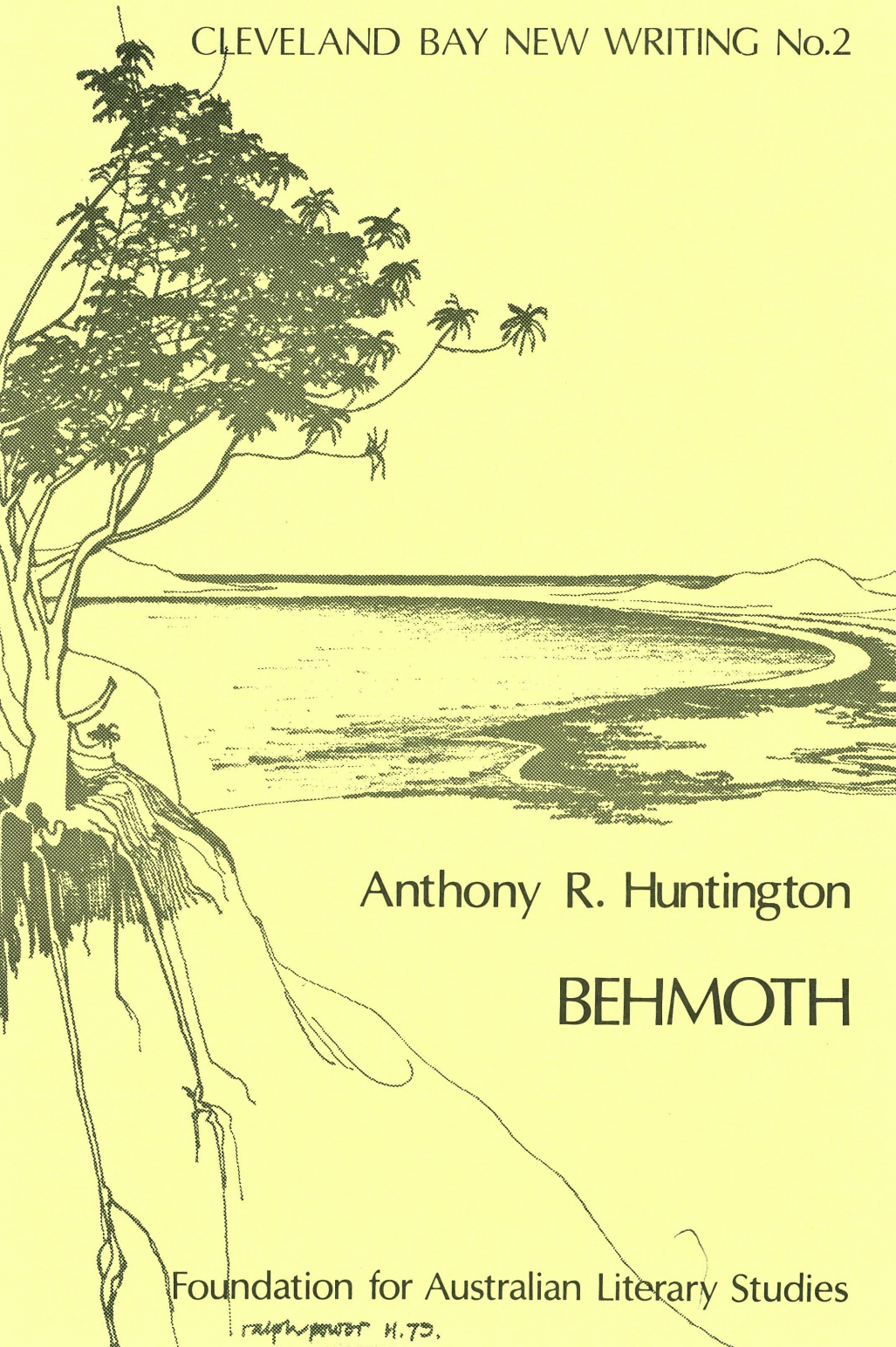


CLEVELAND BAY NEW WRITING No.2



Anthony R. Huntington

BEHMOTH

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies

Ralph Power H.T.S.

