

Razburry Lacquer

Zachary M. Cook

Joy Passanante

English 393

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August 2008: 18 years

I stare at the flickering black forms. How peculiar they look, I think, as they trickle down over the loose dirt. Dad's storage shed looms above me, casting a shadow on the rock and dirt that lay underneath. He built it last summer, perching the rear end over the steep hill behind our house. Stilts—cedar posts jutting from the sky—support the back end of the shed. It defies gravity, jutting from the rocky earth like a miracle. It never even creaks. The hill under the shed is dry, shielded from the rain, and the dirt is more like powder than soil. The ant's legs send tiny specks of dirt cascading down, collecting more tiny particles as they fall. Each step it takes creates a miniature avalanche.

I watch as one of them slides and collapses into a cylindrical cone dug into the dirt. The dirt on the depression's slope is as fine as dust, and in the middle of the hole a small bump rises, barely visible—a tiny depression the shape of a megaphone. As the ant squirms in the middle of the cone, something undulates from beneath the dirt. The ant is flung against the side, twitching and sliding back into the center, covered with dust. It struggles to upright itself, black legs groping the air. From beneath the sand, two scythe shaped jaws slowly emerge. The head of the ant lion flicks, and a spray of dirt hits the ant, covering it with another layer of dust. The ant lion is brown and massive, moving in flickering lunges. It approaches the ant and poises its jaws at the sand where the head is, still struggling to uncover itself from the dust. The two scythes close as garage doors would: slow and mechanical.

I lose my footing in the loose sand and slide down the hill a couple of feet. I turn and slide on my butt to stop myself. A cloud of dust roils around me as I regain my footing and, squinting in the sun, begin to make my way back up the steep slope.

“What are you doing?” My brother said.

“Looking at the ant lions,” I said, grabbing a handful of weeds, pulling myself up the slope. I give a quick tug on each handful of the greasy, white stems to test their strength.

“Why?”

I look up the hill, grabbing for more weeds. Wyatt stands at the top, peering down at me. His face is round and red, topped with dark brown hair that springs from his scalp in fibrous tufts. His nose looks crooked, and one of his nostrils, through some defection of child birth, has an extra bump of skin near the webbing at its bridge. The black hoodie hangs from his arms and neck baggily, draping over his skin like a poncho. As I grasp for the last clump of weeds, I think of how the deformed nostril affects him—ruins him. He never seems to take a full breath.

“They’re cool,” I said.

Wyatt watches me quizzically, hands stuffed into his pockets, eyes wide. Bugs aren’t his thing, but I’m leaving for work in a week and won’t be back for six months. He seems to want to talk, or at least be around.

“Do they eat ants like lions eat zebras?”

“No,” I said, “they eat ants like koalas eat eucalyptus. It’s all they can eat—specialized diet,” I said, gasping for breath and heaving myself to the top of the hill. “If a ladybug or an earwig falls into its trap, it flings it out. Very impressive neck muscles for something the size of an eraser on a pencil.” I sit at the top of the hill and look down. It’s the last time I’ll be home for a while. It’s the last time I’ll see my brother, make fun of his puffy hair, the way he wears a hoodie with no shirt underneath.

“Did you see an ant get ate?”

“She got her ant,” I said.

I had followed that ant for the last hour or so, trying to keep the ash from the cigarettes I smoked away from its path so as not to burn or disturb it. It made its way over twigs and under tires. It chugged along, stopping to greet some ants along the way, lurching quickly away from others. Down the hill it went, snaking through the tall weeds and the stems of cherries devoured by plump robins chirping noisily above. I plucked large obstacles from its way and lifted leaves to keep sight of the tiny, black living dozer. By the time it reached the shed, my tongue was numb from the smoke and my throat burned. From a neighbor's radio played a lowing country song. His voice crackled and sputtered a low, skipping hopelessness.

