

# SWAILING

## DEVIN LATHAM

The poets tell me I'm in fire season. I build fires in the night, at daybreak, at noon. I like to sweat. I'd sweat out every ounce of liquid in my body given the chance. I've got fire in my thighs, in my mouth, in my belly. I lie on my back, on my knees, on my face and burn until I'm put out. I'd burn myself up if I could.

Fifty acres of woods and a long overgrown farm sat in Bibb County, Alabama with no company but a train that ran by and a great-grandson who piddled around for answers. Jim called this land the Old Place.

The brush pile sat at the edge of a clearing beside the old house Jim's great-grandparents had lived in. The house leaned forward like it'd been waiting on somebody to

come home too long. The front door rested swung open against the outside wood wall. Most of the windowpanes were broken, but the porch still stood and wrapped around the old house.

I wanted to burn the brush pile. Adding to it, I drug saplings from under the surrounding woods while Jim shouldered the fallen trunks of sweetgums and pines. We made the pile twenty feet tall and forty feet around. There was an old mattress halfway down buried beneath branches—the floral fabric peaked through. Someone had dumped it by the gate. I wanted to burn it, too.

Jim poured diesel around the edges to make it all catch. He threw in a lit chunk of kindling, and the dry wood caught with a quick roar, burning tall and toxic.

Between the wall of summer  
and the wall of the fire, sweat  
rolled down both sides of my body.  
I watched sweat run down his  
red-brown face off the tip of his  
nose into his black beard down the  
length of his neck to soak into his  
shirt. I wanted to taste his sweat,  
to run my tongue down his salty  
stomach.

That night, we watched  
from his campsite as the brush  
pile smoldered to scattered ash,  
smoking under a clear night half  
moon.

Fire is a chemical process  
dependent on oxygen and energy.  
When heat cannot release faster  
than it is created, fire catches. This  
is combustion.

Fire's burning is called  
oxidation. The oxygen atoms  
combine with hydrogen and carbon  
atoms in the atmosphere, exhaling  
water vapor, carbon dioxide, and  
fuel particles. This is smoke.

Wood burns fast; therefore,  
energy is released fast. This is heat.

Jim taught me how to find kindling,  
the heartwood of resinous pines—  
graying chunks of knotted wood  
hidden under leaves and rotted

stumps. Daddy broke the jagged  
wood in half, showing me the  
orange, oily center. Jim taught me  
how to snap the kindling, how to  
smell the sweet pine middle, how to  
place the lit pine within the deep,  
dry branches to start a fire.

Matter is neither created nor  
destroyed, but rearranged.

Growing up in our half-finished  
log cabin, we never had central  
heat and air. During the Alabama  
summers, our air conditioning was  
provided by window units scattered  
throughout the house. I had one  
in my bedroom above where I  
slept. Mine was old so it repeatedly  
froze up and thawed out, dripping  
water on my head. Momma put  
peach filters in the great room  
unit and vanilla filters in the one  
in the kitchen. Daddy said he liked  
window units better so I decided I  
did, too.

During the winter, our heat  
was a wood-burning stove that sat  
in the back of the kitchen. The  
gray, metal rectangle connected to  
a wall with a thick black pipe where  
the smoke was exhausted. Daddy  
said to never touch the pipe. But  
once, I accidentally brushed my

thigh against the pipe and jerked back, watching the skin redden and pucker to a blister.

Daddy yanked the stove door open to shove oak logs inside. Four or five logs could fit at once. The house usually fogged over, smoke clouds clinging to the ceiling. The alarms took turns going off, and one of us kids would grab a kitchen table chair and a potholder. The alarm stopped and started again until Momma opened the back door. Daddy opened the kitchen and living room windows, letting the smoke seep out of the house. Momma said this defeated the purpose and this was why normal people had central heat and air.

We all smelled like smoke—our clothes, our hair, our beds. At 111 degrees, our skin feels pain. At 118 degrees, we receive a first-degree burn. At 131, second, and at 140, the skin becomes numb. At 162 degrees, skin is instantly destroyed.

The following Christmas, five of us sat around Jim's campfire at varying distances, depending on how thick our layers were. The train track ran parallel to the property line of his campsite. When we were quiet,

we could hear cars drive by on the road out past the gate.

Jim invited a few friends he went to graduate school with to go camping at the Old Place. One of Jim's friends was much closer to my age. His name was Michael, and he was tall with sweet eyes.