CLEVELAND BAY NEW WRITING SERIES NO. 2.

BEHMOTH

by

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with illustrations by Anita Jetnikoff

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: As far as I know, the business about the levels in Lake Wakatipu is true. *Nessiteras rhombopteryx* is the official scientific name for the Loch Ness monster(s). An article including the photographs mentioned was published in the authoritative journal *Nature*. They were taken with strobe cameras linked to sonar equipment, and show something. However, they are in dispute.

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Bent double under a heavy scuba tank, mask and flippers swinging from his neck, Gino Cassavetes picked his barefoot way down a narrow strip of ground. Inside his unfastened wetsuit he was sweating rivers, labouring with the weight he was carrying.

It was very dark and sometimes he made as if to stumble.

A few more metres along the rocky ground Gino downed his gear and carefully put it on, his movements slowed by a panicked heart whose frenzied tattoo frightened him.

Now looking like a refugee from a Fifties horror-cheapie, with thick rubbery skin and cryptic yellow markings, goggle eyes and webbed feet, a humped protruberance and corrugated air hose, he waddled downslope brandishing the yellow beam of his underwater torch, towards the glint of clean metal.

Gino lowered himself onto all fours, backed towards the cliff in the darkness, stones grinding through his rubber booties, burden and exhaustion a physical presence oppressive on his soul, and went over the edge.

As he did so, he realised that this had been coming from the beginning.

“Hold it right there, buster! I have you covered, yes?”

“It’s not done to shoot a man with his hands in the air. You don’t give him a chance to shoot you.”

Gino held his right hand up and cocked the thumb with his left hand, as if chambering a round in an automatic pistol.

“Whatever the circumstances, I don’t think you would kill anyone, let alone me,” said Veronica, suddenly looking serious.

Gino looked at her almost too dark brown locks, remained silent and thought, “Though truly I would kill for you, to keep you.”

For a moment Veronica felt uneasy under those solid eyebrows then Gino turned away.

“You haven’t answered me.”

Changing the subject, Gino said, “Will you just look at that water? What murk the stuff is at home in comparison.”

His voice was incredulous. The surface of Lake Wakatipu, South Island, New Zealand, rippled here and here again, reflected the dark pine trees and rugged heights of the Milburn Range. Hypnotised, he looked down off the old wharf and easily distinguished different strands of a mass of aquatic weed. Accustomed to unsatisfactory visibility when he dived off his home town of Rockhampton, Gino found the clarity remarkable. The Remarkables were another of the mountain ranges within sight but he couldn’t decide which one.

“Okay, don’t answer me, see if I care, but please hold that pose like a good fellow.”

Gino obligingly froze while the shutter clicked, as the motor whirred the film onto the next frame. Veronica ran the length of the wharf, her heels sounding on the heavy planks, and wrapped both arms around him. A shoal of small fish frightened by the heavy footfalls flew from underneath the wharf towards deeper water.

“What are they, champ?”

“Smelt? *Galaxia*?”

They watched, feeling the warmth of the other’s body in contrast to the air that chilled their faces. Locals wouldn’t call it cold but it was a big change from an edge-of-the-tropics steam bath.

“Look there,” Gino pointed. A speckled torpedo emerged from a bank of weeds. “Brown trout. Nice with almonds or bacon.”

He looked up at the frontage of the hotel where they were staying, saw that the Americans had gone in off the terrace. Charming, really, that terrace. All white painted wrought iron tables and chairs under a red and white striped canvas awning.

“What say we put the feedbags on, buddy?”

That snapped him out of his aquatic daydreams and languid observations of now deserted hotel frontages.

“Feedbags? Yeah, right, right,” he grunted at Veronica’s quirky use of language. Feedbags indeed.

