

Jennifer Carr

Keeping Pace

You scream like you know what you're doing, Slow down! as the littlest one comes crashing through the back door, trips, falls. Your husband hears, of course, he's been waiting for this, for anything, and he's up off the couch, through the kitchen, stepping over the little one, passing her up for the eldest, deer-still in the door frame, his pink hand still loose on the screen door, his smile left over, unable to twitch, unable to dissolve to blank face. Your husband grabs him by the scruff of the tie-dye shirt you made together at the birthday party last summer. The boy is hoisted underarm like a football and tackled into the La-Z-Boy by the mantel, and your husband slams the chair back and forth so it sounds like the child is breaking. But the boy sings. Not a song exactly, but Row, row, row your boat, until the chorus is in time with the slamming chair, keeping pace with it. You have taught him to be silent at these times, and you don't know where he learned this from.

Grab at your husband, his shoulder, his shirt, scream Stop in his ear. On a bad day you've called the neighbor, your sister, a priest. The littlest one runs past you now, and somehow she climbs between the arms of the man and the arms of the thrashing chair, and she too sings, though she is crying, her blond hair in sweaty rings on her face.

The singing breaks through. Your husband stops, slams his hand flat on the wall near their heads, grabs his smokes on the way out. His way of saying he knows he needs to cool down. The screen door slams, then the sound of boots punching down the porch stairs releases you into action. You don't reach for the children, but the chair, the stiff brown fabric of the arms on your hands, and you try to pull it, your children cradled in its seat, to your chest, to soothe, relieve. The youngest reaches for you, and cries into your neck, clutching tiny handfuls of your hair. You try to collect the oldest, to bring him back, but he sings relentlessly, through teeth open for words, like a smile, like delight.