

Homing Pigeons

by Tawnysha Greene

The first time we go to the mountains where Daddy lived as a boy, he drives, one hand on the wheel, windows down, and the air is cold, the roads dark, covered with trees.

On the other side of the mountain are boats, red rafts, a standing bear made of wood. We stop, and Momma says we're going on the river, that Daddy will teach us how to swim.

He picks a raft with a yellow stripe on the side, carries it to the riverbank. Sister and me follow, carry the paddles, and Daddy tells us to get in.

Taking us down the river to a place by the rocks where the water is calm, Daddy pushes us out, dives down to the bottom, comes up with silt, smooth black stones.

His arms move in long, slow strokes as he swims by the raft, stops, tells me to follow. The water is deep, but his arms, slippery with sunscreen, take my hand, hold me up.

He flips me on my back and I'm floating, the water covering all but my face. I see him talking, but hear only the water moving past, a continuous shushing, full and deep.

I fear the fish, water snakes I can't see and Daddy looks at me, puts a hand on his chest, opens his mouth, leans his head back, shoulders, chest rising. He's telling me to breathe.

I open my mouth for air, look up and see the sky, a flock of white birds overhead. *Homing pigeons*, he called them as we drove up the mountain.

People take them to the valley and release them, said Daddy, *and the birds follow them up the mountain. Sometimes, they beat their masters home.*

He points to them and I can feel the vibrations of his voice through his hand. I close my eyes, breathe in, smell the damp earth, red clay on the riverbanks,

yellow dust on the pine trees, what guides these pigeons home,
and I wonder what brings Daddy back here, if they are these same
things.