As they reached the end of the wharf to which were moored equally aged rowboats, Gino turned around and once more looked out over the lake. His heavy black curls moved as he surveyed, his hairy, olive skinned hands clenched on a rail. Beside him Veronica looked tasty in jeans so tight that they must have been sprayed on.

“Come hell or high water, I’m going in tomorrow morning. As soon as it’s light.”

Veronica protested, “But Gino! I thought we were going into town tomorrow. I was talking to that nice woman next door and *she* said that it was really very nice.”

They started up the short stretch of uphill garden between the lake shore and the road.

“Okay, I surrender, you have penetrated my defenses. But I thought you were trying to get off the corporation trip. If you want to get into it, that’s fine by me, there must be a church around here somewhere.”

He watched her warily and sure enough there were the signs of irritation, the little mannerisms he had come to know too well, he had expected before he finished the first sentence. Then she returned fire.

“I really wish you’d sing another song sometimes. You’re really stuck in that groove and I don’t need it, that’s all there is to it.” They stopped in the middle of the road and turned towards each other, seemingly on the level though he topped her by half a head. She seemed closer than she was. “Look, this is supposed to be a holiday so let’s just have a good time. I won’t leave you or sleep in a single bed. You won’t ask me to marry you *again*. Deal?”

Gino grudgingly shook. They didn’t speak until they had entered the

lounge where the members of the American tour were waiting for the dining room doors to be opened.

After dinner, when Gino had sole and Veronica steak, they moved into the bar with the Americans. Soon they were involved in the tourists' conversations, trading names and geography and laughing at the other pronunciations.

"What about you two? Honeymoon?" asked a shiny domed gent with glasses who identified himself as a Californian aerospace engineer.

Veronica tried a smile that failed. It had just been conversational facade, cracking as it was applied.

"We're just travelling together."

Some of the older people showed shock, eyes full of the knowledge they had just been given. Gino added that they were celebrating the sale of the snack bar Veronica had inherited from her mother.

"Did you get a decent price?" continued the bald man, obviously fishing for the figure cause he had nothing else to do.

"We were pleased with it," replied Gino.

The man went back to listening to his wife talk about her sweet, little Pekinese.

It was then that Gino realised that the muscular local colour who had been standing near Veronica and him at the bar had been giving her an eye full of approval for that period, mainly directed towards one of her more prominent assets. Gino's hand clenched hard on his glass and his jaw locked up tight. He could see that she was bathing in his unashamed lust. To misdirect himself away from feeling very down, for he knew that if he dwelt on it something nasty would happen, he turned to the barkeeper.

"By the way," said Gino, appearing casual and relaxed, "Is there a diving shop in town?"

He wasn't too hopeful for there had been none in the phone book.

"No, nothing like that in Queenstown. Have you seen the centre of town yet?"

Veronica nudged his foot significantly. That blew thirty bucks excess baggage charges in bringing the tank out. They should have stopped for a few hours in Christchurch, and got it railed down full as air freight wouldn't accept it full. Damnation. Still, he had the wet suit, which he would need for any bathing at all with the water temperature way below what he was used to. The prospect of cramps in all four limbs wasn't a pleasant one.

Then he saw that the lecher was moving towards them. How to react? He knew a scene would have lots of bad PR value but he couldn't trust himself. Be calm, he told himself.

Whoever-he-was presented himself to the two of them.

"Hi. Heard you asking about a dive shop. Got a tank that needs filling?"

"That's right. What's your connection?"

"A bunch of us bought a compressor between us, it's in my garage and I'll be happy to fill yours and take you out. I'm at a loose end at the moment, on long service leave and everybody I know is busy fleeing tourists. I'm Greg Strathmore."

His hands would have shamed King Kong's; his body was built to the same specifications. It came as no surprise that he drove a late model Holden stationwagon, a diver's car, when it wasn't a carless day.