It fell below freezing after sundown, and the men built a massive fire in the pit. They piled up oak logs, then oak stumps, building the fire until it was too hot to sit close to. We all scooted our chairs back, trying not to spill our coffee mugs of whiskey. The stump's burning roar muddled the passing train's stumble to a metal clink. Train lights threw shadows through the woods toward us.

Jim wouldn't come near me that night. He wanted it to seem like he was sad about his divorce, like we were just friends. Tired of following him around the big fire, I sat back down in a plastic lawn chair as close to the fire as I could stand. I wanted to feel the heat in my bones; I wanted to be hot.

I watched his friend Michael across the pit. He sat on a concrete bench that happened to be in the shape of Alabama, watching the fire he helped build. He resembled a

bear with wavy hair, a thick beard, and broad, round shoulders. I wondered what it would be like to be with someone young like me.

Late into the night with the chill coating my back and the whiskey in my head, I stared into the fire's heart—the embers glowed orange under the flames—imagining what it would be to touch the pulsing center, to step into the heart of the fire, to feel that necessary energy.

"What would happen if I walked into the middle of that fire?" I interrupted them. They all agreed I would die. I knew I would die. I wanted to know how fast.

During the summers, Daddy built bonfires down by the pond. Momma and Daddy made me drag up limbs from behind the house that were knocked down by the year's storms. My brother and sister were too young to work, so they played in the grass. Daddy stacked all the limbs and branches into a burnable pile.

He poured gasoline over the top of the brush pile. Daddy told us all to step back, and I ran straight to the pond, waiting by the water. He lit a paper match and Momma

told him to be careful. We all watched him throw the match into the gasoline soaked wood.

As soon as the lit match hit the wood, the gasoline combusted with a loud, strong exhale. The heat was instant. I made my way up the hill, approaching the fire's heat.

Daddy got fold-out chairs to sit in and beers for him and Momma. I was too young to know how good a beer was once the sky got dark and sleep was hard to find. They had each other, but they usually didn't sleep in the same bed.

My baby sister sat in my lap, and I propped my cheek on her head. Our faces reflected the red glow as we memorized the flames.

Dark sank over our heads, and the branches and limbs crackled to ash. These were the special nights Momma and Daddy got along and lightening bugs joined us by the fire.

A week before the camping trip, Jim and I went to the Old Place to straighten up the campsite. Jim wanted to use his blower to blow the leaves in front of the wood stack.

"It's outside. There's supposed to be leaves on the ground. Are you gonna sweep the dirt, too?" I



thought everything he wanted to do that day was stupid. I felt an anger toward him that I couldn't get rid of.

"No, I just want to clear this area 'cause we're gonna chop wood over here, and I want it to look nice."

We cleared Quikrete bags off the industrial tables so we'd be able to set out our food, whiskey, and coffee. We straightened up the lumber. Over the summer, he started building a cabin. The four corners stood with boards around the base. All summer we'd come out here to build, bushhog, and fuck because we couldn't be seen in town. But he stopped working on it after his wife filed for divorce and I moved for graduate school.

"I want to move these over to the firewood." He pointed to the segments of an oak tree we had stacked the summer before and then pointed to the firewood across the camp where he had just blown.

"Why?" I looked at him like he was stupid.

"Because I want them over there. If we decide to split them for the fire, it'll be a lot easier to move them now than in the dark when we're all out here." He was frustrated with me. I wanted him

to get angry. I was angry. I'd been angry at him for so long, and it was like he was oblivious, like there wasn't enough space for me to feel things while he had so many things to feel.

"If you don't want to work, if you think everything I'm doing is stupid, then why don't you leave, why don't you go back to your uncle's house or go to Starbucks and write on your laptop so I can actually get some work done." And like that he combusted, all the stress from his divorce, from not having any money, from me being ten hours away, ignited. I was holding the handles of the wheelbarrow, and he swung his right hand back and hit the wheelbarrow out of my hands. It clanked against a root at my feet. He yelled while stomping around the camp throwing what he could, knocking down pieces of a shed propped up against a pine. He screamed and he paced and he kept screaming.

I picked up the wheelbarrow and started doing my own work. He tried to knock the wheelbarrow over again and told me to leave, but I ignored him and kept working. We didn't talk for about an hour.

Later, I apologized for acting like a “shithead,” and he apologized for getting mad. Actually, I don’t remember if he apologized for getting mad, but it sounds nice. Rather, I think he talked about my young age and bad attitude and about all his stress that I knew so well. I felt like I was getting a divorce, too.

I told him to burn the pieces to the shed that used to sit behind his old house before the divorce. They were already lying on the ground from when he knocked them over. He didn’t want to before the yelling, but afterwards, after we made up inside the frame of the cabin, he let me throw the shed walls on the fire. We left before dark, and I know he watched the wood burn in his rearview mirror.

