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Sawdust Mountain

My father loaned money to my uncles
for a logging business. They never paid him back.
When I was little it wasn't much I understood
about the loan but we'd visit the mill sometimes
where big trees were brought in on trucks,
longleaf pines trimmed up, branches stripped off.
They used chains and tractors to haul them up
on the logger with its mechanism of pulleys and hooks,
the clank and screech of rusty gears, then the high
wheeling swing of a log. In the blue diesel mist
and cough, I saw the biggest round cutting blade
with teeth like a dragon's teeth. It's what I thought of
when my teacher told us a story about a dragon.

We were studying medieval times and magical beasts
like unicorns and dragons, sea monsters on old maps,
the legend of Tristan with a nick in his sword
for the dragon he killed for his uncle Mark.
I wasn't so sure about uncles and so I had a clue
about how the story would end, pledges and lies,
a black not a white sail on the horizon.

The best part about going to the sawmill
was the sawdust pile. There was one big mountain
of sawdust way on the back of the lumberyard,
a mountain with high multiple peaks, rust orange,
dark brown in places, and black rotten inside.
You know wood can rot, my father said,
and told me the true story of a child climbing

an old sawdust pile. It caved in and smothered her.
But he let me and my sister play on the new pile,
sweet sawdust of pine, not like dust you'd have
on your furniture, but bits and curls of wood
where the saw blade chewed longways down the logs.
We shook it from our hair and socks and pockets.
Sawdust is lighter than beach sand which is gritty
and packs down. You can't make sand castles
with sawdust but you can slide or roll down
from a sawdust mountain and tumble softly to the bottom.

In the mill office my dad and my uncles talked,
joked around, and smoked cigarettes. You could hear
my dad's laugh for a mile. He was a good storyteller.
He'd come out with a handshake and a check in his pocket—
only for interest, I heard them say; they'd pay down
the principal when debts for equipment were clear.
Sometimes the check was good, sometimes bad.
I got bits and pieces of the story, how my dad
wanted to help my uncles, because he could,
with money he'd saved when he was in the war.
They were my mother's brothers. Family, he'd say.
That's when I learned about family and money.

They were taking in big money on the accounts
and bought fancy cars—a white Buick,
a red Thunderbird. Then a timber company
from out of state moved in on them and bought up
tracts of land for the trees. They clear-cut
to raw stumps, then sold it off to developers.
My uncles were smart and put their houses in the names
of their wives, and lost everything else. Everything.

Those were hard times for my father. He ruminated
about it, sipping his coffee, making grocery lists

from the specials in the Thursday paper. He ruminated
about what went wrong, the premature elation of cash
in their pockets, the good times, the big cars.

He liked to watch his daughters sliding, tumbling
down the mountain of sawdust, the simple soft
pleasure of yielding to gravity, while gravity
was a physical thing, not a worry about the way
things were working out in the world. He'd tell us
how growing up as a boy he'd found an orange
in the toe of a sock laid on the hearth of a Christmas fire—
an exotic thing, a bright bitter sweetness.

I learned that hope is a kind of denial, white lies
you tell to yourself to be the kind of person
you can look in the mirror at, lies you wouldn't
believe unless you yourself were good
and hopeful enough to believe in the word of a man.