"In that case I think I'm going to like it here," said Gino all the while intensely resenting this brash man. He hadn't wanted to dive at the expense of losing Veronica. If he kept away from her, things might still work out the way Gino wanted them to.

He looked at Greg's smile as he introduced him to Veronica. Predatory, that was it. At first it looked like Greg was going to fondle Veronica and Gino prepared to bring his glass smashing down behind his ear and flamenco on his ribs, but he only shook her hand, very intimately at that.

Gino drained his drink and gritted his teeth against the ignition from throat to stomach. Son, Gino thought, blearily surveying middle aged women in pants suits, most people win some and lose some, but you, dumb bastard that you are, you just lose 'em like it's going out of fashion.

At five thirty the next morning, Gino gently closed their motel door and left the unit the back way, legs goosefleshed in the dawn.

Overnight, the weather hadn't gone anywhere but he could feel tides of neither air or water starting to move between the two of them. She had been receptive, but not particularly reciprocating. In her eyes he thought he saw his reflection as Strathmore, hair sunbleached, skin whiter, taller, broader, heavier. He was unsure about making anything of it, always having felt that their relationship was tenuous and that he was under probation. She never seemed to open right up to him, but then he didn't to her either. She sometimes laughed, sometimes erupted angrily and Gino had endured enough eruptions lately to last him for a considerable while. It was only necessary to mention marriage or act in the least possessively and it was on. What a dilemma; what to do? Something happened when he was near her that made it very hard. He was really happy about the trip, especially now he had the chance of doing an accompanied scuba dive with an old hand. If only she would fall under his spell as he was under hers. Something inside kicked and he looked forward to when he would see her again. How she had looked as he had closed the door, sprawled asleep in the bed that had run so hot for him last night! She never failed to knock him out yet seemed nonchalant about him.

A few minutes and Gino was on the edge of the water, uncomfortable and yawning on the shingly beach. It looked really good, sun as yet low, sky not fully lit, clouds mother of pearl shadows. The surface was flat as molten tin. He waded in until the water reached his thighs, cold creeping up with the water an intense presence, then launched clear.

The sediment he stirred soon fell and fluttered back to the bottom. He had never felt this cold before, it even surpassed the trip onto Fox Glacier, yet he still had that feeling of weightless freedom that diving always gave him, heightened this time by the combination of new sensations.

And the incredible visibility . . .

It just went on and on. He guessed at it being a figure unprecedented to his knowledge. The bottom dropped away with greater speed as he moved away from the shore, stabilised for a while then went out of sight below.

Down, down, down Gino went, complimenting himself for executing so textbook an example of the feetfirst dive. He was *deep* in seconds and pinched and blew his nose to equalise the pressure on his ears. Still he went deeper, stopping to equalise at intervals. His body began to feel compressed and he exhaled a little into his mask to balance the eye squeeze. It was like flying.

He felt such a thrill; the only comparison was when he had first taken Veronica to bed. Ascent, not descent, was the sensation.

Ahead was the bottom, still obscured. It resolved, then his kicking ceased for a moment until his body began to be dragged to the surface by its slight positive buoyancy, as the weight belt and the neoprene suit's nitrogen bubbles almost balanced one another. Then he resumed, much slower and with greater caution.

Up ahead, from the grey and brown and blue jumble of the distance and the bottom's ghosts formed an outline, a formless shape that scared Gino as he had never been scared before. It was a rounded grey thing. Gino had seen photographs in magazines that were supposed to be portraits of something in Loch Ness, making the owner of that diamond shaped fin *Nessiteras rhombopteryx*, otherwise known as Nessie. He hadn't heard of any sightings in the lake, but that didn't seem to deny the existence of a creature. Titicaca, the Indians' Ogoogo in isolated lakes through the northeastern states of America, Kipling's monster racing the steamer in the Indian Ocean, The *Mary Celeste* Mystery, Lake Wakatipu? Why not?