Pyromania: the chronic need to start fires.

Pyrophobia: the hatred and irrational fear of fire.

Pyrophilia: the strong sexual desire to watch fires.

I sat on a broken chunk of aggregate concrete somebody had dumped in a heap at the Old Place. Jim and a friend had carried each

chunk up to his camp and stacked the fire pit.

It was summer, I hadn’t left for school yet, and Jim was still married. The cicadas were on for the night. The train rushed by every hour—two long lights slipping between pines and hardwoods. I wondered how many fires the train saw like ours along the tracks of Alabama.

The fire burned in the pit, but the dark sat around us like walls. I could barely make out Jim’s face as he leaned back in the lawn chair propped on a platform that used to be a ramp to a shed behind his house back before he cheated on his wife, back when they still had a good marriage, when they were still trying, back before he drank Jack Daniels every night, before the tornado came through Birmingham and tore the shed down.

In the field below the campsite, the tin roof of the old house held the white stain of the moon. The moon rose up above the tree line, tracking across the night sky. The farther the moon traveled the sooner we had to leave.

I looked back at the house, thinking of the time I had lain on the dusty front porch with my head

on my arms, gazing down the length of the sagging pinewood. I had imagined babies—brown, happy babies—our babies—stumble around the corner of the porch toward me.

“I want to live out here forever,” I told Jim across the fire.

I stood up from the cement circle and went to him. I knelt before him on the old shed ramp and put my head in his lap, smelling his jeans, rubbing my face against the worn denim.

“Don’t say it unless you mean it,” he told me as he rubbed the back of my neck.

He smelled like sweat and cigarettes. I pulled his jeans down to the tops of his boots. He rolled down my pants and turned me around, facing the fire, bringing me onto his thighs. He took off my shirt, and the orange glow reflected off my white skin. His hands looked nearly black against my breast. A lightless train rumbled by, covering the sound of our breathing.

We moved to the leaves of the forest floor. On our knees, my elbows and hands sank into the cool dirt, and I felt real and necessary.

fire breathers, fire eaters, ring of

fire, lake of fire, fiery pits of Hell, fire and brimstone, getting fired, Hellfire!, Shitfire!, spitfire, fired up, fire power, firearms, gunfire, firing squad, fireworks, fire hazard, ceasefire, fireball, Chicago fire, death by fire, baptism by fire, fire pit, fireplace, firebrand, light a fire under my ass, fireman, fire truck, fire alarm, firestorm, lightening fire, brush fire, wild fire, forest fire, coal fire, wood fire, Frost’s fire, bonfire, campfire, fire one up, fireflies, friendly fire, fire watcher, fire sex, fire cleanse, candle fire, London’s fire, fire bellied road, fire bird, fire clan, firewalkers, fire totem, fire in the sky, fire in my thighs, fire nights, fire mornings, fire smoke, fire swell, fire squelch, fire scream, fire please, fire oh my god, fire fall

Later that Christmas camping night, Jim and I crawled into his small tent. I was glad to be close to him, and he held me against him, and then he kissed me. But this was some kind of affirmation that I wasn’t sure about, that I had needed earlier. I never wanted to be Jim’s secret. I thought about Michael in the tent next to ours and wondered if he heard us and what he thought about us together, me



being so much younger than Jim and Jim being so recently divorced.

The next morning at 5:00 a.m., I was colder than I've ever been. It was well below freezing, and my face ached. I couldn't sleep anymore because I had to pee.

Jim lay next to me, but he was zipped away asleep in his sleeping bag. I found my boots and pulled them on, wishing I'd never taken them off.

Outside, it was black. It might as well have been night. This wasn't morning. I walked into the very edge of the woods because no one else was awake, and it's true everything looks different in the dark. I pulled my pants down and sat back gripping the small pine's trunk through my gloves.

Our fire from the night before was only dark embers and ash. I found the hoe we had used as a rake and poker, stoking the embers awake. I pushed and pushed at the ashes until a small flame popped up. I ran to the woodpile and gathered up a few logs. I stacked the wood over the flame, waiting for fire to catch. The logs started to crackle. I carried more wood. When Jim woke up, I knew he would be proud of me; I just wanted him to

be proud of me.

When a human spontaneously combusts into flames, the torso and head char beyond recognition while the legs and arms remain unharmed. The body burns like an inside-out candle, the skin being the wick and the insides being the wax.

To combust a body needs two things: a lot of heat and a flammable substance. Normally, the human body contains neither.