And there it was, that slick cone—the lump and the jaws frozen beneath the dust, and my ant. *My ant*, for I had connected with it. I had experienced what the ant had. I moved from its cozy nest, high atop the hill that was shaded below the willows and nestled betwixt lush ragweed, down these slick slopes looking for something. We both wanted something. This hour long trip into the perilous sands under the stilted shed was for something. For the ant? Food. He wanted a cherry, succulent and heavy with sugar. How the other ants would welcome him if he brought back a cherry! And at least this ant existed here with me, quietly consoling whatever emptiness I felt by merely existing. I exulted in its simplicity. Exist and seek food. It chugged along through time and space making tiny avalanches.

And down he went, sliding on the dusty slope like a drop of water through the air. In a blink of an eye, everything was for nothing. I watched the jaws split him in half while clinging to that slope with a cigarette pursed in my lips and the smoke and dust sucking in my nose and my heart beating—the vibrations of the country music still bouncing off the air into my ears.

I have seen this before. I have increasingly encountered moments where the world stops making sense. How different am I? What am I doing with my life besides looking for cherries?

Here I am, fat and tired, huffing air and staring under the shed at that tiny grave. After the lion is done, it will fling the dried-up ant out of the cone. There, microbes and bacteria will finish the job of decomposition. The lion will pupate, salivating around its dusted cone to create a shell. The ant gives the lion energy to fly. Wings grow. The queen, back at the ant's nest, will starve and die.

I stand up, collecting a handful of cherries, plucking their stems, and make my way back up the hill. The cherries are alive with the ants, crawling and biting into the skin. She will live. "I'm sorry," I say, watching them cut small chunks of the cherry away, disappearing into the hole in the ground. They don't hear, but keep working away at the cherry, oblivious to their sterile sister dead under the shed.

December 1998: 8 years

"What color do you see?" I said. Wyatt stares at the paper. His face is young, eyes red and puffy. It's a Wednesday, and the teachers at school would have tried to force him to swish the pink fluoride between his teeth. He would have looked at the plastic cup, quivering his lips and squinting as tears rolled down his cheeks. *No, you must swish this*, they had said. And he did. A quick gag and, retching, stumbling across the room, he vomits in the trash bin.

"Blue."

"And now what color do you see?" I said. I put the blue paper behind my back and present him with the purple paper.

"Purple."

"If I look at this blue paper, I will tell you it is blue. Do you know why?" I said, setting both sheets on the bed.

“Because it is blue.”

“Because I was told it was blue. Mom or Dad or someone else told us that what we see when we look at this is called blue. So we call it blue.”

Wyatt stares at the blue paper absently. His shoulders slouch and his nostril whistles quietly.

“But it’s blue.”

“What if, when I looked at this paper, I saw orange?” I pick up the blue paper and shake it in front of his face. “What you see when you look at orange is what I see when I look at blue. You see blue. I see orange. We both call it blue. Who’s right?”

“I’m right, because it’s blue. If you are seeing orange then something’s wrong with you.”

“What if you’re seeing orange?”

Wyatt shakes his head and shoves past me. He has apparently grown tired of my presentation. I promised him enlightenment of some sort; I specify *of some sort* because I’m not enlightened. I’ve merely been exposed to subjectivity and sunk. My crude attempt to show him that nothing made sense and life was a sham has failed. He went back to watching television and I went back to my room.

I remember getting onto my knees as a kid, clasping my hands together like I had seen Mom do after Grandpa died of brain cancer. Her whole body shook and convulsed, quiet shivers and whimpers for a man whom she later told me tried to kill her as a child. For insurance money. Because he was drunk. *Set fire to the house and watch it burn. We’ll save the oldest. Start again.* She clasped fingers together and mumbled unintelligible words to God. So I looked through my window and prayed for death. *Kill him and I can be happy. Kill the kids who call me fat and ugly. Kill them like you killed Lot’s wife. Like the people of Sodom. Like my Grandpa.* I got up

off my knees, unclasped my hands and felt a little better. Maybe God heard me. He'd take action. He listens to everyone. He loves everyone but my enemies. He favors those who listen and talk. You just need a little faith.

