

Meth Ghosts

By Jenny Butler

© Jenny Butler / <http://www.drjennybutler.com>

First published in *Flash Fiction Magazine* on 29th August 2016

<http://flashfictionmagazine.com/blog/2016/08/29/meth-ghosts/>

He woke up. The sickness rose, he heaved, but didn't vomit. He reached under the bed, searching with one hand in the dark space. He felt empty cans, knocked a semi-full can and got something sticky on his finger before he finally found it, the little brown plastic container with his little blue tablets. These little blues only served to smooth him out, mollify him. He took three and swallowed without water. He lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Then he saw it. Out of the corner of his eye, or did he sense it first? He was never sure which came first, the feeling that made him look to one side, or the flicker of something that disturbed him and brought on that eerie sensation. He knew that if he turned his head ever-so-slightly, it would disappear. But he knew it was still there, watching him. It was always watching him. Or was there more than one of them? "Meth ghosts" was what Johnny called them.

He thought of the faces of the pockmarked speed freaks with their disgusting brown teeth down by the intersection. He hoped he would never end up that way. He thought of their suspicious peeking, a few steps forward, glancing back fearfully, afraid of the people following them, the people in the shadows only they could see. Johnny used to laugh at far-gone meth-heads, called them paranoid tweekers.

The first time he took crystal meth, he stayed up all night, stripped bits of wallpaper off the wall of the apartment, unwound the steel wool by the kitchen sink, picked fibers out of the

carpet, arranged the fibers in a little pile, and picked at the burnt orange colored fabric on the chair, both sides, until the threads were unwoven. With joy, he discovered meshed threads of yellow and dark orange formed a base to this fabric covering, got them out, strand by skinny strand, and placed them on the floor in alternate rows, like little colored threadworms: yellow, orange, burnt-orange, yellow. He'd read a book once about vampires in old Europe. It said they used to put millet or sand near the graveyards, so that when the vampire rose from its grave, it would see the grains and would not be able to resist counting them all. What he wouldn't have given to have some grains to count that night! Oh Jesus, he would have loved some kernels to arrange in heaps of twenty. He was awake all the next day too, fidgeting with his phone, walking too fast, tying and untying his laces, picking at the paint on the railings, smoking, peeling the cigarette box into tiny squares, trying not to look at the ghosts.

Johnny reassured him that he saw them too, just hallucinations, not there, just the meth. What scared him was, he knew *it wasn't just the meth*. He had always seen them. They had always been there. And it wasn't his eyesight: "20/20 vision" the optician said and "nothing wrong with the optic nerve." He'd wished for a tumor, something that could be removed, dealt with. Even as a little boy, he remembered glancing at them darting when they realized they were visible. They were only noticeable as shadows when they were moving away, or so it seemed. Maybe they didn't like when you could see them. He always felt sick to his stomach when they came so near. They were threatening and, as a child when it first happened, he instinctively knew not to tell anyone. At least he wasn't in a psych ward.

He felt safer inside the apartment, even though he could sense them in here too, invading his space. He felt it was at least *his* space and *they* were intruding. It was different outside, ominous. He could feel them all around him, watching, in Father Serra Park, the day he went there to meet a dealer who never turned up. He wondered if they were the same entities. He felt silly thinking of them that way, entities, like the *X-Files* or something. Mulder and Scully

shining torches into the bushes looking for the shadow people and the dark amorphous things flitting around in the foggy air. He chuckled at this.

He continued to stare at the ceiling but knew that something had changed. The room felt different. He turned his head, but this time they didn't flit or disappear, just stayed stock still, silhouettes. The air was different suddenly, dank. They were bigger than him and they were strong. He was confused at how something could be ethereal, a shadow, and yet so strong. He could feel their hands on him—were they hands? Grey heads with eyes like seals, like black glass glinting. Could they be delusions? Demons? Johnny said it was just the meth, what it does to the brain. His thoughts raced now. How could they be so *strong* if they weren't really there? They were all around him, holding him down, wrapping him with something, binding him. He couldn't move. He was panicking, wanting to scream but no sound was coming, his mouth moving, opening, closing, just breath coming out. He closed his eyes. He could feel them closing in...