One theory to human combustion is that methane builds up in the intestines and is ignited by enzymes. Another theory is the build-up of static inside the body, and another is that combustion occurs from an external geomagnetic force exerted on the body.

Most scientists don't believe in human combustion. I guess I can believe in human combustion since I'm not a scientist, but I'm having a hard time of believing in things these days.

When I was sixteen, I read a question-and-answer book a man had with God. Throughout the book, the author asked God questions, and God answered in a



different font.

One question the man asked was how to find God when it felt like God was unreachable and silent. God said to meditate and one way to do that was by staring at a candle flame. So I sat on a thin rug on my bedroom floor and stared at a Yankee vanilla flame. My bedroom was dark except my Christmas lights strung around the ceiling. It wasn't Christmas. I just liked the light's red glow. I stared for as long as I could without feeling stupid, waiting and watching the flame shake with each of my breaths. But God never spoke, and I wore the flame's imprint on the back of my eyelids for the rest of the night.

When a candle is lit, the wax travels to the top of the wick, and it vaporizes. The heated vapor oxidizes which creates more oxidizing vapor, making the fire hotter, building and sustaining the fire upon itself.

When Jim and I met, he was married, but not happily of course. However, still dutifully in the most practical and social ways. When his wife got home, he needed to be home or at least be on his way home, which gave us an hour gap

between when I got off work to when she got off work.

Jim would meet me at my apartment. I'd walk in, dump my purse, lunch Tupperware, and books on the kitchen counter, and walk to my bedroom where I knew he was. And after about an hour, he'd get dressed.

He'd walk away from the bed across the wood floor to the front door, turn the loose knob, remember to unlock the deadbolt, turn the knob again, and open the door. Then he might walk back across the living room to kiss me as I sat on the corner of my bed where I could see through the living room to the door. Part of me wanted to push him out the door to get the leaving part over with, tell him that walking back and forth didn't make it any better. And another part of me wanted to plaster my body to his to prevent him from ever leaving again. I knew the leaving was hard for him too, but it was hard to feel bad for him because he was the one doing all the leaving.

Then, he might say something like "he was doing the best he could," and I never did say anything in response to that except

something stupid like “I love you.” Once the door shut behind him, he might open it back again to say “I love you” one more time, but that was usually it. At first, the leaving was easy, but then something happened, or maybe it was that the leaving kept happening. Suddenly, it all looked hopeless, that I would live my life in that one hour.

I sat on my bed raw and sticky, listening to his steps down the carpeted stairs to the first floor, to the slam of the wrought iron door that led outside. This was when I knew he was gone, but I’d still wait to hear the roar of his truck pass below my window to the street. My apartment and I would sit for a strange and silent moment not quite sure what to think or how to feel. At first, I felt nothing—neither happy nor sad, but then the sun would go down. I’d get up and go to the bathroom and pour a glass of wine.

I’d light candles around the living room and drink more wine. I told myself the candles made things better, made my apartment better after he left. After finishing the bottle, I’d study the wave and ebb of each flame like I was waiting on God to say something.

Once fire burns down to the nerves, the feeling—the pain—subsides and vanishes. When skin is severely burned, the body directs all fluid to the afflicted area. The damaged skin and vessels are unable to retain the fluid. Therefore, the body’s fluid leaks out, leading to shock, and then, to death.

Your palm is 1% of your body. If 25% or more of your body is severely burned, this fluid shift will begin.

I became sort-of friends with a woman, Anna, Jim had slept with many years before. That fact didn’t seem to hinder our friendship, being more like something we had in common.

Over Christmas break, Anna and I decided to meet at a favorite bar in Birmingham. She drank white wine, and I drank Long Islands because I’ve always been amazed at how they can make all that alcohol taste so good and how drunk all that alcohol can make me. Across from one another at a small, round table, we both texted Jim, begging him to join us. He was busy packing for the camping trip the next day. I invited her to camp too,

knowing that she wouldn't.

Later, Jim showed up and drank Jack and Coke while I got drunker than I realized and continued to drink more. Anna and I sat moved to one side of the table while Jim sat on the other. She held my hand, and I sat close to her, practically in her lap. I wasn't attracted to her, but we had an intimacy that we automatically shared through Jim. We both knew what his dick felt like in our mouths. We both knew how he smelled. We both loved him, and in that way, we shared a love that bled over onto one another whether we wanted it to or not. She held my hand hard and insistent, rubbing the back of it, daring me to forget she was there. This was under the table and not for Jim's entertainment like the rest of it seemed to be. I felt comforted by her slender, cold hands and her floral smell.