7 January 2011: 20 years

The sun's in the window. Outside, down the hill and past the stilted shed, logging trucks rumble through town, bellowing jake brakes and dragging tire chains. I open my eyes and my brain droops like frozen honey. It lasts only a few moments every morning, but as I emerge from sleep and see my arm and hand dangling limp from the side of the bed, everything seems alien. Cognition fails, reality with no filter blinds every sense, and I experience everything anew. The sun in the window doesn't mean it's another day, but that light exists in my window. It has been flung from the sun as energy and allows me to see my arm. *And I can move those*. Fingers, as I would call them if I were of this moment, exist only as light and vision. Perception calls them fingers, but all I see now are pink appendages. Skin and nail on meat and bone. And with each moment, something akin to terror settles in my belly. It's not a moment of realization. It's not the confrontation of chaos, but an understanding of my own idiocy. How silly we all are. How stupid I am. *Shake it off*. "What a drug," I'll say. What a waste of a moment. Slowly, surely, the sickness of experience will emerge from my brain and the honey will thaw. These shaky whispers will fade, and I'll be able to exist. But not right now. I curl my hand into a fist and sit up, straddling the mound of blankets, feeling the heat from the window warm my shoulders. Melt it away.

And, after the sickness wears off and the world starts to make sense, I leave for work. I leave my family and that sickness and continue on, completing mundane tasks to feed myself.

Standing and watching lumber sliding across steel and brass, I begin to drift away. I try not to focus on the absurdity of the process. I watch the wood before it meets the saw. Thin, dark lines permeate the length of the board and we call them wood grain. Every line is another year, dark and light shades of amber marking the journey from seed to siding. Each dapple of color and splotch has to be accounted for. And the correct mark must be given according to the quality of each board. Wind break marks the board down two grades. It's a structural issue. *Rot is no good.* Rotted wood has lost its aesthetic value as well as its structural integrity. Examine the board. Look twenty feet ahead and spot the small imperfection at its end. *Wind break.* Somewhere in this board's history, it was a tree. The tree grew in the forest's soil. It grew so tall and thin that a gust of wind bent the tree so wildly that the cellular structures on the wood split across the width of the log. A gust of wind left a light scar across the board that makes it unusable. Atmosphere and wind doomed it. This board will never be nailed to the side of a house. I shake the tiredness from my muscles and heave the board from the table. *Wind break goes in the scrap pile.* This board is not fit for construction. This board is garbage.

"Zac, come on down here for a second." I turn and see my boss standing below me. His hard hat rests awkwardly atop his head and a grey beard protrudes from beneath his wide nose. I give the board a final shake, and it falls into place on the garbage pile. I press my palm against the button to my left and the chains, once funneling the boards that still needed inspection down the line, creaks and jostles to a stop.

"What's up?" I said.

"Charlo wants to talk to you," he said. His eyes look odd and cool. Something about how the neon lamps glare off his glasses, or maybe the cedar dust in the air, makes his eyes look grey—stony and distant. I twist my leather leg chaps around and unhinge the belt buckle.

“Do you know what it’s about?”

“I’m just supposed to have you go to Charlo’s office. He needs to talk to you,” he said and, turning, retreats back towards his office. I hang the chaps on a screw twisted into a support beam by the stop button and step down from the grader’s station. I exit the giant, tin production building and make my way across the forklift alley to the supervisor’s office. Behind me, the roar of machinery dies away behind the closing door. The sun is just beginning to rise over the mountains that line the valley. A cool breeze drags its way from the Snake River, swirling between production buildings and cooling the skin on my face and hands. Something feels wrong. Something about my boss’s coldness felt wrong. Something about his eyes.

“Mr. Charlo?” I said, entering the supervisor’s office. It is the first time I have seen Charlo. He is big—a mass of skin, glasses, short hair and t-shirt. He fills his office chair and then some, his legs spread wide to allow room for each thigh. He looks up at me with a thick smile and motions me in with a quick flick of the wrist.

