Nightwalk
by Eric Cecil

In the early evening he runs the bath and looks into its boil. He simmers with it: about work, the night, a walk under low clouds. Standing he glances at the mirror and then back to the running faucet, wiping his mouth with a chapped hand. He does not roll the knobs but leaves the bathroom and enters the bedroom, staring at his clothes. They are laid out perfectly on the chair. Between dusking windows he sees more dark than light and imagines, now, as the room blackens, that night inhabits his shirt, pants, shoes. But when he turns on the lamp, he is in them instead. And now he must leave.

Leaving the building he's given to a kind of kettled scalding, an anger that arrows him toward more water still: a river that splits the middle of town. The town does not mean much to him, neither commands nor repels him, but he leans toward it anyway, finding the steep ascent of the bridge.

Motorbikes flit the bridge's high bow. They dart so close to his elbow that he worries they may hook him, sledding him up its incline. Up the slope he's determined to reach the hump of its crest, where he now sees a descending path slithering to a valley below. The bikes hiss along its length: taillights smoldering, riders' helmets like the heads of pins. I will pin, he thinks, this spot on a map when I return home, noting the center of nothing. But there is no home. Not on the bank behind him, nor the one before him.

He frowns into the wind that shears the railing, looking over its edge. From up high the river is as still as a painting, black as a hole, mute in the mounting gales. He thinks of the bath, still running: boiling over its rim by now, cascading over the floor.

Over the spalled road another bike approaches. This one is much faster than the others. It speeds as if aimed at his center. He expects it to swerve, to slow as it nears. But in the darkness of the bridge, they will not move to miss, and in his nightclothes, on his nightwalk, neither will he.

He punches hands into his pockets and charges ahead. The wind plumes at his back. He watches a slanting gust tug at the rider's jacketed arms, the wheel dipping into the suddenness of a deep crater. And it's then that the bike tilts, slides, a left knee skidding along the uneven path. A left shoulder follows. The wheel pops and rolls free, shuddering against the railing. The bike and its rider spark past it and scrape onto the road.

Past the hollow of an upturned helmet, over the bone of metal and tatters of black rubber, he walks to the form in repose. The fork of the bike's front end tusks into the lowering sky. The rest

of its mangled frame pins a trembling figure. Night mottles a bare, drawn face, runs from the inked red of an ear to a jaw that works to speak. Maybe, he thinks, to plead. But all it can offer is a simmering moan. He sees the taut neck working, the blackened shine of a gash at the bridge of the rider's nose. There's a deeper blackness in everything else: sky, river, rubber, the gloved hands that grasp his ankle. The center of himself. And all this, too, he thinks, can boil. The shoulder and neck shiver against the press of his foot. He longs for light but hammers the heel instead.