I didn't want sex. I wanted comfort.

An hour later, we went to her house to see her cats and new furniture. My stomach started to hurt. I walked outside quietly and puked under a tree. Jim didn't want to have sex with her. I didn't want

to have sex with her. But here we were, her leading him around her house making God knows what kind of innuendos while I sat under her tree next to my vomit that I was too drunk to even smell.

Jim came out and told me to get in his truck. I remember flashes of sitting in Jim's passenger seat huddled over, vomiting into my own jeaned thigh, dry heaving as he drove me to my uncle's house where I was staying.

Crying and mumbling, I crashed through my uncle's house, who spends most of his time past four o'clock drunk.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" he asked me. I held my stomach, and he bathed me and washed my blue jeans. He's a kind man, and I believe he was glad to finally not be the one who needed cleaning up.

The next morning, Jim told me I acted like a child and one of these days I'd learn and I guzzled it down like water and he had a lot of work in preparation for the camping trip and he shouldn't have come out last night and there was puke in his truck and this wasn't the first time I'd done that. It was the third time I puked in his truck.



The other times were near the end of summer when I'd drink the leaving away sometimes overdoing it and puking before he was even gone.

I wanted to tell him it was his fault that he made me drink like that, but he didn't make me drink anymore than he made me do anything else. That Christmas, he asked me to lie down in the backseat of his truck when we drove by his old house and his ex wife was home, he asked me to hide in his closet when someone came to visit. And I hid. I needed self-respect and was waiting on him to find it for me like a Daddy would.

More than 100,000 wildfires clear four to five million U.S. acres a year. Wildfires can travel at fourteen miles per hour, consuming trees, animals, homes, towns, people.

Wildfires are difficult to control. Therefore, we suppress them and prevent them. But wildfires are necessary to restore nutrients to soil for seedlings, to thin crowded forests and overgrowth. Wildfires remove diseased plants and harmful insects.

Wildfires cleanse the land.

Daddy was a forester and it was his job to manage his clients' land. He started, controlled, and put out pine plantation burns. These burns were supposed to mimic the natural fires that would push through forests. I could always tell when he'd burned all day because he came home, his skin covered in a layer of soot, and his boots stained black. Daddy said the wind had to be just right or the fire wouldn't travel enough or worse, the fire would travel too fast.

When we drove past the plantations because it was always me and Daddy together, I could smell the burnt resinous pinewood before I saw the blackened trunks and ashed, clean gaps.

When I was young and I didn't know, I asked Daddy, "Does the fire kill the trees?" He answered that pines needed fire, that the strong pines would survive, that they needed room to grow.

After everyone else left the camping trip, I sat on the dirt below Jim and held his thighs, saying, "I want to be a better woman for you."

He said he wanted to believe me, but people say a lot of things

they don't mean or things they want to mean. I swore I meant it.

But what I really meant was that I just wanted to be better. I didn't want to be angry and drunk all the time. Sometimes, I hated him for leaving me, for being so sad about his divorce, for being his secret. I hated myself for letting him.

I picked up a stick and sifted through the ashes, trying to define what I was to Jim, what he was to me. There were two broken glass bottles. I looked for the beer cans, plastic forks, and foil we'd all thrown in the fire, but the pieces of melted glass were the only thing that hadn't burnt down to ash, the only thing left to identify.

The feed sack burn pile sat right off the gravel drive by the barn. Daddy and I burned the paper sacks every evening after feeding time year-round, but when I think of the gray ash circle surrounded by yellow grass, I think of summer. We stacked feed sacks that smelled like molasses and alfalfa inside the circle.

Daddy placed a match under the sacks, and he and I watched the paper burn. Paper sacks burn tall and quick.

The goats picked over their

food with happy, full bellies while the fat sun dropped behind the trees. The bats came out in dark circles above the barn, followed by the lightening bugs. When the sunsets were exceptional and the sacks were ashes, Daddy and I walked up to the back porch to watch the last sun slip through the pines. He always asked Momma to come look, but she wouldn't. I'm not sure if he asked to be nice or because he really did want her to stand by him, stand in my spot like she should have. She wasn't my real mother. Daddy married her when I was six. Pink and orange stretched and spilled behind the backyard pines. I got used to standing next to Daddy, but many years later I'd leave home and wouldn't have a place anymore. It hurt like a breakup. Jim filled some of that space for me, and we both knew it, but it came like a package. It wasn't something I could extract. It was all melted together, pooled like cooled wax. The air held smoke while the sun set like it does every evening, like the way we can't help but keep on.