His thoughts flashed back to the trip he had done with his father ten years ago. The driver of their coach had told them that the level of the lake varied perceptibly every five minutes. There was absolutely no scientific reason for it. The driver hadn't said anything about a monster, Gino kept telling himself. Nothing about a monster. It was just that the lake looked like it harboured a monster, it really did. Just as often as he told himself "No Monsters!" the level business blew away any reassurance this

talisman of mystery summoned.

Veronica had called him her Creature on first seeing him in full scuba regalia. It was true, when it came to their relationship.

His lungs were starting to complain. He didn't often dive this deep without the encumbrance of a God-knew-how-heavy scuba tank. It was starting to get pretty critical but he just would not be able to live with himself if he had sighted something like this and hadn't proved it one way or another. He was nowhere near the free diving record so he didn't think himself crazy to keep on. As he descended, Gino tried to reduce his flipper noise by concentrating on the technique.

Below was The Thing, waiting for him.

Handfuls of needles thrust deep into his frontal sinuses.

Plenty deep. Too deep!

No, to go deeper was beyond him. He felt close to death, already embalmed.

Another few seconds and Gino almost laughed at himself, despite the gravity of his situation. The 'monster' was probably only a mass of entangled and driftwood caught around a stump. If it was sitting on a patch of lightly coloured sand that would create a sharp contrast. That *must* be it! There could be no monsters, those photographs must be fakes.

He changed end for end and looked up at the surface that was usually so close overhead, bending away in every direction. Christ, but he was deep! The water had gotten rapidly colder and now it was positively freezing with the wet suit making little difference. If he got a cramp . . .

With broad, powerful flipper strokes and wide, wild grabbing motions he began the long ascent, a thin stream of spittle coated bubbles draining from his mouth.

It was a long way to salvation and there was the chance of an air embolism, of his lungs rupturing and a bubble causing cardiac arrest, or even the bends if he didn't blow bubbles as he rose.

He was just too damn deep, too deep and alone! He felt so mortal, so vulnerable, as if the powers that be were about to crack down with a peal of thunder at any moment. It wasn't a nice feeling.

All the same, he told himself that the number one rule is to dive with a buddy. He spiralled left to right, head arched back, watching for entangling weed, listening for motors and longing passionately for the sight of that elusive surface, panic stations well sounded.

Then for some irrational reason his panic seemed to go out of control. He *had* seen something down there, it was after him, something evil and ancient that demanded sacrifices at night by the light of animal fat torches. The intensity of his fear was absolutely new to him; he didn't know what to do, what was going on, where to look next; it was insane. He lost his orientation, direction, threshed about. *It* was getting closer. Don't look down, down to the dark place, don't look into the face of that which should not be contemplated.

Then the irrational sensation passed away, left his body and reentered infinity. He was back in control, perhaps not for long. He let himself drift to reestablish up then hit top gear.

There was nothing else for it. With a ripping motion he cast off his lead belt, shot like a cork towards the surface. What the hell sort of depth had he hit? This was like escaping from a crippled submarine.

Jesus, crisis after crisis! It hit him hard.

He was right slap-bang in the path of that tinpot tourist tub, the *Earnslaw*, right where he had seen it go up and back again as he had been having that toothsome sole in the lovely evening and company of Veronica. He had watched it crawl, it's stack griming soot onto those who fancied themselves hardy souls and braved the weatherdeck like old salts. Not to forget the jet boats, of course. What speed for them?

Oh, yeah, seventy five mph, bloody fast on water with the wind blowing your fringe over the back of your head. He would hear the motors, both of those Ford 351 V8s, coming from all over the way sound travels underwater then pow! Blamm! A twenty seven year old tourist was killed today after being run down by a speedboat while swimming. Police have not yet released his name while relatives are notified. The next day there



would be a smaller notice, half column, page three perhaps, giving his name and maybe Veronica's. The newspapers were always hungry for stories at this time of year.

