

"A Death by the Sea"

(excerpt)

by Cooper Renner

When I woke the room was dark: my computer had put itself to sleep, and I had been working solely by its light. I could see, through the open window, the fifth floor of the building opposite, lit at an angle by the moon. I had often seen residents on the lower floors coming to their windows or balconies to smoke, to hang wet clothes, or to call down to neighbors on the street below. But the fifth floor had always seemed vacant--never a light behind the window-glasses opaque with dust; never the sound of one person calling to another. The window was always closed, as were the French doors that gave way to the narrow balcony.

Then a flicker caught my eye. To the left of the balcony, where the residential high-rise abutted a commercial building to its right, a shape--half-dark, half-lit--stood on a limestone ledge. There were several windows, I knew, above that ledge, though I could not see them from where I sat on the bed. Presumably the ledge-walker had exited one of them. He (she?) sidled along the ledge till it ended at the red brick of the residence. There was a gap of perhaps four or five feet--gauging distances is not my talent--between the lip of the ledge and the railing of the balcony. The figure crouched--or perhaps *hunched* would be the more accurate word--and I wanted to shout out a warning. But I was still hazy from sleep and medication and, to be frank, was not sure I had not wakened from one dream directly into another.

The moon was apparently about halfway up the eastern sky because the figure's back and part of its head were highlighted; the rest was dark against the limestone blocks of the building. I leaned forward, forcing myself to behave as though awake, at the same time the figure leapt. It was, to me at least, an astonishing performance, as though the legs were propelled by some other

force. I almost lost him against the dark top floor of the residence-- he was no more than a richly brown smear sliding across a richly brown backdrop until, that is, he landed. He had entirely cleared the railing and managed to land on the grey planking of the balcony, on all four.

I shoved the heels of my hands against my eyes. I felt the warmth of my laptop on my thighs. The breeze ran, just for a second, against the thin skin between my left ear and the leg of my glasses. That head not more than forty feet away, because the street was quite a narrow one, turned toward me and I caught the glint of moonlight on one eye. The other eye, on the head's left side, was blocked by the shadow of an upraised ear.

One side of the French door opened and a hand extended out, snapping thumb and middle finger. Then the creature on the balcony curled back on itself, its sinuous spine making an elongated C, and the dog--the wolf?--padded softly inside.