“Zac, it’s nice to see you.”

“Yeah, you wanted to talk to me? Sorry, I’m not sure if Roger has anyone covering me on the Re-Man. I don’t really want a pile—”

“Don’t worry about that. Your dad called. He wants you to go up to St. Joseph’s. He said to take his truck, the keys are in it.” His eyes shift between me and his desk. I put some of his words together and work them over. Someone is hurt. Someone is in the hospital. “Now I want you to get right up there. Buckle up and drive safe. Promise me you’ll drive safe,” he said. He pulls his glasses down to the tip of his nose and gives me a look so weary that I feel a pang of shame. Wyatt or Dad is dead. Wyatt has wrecked his four-wheeler or Dad his car. Wyatt has gone out and hit a rock and went into the river. He was drowning in the river and I was at work

staring at lumber. *Rot is no good*. No, Dad is dead or, wait, perhaps it's Mom. I promise that I'll drive safe and start to walk towards the parking lot. Wyatt isn't dead. Dad is fine. It's Mom. My gut starts to churn. I stop registering anything but the wet stench of cedar. Everything is about to change. Mom is dead, I am sure, because she had a heart attack or a stroke like her mom did. Mom is lying on a cold steel table, and I am going to walk up to it, and there would be Dad and Wyatt and Mia, all cold and stern and numb like I am right now. Nobody would be crying. None of us would cry. We never did. We will get over it. We'll help each other out. We'll sit around a campfire, years from now, and tell stories about her good moments, drinking beer and laughing because this life is wonderful and she had her time with it. I clamor up into the tall pickup and leave the lumber mill behind me. All the production and inspection fades away and disappears with the landscape that bore it. I follow the river, driving into the rising sun, headed to the hospital where everything would be fine, eventually.

A bitter whisper of cold air slides in through the open window. My fingers curl around the leather of the steering wheel cover, and I squeeze hard. I collapse into the motion of the green and yellow grasses as they go by. I brake for a corner and wipe my left hand across my thigh. The denim feels hot under my sweaty palm.

To my right, a dike follows the slow spin of the river as it passes this town and flows on ahead. I watch the people that rose with the sun. They dance their way in the morning light, cotton sweatpants clinging to their legs and iPod cords nipping at the napes of their necks. Their breath broils out into the low sunlight. Wisps of hot smoke linger behind skin and bone locomotives.

My hand is shaky, so I roll down the window and stick it out into the wind. The air is cold enough to bite against skin and nail, all red and cold. I round the last corner before I have to turn away from the river and head up the hill to the hospital. I look at my phone. It is black and lifeless, lying in the passenger's seat. Nothing blinks. No one will call me back. The street light down the road turns red and I press the brake slowly. All the land stops its quivering and comes to a stop outside the windows. I curl my wrist in slow circles and wait for a man to cross the road.

His nose shoves its way against the zipper of his coat, and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He lurches forward, angled to the ground as if he were falling. His feet catch the ground beneath him, clapping against the pavement and, as he crosses in front of my car, his torso breaks the outline of the rising sun. He becomes a black flicker, flashed against a plucked cherry stain of light. And when I shut my eyes I can see him still, fluttering amidst that instant orb. I turn away from the river and it dies away behind me and I blink again and again. The circle of light, its broken shape—the outline of a man stricken across it—remains burnt on my eyelids.

12 July 2010: 20 years

My sister is nine months pregnant with her second child. His name will be Rowen James Cook. James is my grandfather's name. He worked his whole life cutting down trees. His father before him ran moonshine through Alabama. His family was told to never come back, but he had. In the top shelves of his woodshed, glowing dimly in the cold, pine scented air of the mountains, are a row of orange mason jars. Peaches older than my father hover at the bottom of each. On the lid, etched in old marker, are notes from his brother. *Special Blend—1947. Cooley's distillery—1932. Pa's favorite: razburry lacquer—1907.* "razburry lacquer" is by far the most

prized in the collection. On occasion I would ask to see it, and Grandpa would make his way out to the shed and reach way up on his tip toes and grab it. It was red, unlike the others, which shined a dark gold like the setting sun. I never met my grandfather's brother; he wasn't even ever spoken of. I inspected his handwriting. It didn't look gay, the jagged, Appalachian scribbles fading away on the copper lid. Grandpa would wait a second, letting my eyes pour over the glass treasure, ready to catch it if I let it slip. Then, after he felt I had seen enough, he replaced it high on the shelf.