Damn the torpedoes! He ascended faster than his bubbles. Dangerous, dangerous and he knew it. Writing his own admission to hospital or the morgue. Well, he'd just done the obit. What an imagination. Guys do this every day of the week. Quite safe.

But it wasn't and he knew *that*. His lungs had never felt like this before.

He could only just see the surface, but it looked a lie, a facsimile that would always remain out of reach. Forever to writhe and decay in darkness striving for the light, what a fate that would be, down here amongst the tiddlers, trout and imaginary monsters. It was as unreachable as Veronica's devoted love. Fate was going to enchain him at a more visceral level than the pace with which it passed most people by at the surface.

Another gem shone from the past. Panic is the greatest killer of divers.

Just keep up the regular strokes, not too fast, not too slow. The air you are loosing, emptying your lungs in seeming suicide, carefully does it.

Black and red spots swirled and his chest heaved on a private atmosphere. If he blacked out and went onto automatic he would die.

He. Would. Die.

Insect in amber cried in pain.

Gino gave a start. He was beginning to worry himself. Spouting poetry! What would it be next? Perfumed handkerchiefs?

Blinding light burst into his life like sunflowers opening to the dawn. Gino scrambled the last short way in a flurry of aching limbs, burst through into the mirror surface of the morning like a broaching whale, spat the snorkel clear and floated on his back, thankfully inhaling lungful after lungful of life.

He had come close, very close but not close enough. Close is not captured. And there *were* monsters.

Shaking with the balancing of his oxygen debt, cold and reaction, Gino did a slow freestyle for the beach.

The whistle of the *Earnslaw* screamed and echoed, a white cloud of vapour erupting from her stack and loosening black soot. The sound frightened waterbirds into the air. Figures moved amongst the buildings on the wharf and went down below, firing her up for the day's cruising; figures headed towards offices and fitted keys to locks.

* * *

Gino was still shivering violently when he dripped his way into their room, dumped the gear in the shower and towelled his head. There were sounds that Veronica was finally waking. She didn't like doing it alone.

"Gino?"

He came out and she squawked as soon as she saw his wetness.

"You've been in that bloody lake."

The tone was that of a mother discovering a mud pie manufactory in her backyard.

"Absolutely. It was great. Visibility . . ."

She cut him off short.

"I'm sure. I didn't want you to do it, you know. You could have gotten a cramp, drowned, got tangled in some of that weed we saw yesterday, been hit by a boat. Then where would I have been?"

Gino got out today's clothes. The phone rang twice and was swiftly answered, being on a small table on Veronica's side of the bed. As he watched, a radiant smile transformed a grumpy nonmorning person to the personification of indolent lust, into a Norman Lindsay hoyden.

Something seemed to be wrong with his ears after the dive. He

couldn't quite catch what she was saying. It added up to one bloody person: Greg Strathmore. Gino slowly buttoned his shirt and shook his head to get water out of his ears.

"Goodbye . . . Yes." Giggle. "Ooh . . . Yes . . . Bye!" She replaced the handset in the cradle and glared at Gino again from under a tangle of awry hair, left breast casually uncovered, nipple raised against the cold. Gino remembered Greg's obvious staring, her awareness of that stare. They *were* rather nice.

"That was Greg getting in touch about a trip tomorrow. There's a gentleman. Getting back to what I was saying before, I think it's a fine cavalier attitude you've adopted towards me. What if something had happened to you, you think I would be free to chase Greg then, don't you, forget you within the hour and make whoopee between his sheets that night? Don't you?"

Gino, suddenly incensed, couldn't resist a barb.

"I haven't seen much to the contrary."

That almost set her off.

"Oh, come on. I sleep with you. What more do you want? *No*, don't say it!" She held hands over her ears and the bedclothes fell even further. "I'm fed up with your bloody, pigheaded insistence. Fed up, do you hear me! Fed up!"

Gino stood near the door for a moment and they glared at one another across the room.

"Who broke the deal?" he said, defensively trying to patch the rift.

