

JENNIFER GIVHAN

Madhouse of Spirits

& ghosts must do again / what gives them pain.
—Auden

I unwrap a bar of amaranth soap & wash my own mouth
the way Mama used to do when I'd been profane—
I'm trying not to become the kind of parent I feel bound
to (all this screaming, this relentless
motherloving fear). I think hard about Charlie Gordon
as a boy in *Flowers for Algernon*, how he couldn't hold
his mess & made it on the floor, how he couldn't
understand his mother's screamings & beatings
& why she sent him to the sanitarium.
The mother eye isn't all it's cracked up to be.
My own mother used to wail
as she spanked me with a wooden paddle—I still imagine
the hole where the rubber ball should go, its one blind eye
blinking. When I dream, to stop the train,
I must split myself in two: one of me is metal-hinged &
crushed, the other, with chest pain but living. I wake
with heartburn. How does one extract the violent bone
without mining that poor child's spine?

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