Logging in Northern Idaho made Grandpa strong as nails. Time made him old. I watched his face when my sister told him that her son would be named after him. I'd never seen naked happiness before. Every wrinkle and blotch of skin about his mouth and eyes exuded his happiness. Teegen will be Rowen's brother. He is two years old. I've seen him take his first steps. His sixth word was "uncle."

Rowen's father is a piece of shit. Her words. He threw my pregnant sister against a wall and threatened to kill her. Because he was drunk. Because he wanted to. He won't be there when Mia goes into labor. She wants me to be there, in the room with her.

"Can you do it?" she said.

"I guess I can, if you want me to be there," I said.

"I want you to be there." My sister's voice broke. She has been crying.

"I'll be there, Mia. I've got to go back to work," I said.

I hung up and slid the phone into my pocket. Old men in jeans and boots with beards and big bellies shuffled out of the brake room. I sat there for another moment, squeezing the small piece of foam that goes in my ear to block the noise of the saw. An odd arrangement, I thought, shoving the yellow foam into my left ear. A brother in the delivery room.

I'm with my brother and father. Stagnant, sweet air blows around the open doors in a whisper. The woman in white rounds a corner pushing a tray piled with shiny, sharp instruments. Plastic and sanitary and so sweet. Sickly. I leave Dad and Wyatt in the waiting area, Spongebob on the television, and enter the delivery room.

Skin. That's all I see, but it's my sister and her eyes haven't acclimated to mine. They keep darting my way, but I'm past modesty. On to life! On with you, sweet little animal—human, they'll call it. I'll show you how to move. Teach you how to hold a gun like grandpa showed me. Eventually, I'll walk beside you, the blistering cold of the mountain stinging your cheeks, but I've got you wrapped up tight. You'll blow air through your throat and make what we call words. I'll hear them, kneel down and make sure the coat is zipped up enough. The sky will be pink, burning the cold clouds with a callous beauty that even our eyes couldn't miss. Everything might be white, it might be snowing, but you'll be warm and safe and I can answer whatever you ask me. We all start to miss what we know we'll never have. Time might be one of them. So on to life. Real, quick humanity. Dirty life.

I thumb through songs on my phone, looking for something worthy of this kind of moment. Into the classics. Bach? Too dry. Too fluttering to christen a warrior—violent, anxious to scream. Everything in the blink of an eye. Symphony no. 5 in C minor andante starts to play, and Mia and I know right away that's the sound. That's the ticket. That's the vibration that we need to ride. Beethoven could spill on to the table and melt the walls. Everything open and transparent. There it is.

So we listen to the whole damn thing. In and out come the nurses, checking and sending me into the hall to probe or whatever—quick smiles from the nurses and receptionists who think

me daddy. I look pale. That's justified. Back in, and her legs are hoisted into the air and draped with a cloth. The doctor's bent over and peering into the nethers of modesty with shiny eyes.

"Another try?" he said.

She heaves, twisting her cheeks and eyes in a furious grimace. There's a container between the doctor's and my sister's torsos. He bends down again, agonizingly concentrated at staring into the birthing fort. I hear flesh and fluid drop, splash.

