing. This is the same ground that you stand on, or, rather, stood on, the ground that bore you, that bore your mom too, that held you, at least then, for a bit, at the start. This is not Georgia's famous red dirt but what lies underneath the red and the black dirt, its pure white inside, its middle—this is the same dirt! Shipped to you in a sterile Ziploc bag, packed in cardboard, you can hold it. We will send you some, from Georgia, to wherever you are, for you to hold and to eat. If you buy six boxes we will give you a discount and pay the postage, to wherever you and your kind have fled to, anywhere, so long as

it's in the United States. We will sell you back the dirt that you didn't need to own. The dirt that was just there, then, like the air was just there, along with the woods and the water, the crows and possums, the longleaf pine, the turkey oak and the little blue-stem.

Our white dirt is a pure and naturally-made product, derived from ancient times, when Georgia's rivers slid across the crystalline rocks of the upper Piedmont, then dropped their white silt at the fall line as their mouths opened into a shallow cretaceous sea. Our white dirt fanned out, sunk and rested there, for more than centuries, for eons. The sea rolled back. We arrived bewildered. We called it all ours and made you leave. We pushed you out of Dahlonega, where the dirt looked like it might turn a profit, and where we used your word for its name: yellow. We wanted you out of the way. We pushed you first to Tennessee, where John Ross wore a waistcoat and his daughters, high collars in spite of, or because of, being Cherokee. In 1838 we gave you blankets from the hospital, and no food, and we made you leave again. You had to walk without shoes or food, not even dirt to eat because the ground was either swampy or frozen, and we made you move.

We thought we would dig money out of the ground in Dahlonega, Georgia, in 1829. The first tidbits of gold flashed a false alarm; we couldn't make it pay. You left down a long road towards Oklahoma, where the dirt on the surface is also red. You left names behind in Georgia—Alapaha, Catoosa, Chattahoochee, Chatooga, Chickamauga, Chicopee, Echota, Hahira, Hiawassee, Muscogee, Nahunta, Ochlocknee, Senoia, Suwanee—and you left a flower. We made it Georgia's State Flower: the Cherokee Rose is white in the center for the tears of the mothers who watched their children die, gold for the gold we took from your lands, and seven leaves on each stem for the seven Tribal clans. We have that flower and we have those names, and now, finally, we have figured out how to mine the gold in Dahlonega and make it pay.

And now you can buy back some of the land that you had to leave behind, that you might just be craving: \$9.95 for 2 pounds—it's a small price to own and hold

again some of what once was yours—or rather, I keep forgetting, you don't see it that way, and that was part of the problem with you. You never thought of land as something you owned but something that was just there, like the quail, and the mourning dove.

But you aren't allowed to exist unless you pay for the ground that you stand on, the dirt that supports you, that holds you—if you can't pay for it, you can't stand on it, there is no space for your body to be in the world if you can't pay for the space it takes up—and even if you can pay... Some of you are still not allowed to have land. The company men who arrived on your front porch, with clipboard in one hand holding the other glad-hand out, with a smile especially wide for Black farmers, those of you who had only recently acquired your land—how did you do that, anyway? It couldn't have been legitimate. You hadn't even been freed for that long, and you were also, technically, immigrants—well, so were we, but we had the clipboards, the whips—all the kaolin men were doing was finding a way to take back what was white.

But you can have some of it again—a small piece (\$57 if you buy six boxes). It's gourmet. You can't find this particular dirt west of the Mississippi, or up in Illinois. Maybe in China, some companies call it China Clay. The kaolin companies have made a mint. White dirt is extremely lucrative, but its value is a secret. Everything about the kaolin business is a secret. Like when you went to the back-field to dig and guiltily eat the ground that you stood on, you didn't want anyone to know. The kaolin companies don't want anyone to know how lucrative their business is, and how much power they wield in the politics of central Georgia. The sand bank / fall line stretches from Augusta to Macon—like a belt across the fattened waist of the kaolin industry—including the towns of Sandersville, Gray, Hephzibah, and Deep Step, and the town of Gordon, named after John B. Gordon, confederate general, former governor, and founder and one-time Grand Dragon of the Georgia KKK. This looks like hard-scrabble country. The soil surveyors say it's a place of subsistence farming, but most of the farms have collapsed. The kaolin companies expropriated land based on flimsy legal precepts, leases signed with x's because Jim

Crow wouldn't allow you to go to school, or find a reasonable job, or hire a lawyer. The kaolin companies took your land, already so hard won—how did you come to get land anyway? Based on some kind of Reconstruction deal? But we know that reparations are a myth, forty acres is a myth—still, there was that fourteen-year window of permissions, of wildness, when we didn't know what to do about you. We didn't know what you might be capable of. Some of you slid inside the system and purchased deeds to your own land. But the kaolin companies took care of that later, at least in middle Georgia. It was hard to be a subsistence farmer of any color in middle Georgia in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, so when they offered a dollar an acre per year for the right to dig on your land should minerals be discovered some time in the future it didn't seem like such a bad deal (and if you had already dug your own white hole with your mother out in the back fields, it shone like a beacon to them, a little star from the helicopters).

How could you know that the small white hole you had dug with your mother was only the tip of a massive deposit of whiteness that would yawn wider the deeper we dug, until your barn and your cow and your house and your chickens and your truck were swallowed up, because there was no place left to stand, no land, no dirt, no substance that could be called "property"—left?

That x remains on the photocopied form—we have the clipboards, the lawyers who have all the tools to imprison you forever, again, or any one like you, for resisting. We dug a very large, white hole, and it is spreading—begun on the same spot where you and your mother had dug your tiny hole, where you would go and eat, secretly, guiltily, because eating dirt is called a sickness—crushing the clay, rolling it around on the roof of your mouth, and it would taste and feel so good. Plus, you and your mother shared a secret.

You both knew that clay could grow—that it does grow underground, that it is an expanding material, not a passive, inert material. You knew that the clay that was just there, like the grey fox and the screech owl were just there, like the bluegill, the wood duck, and the channel catfish, that this clay is connected to the fox and

the owl and the catfish, in that it's alive too—its thin plates of silica and alumina (so thin and so tiny, in fact, that it can take 800 years for a single clay particle to fall to the bottom of a glass of water)—these thin plates which had been broken down from rocks over many centuries of erosion, of wind and rain and battering. After all that, at some point the process of destruction has to conclude, and the tiniest particles, those tiny thin plates, start building new structures. They sandwich water between them and stack up, like dinner plates, curving and arching and growing in microscopic towers under pressure, underground, together— building and growing slowly, invisibly. Some claim that clay particles are the link between biological and mineral life—that they formed a primitive cell that sheltered RNA, back in the beginning of time. I don't know about this, but your mother knew, she knew that eating dirt could protect her from the awfulness of the world by absorbing it, and that this white dirt also has the power to invent itself—she ate it before she bore you. She ate it secretly. She wanted to take it in, and she wanted to make it disappear.

We have packaged this for you. We will sell you some.

A. Laurie Palmer is an artist, writer, and teacher living in Chicago and California. Her work is concerned, most immediately, with resistance to privatization, and more generally, with theoretical and material explorations of matter's active nature as it asserts itself on different scales and in different speeds. Her work takes various forms as sculpture, installation, public projects, writing, and interdisciplinary research. Palmer teaches in the Sculpture Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. www.alauriepalmer.net; chicagotorture.org/artic.edu/~apalme/