And for a moment the world is drugged, and I can see the whole of it stumble, glimmering in the flecks of light that skim through the blinds. Colors and shapes become a vibration, and a low note catches me in its rhythm. I watch my hands dance, *thick as honey*, and they reach out—a pair of odd scissors poised between my fingers. Drops of blood spill as I cut life's cord, and that low note keeps playing, the sickly smell subsiding, the air still vibrating. Mia stoops and kisses her own skin, wet and warm. And that violin of bone and blood begins its own song—drowning the tenor from the world. A quiet, fluttering space emerges within everyone who hears. I felt each note move as a bird hops, flits among a stand of grass, searching for a seed that has fallen from the stalk, blind to its ability to grow itself, oblivious of its own wings, destined to the dirt where roots suckle and feed.

7 January 2011: 21 years

I open the door of the pickup and take one last deep breath. The air is still cold and the sun has risen over the river. My boots aren't made for running, and I catch the heavy steel toe on a curb as I run across the parking lot. The pain in my knee doesn't slow me down, but I'm

bleeding enough to feel the blood run down my leg and soak into my sock. I push through the doors and, immediately, I know that it is not Mom. I'd never seen Dad cry before.

“Zac,” he says, gripping my shoulder in his massive hand. I know my mouth is open, tongue dry, knee aching. I know this is wrong. This isn't what I thought of. There will be no campfire, no nodding consolation at a life lived and gone. “It's Rowen. He's dead.”

“How can you be against God?” I'm asked. I look into my sister's eyes—the eyes of a believer, someone forced into belief by unrelenting sorrow. How could she go on without God?

They weep here

For how the world goes, and our life that passes

Touches their heart¹

I'm not against God, I want to say. I'm against those who believe. I'm against those who give themselves a reason to think irrationally. I'm against those who accept something above and outside the power of the only thing they have to make sense of the universe: reason. I'm against you, Mia, because you must want to die immediately. Die and find out. Die and ascend to the chosen throne of believers to be reunited with Rowen, the son stolen from you by the God you so unwittingly believe in. You can't wait to get out of this meaningless moment we have. That's all we have and some people get shorted. Some things suffer. Some colors deceive and some ants fall into holes in the sand. Some things have all the hope in the world and are struck down with the righteous hammer of chaos too soon. *Rot is no good*. A gust of fucking wind, instability in the atmosphere, drunkards and murderers all plotting against us, and we're the ones lying there, flayed open on that cold steel table. But that's no reason to give up reason. That's no excuse. I

¹ Translated from Virgil's “The Aeneid,” when Aeneas cries “sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt,” while gazing upon a mural found in a Carthaginian temple. The mural depicts a scene of the Trojan War and many of his friends and countrymen dead.

want to tell her that, but looking into the eyes of a believer, one who has been crippled by this life, her son fallen into his own hole in the sand, something stops me. I can only do harm. I can only breed sorrow. All this reason only destroys. So let her believe. That's what I'll do. I'll let her live this delusion. It's becoming a burden to accept reason. She should admire me for that.

8 April 2011: 21 Years

It's cold outside, but Grandpa's woodshed is even colder. Dad and Wyatt drink beer outside, talking to Grandma and Grandpa; their voices drag out to a mumbled hush through the door. I set the hammer down on a block of pine. All day, up and down ladders, the booming of hammers driving nails into wood, the work has drug on, but the warm kiss of coffee seems to make it all feel distant. Something about the smell of the woodshed makes me remember. The cool must of the wood and the smell of mice pluck the chord of a memory, and I turn and look up at the rafters. There they are. Dusty, glowing jars line the space between the wall and roof. I set the mug on the freezer, steam rising like a silk ribbon into the still air, and roll a chopping block to the far wall. It makes a thud as it drops against the hard, frozen ground. The light from my phone glares eerily off the glass of the mason jars as I scour them. Each is similar: orange, gold, yellow—the orbs of peaches dead and still at the bottom—one after the other another hue of sunlight. And, at the end of the row, an empty jar. I reach, leaning across the stack of wood, and grab it. *Pa's Favorite: Razburry lacquer—1907* shows clearly through a clearing in the dust, Grandpa's fingerprints still visible on the copper lid. I wonder, replacing the jar with the others, how good it must have tasted.