Veronica pouted. "You *did* agree to come to town with me. You broke your promise."

"You're the one who mentioned marriage, not I, but even so we'll go to town today. Good Lord, woman, we're staying here for four weeks."

"But you just had to dive this morning, didn't you? You receive an offer of a fill for your tank from a friendly stranger, a nice man, but that

isn't enough for you," said Veronica, in acid tones that would kill at close range. "You just *had* to."

Face blank, ice clamping his heart in a grip of sorrow, walking alone in a vale of tears, Gino said, "I'll see you in the dining room. I don't want to talk any more."

* * *

Afterwards they walked along the road above the shingle beach to the park, where they watched ducks bobbing their tails in the air as they went after weed in a pond. At the other end of a path flanked by oaks, with old terrace houses on their right and a shingle beached bay on their left, they reached the mall at the centre of town, which was already starting to come alive.

"Gino, what's that man doing?"

Someone who looked like a local was leaning over the edge of a wharf, shaking the contents of a plastic package into the water.

"It's frozen mince, but not for the birds. I saw the same thing on the tour, the same place, same package, maybe older brother of that bloke."

As they approached, large brown trout up to a good size began shooting through the water and snatching particles of meat from right under the birds' beaks.

"Just like that one yesterday. One of the women on the tour told me that they are tasteless, but I don't believe her. How can something as graceful and beautiful as that not be good to eat?"

Gino couldn't stop laughing at that one.

"The two don't go together, you know."

The larger pieces of mince consumed, the fish quartered back and forth, occasionally taking smaller specks, before returning to the shade. Gino took Veronica's arm.

"We started the day badly, but let's have a good one instead."



Veronica squeezed back and he felt a warm glow. The glow became a fire later in the morning when he found the shop he remembered from the tour. It sold high quality jewellery cheap. Something made Gino buy an amber brooch set in gold with a fly stuck forever in the middle.

* * *

Insect in amber cried in pain.

* * *

He couldn't get it out of his head.

They had a ride on the Gondola chairlift and tacos for lunch. Late in the afternoon, they turned for their hotel, considerably tanked and overloaded with purchases. It had been a memorable day.

Back in their room Veronica collapsed on the bed, scattering packages to the floor.

"You go have a sauna cause I'm having a sleep. The time difference is starting to get to me."

Gino took his time over the sauna, something he relished but usually had neither time nor money for. Thoroughly relaxed to the point of yawning, he entered without warning and walked in on Strathmore standing beside her as if they had just kissed. Veronica turned away and began to comb her hair although it didn't need it. That told him that something had been going on. He could read her like a book.

"I thought I'd check out how you were settling in," Strathmore said as he held out that large paw to shake.

Gino kicked off the strapless sandals he had worn up to the heated pool and sauna. Yeah, I'll bet you did. *Swine.*

"We'd better get dressed, Veronica. You'll have to excuse me, Greg."

"No worries. I'll be on my way. I was just passing by and thought I'd check on tomorrow since the two of us didn't have a chance to talk this morning."

"Tomorrow?" Gino looked quizzically at Veronica.

"Greg suggested it this morning. I told you."

"No, you said that he was on the line, that's all. Where do you have in mind?"

"Kingston at the other end of the lake to combine a scenic drive with a dive."

Gino nodded. "Yes, I've been there. I was here with my father ten years ago, did a coach tour of both islands. Ten o'clock?"

"Sure. It's not a long drive. See you tomorrow."

Gino stayed in the doorway and made Strathmore push past, letting him know how he felt by keeping his eyes fixed and level. After Strathmore's footsteps had faded down the corridor Gino changed into a clean shirt and singlet, feeling that empty feeling and sure he had lost her.

Well, that was it. He was not going to get hurt any more. She's the absolute last, but to his surprise she got up from the stool in front of the postcard sized mirror and wrapped herself around him mating-octopus-fashion before he could say anything, put her head on his shoulder and started to cry.

What was he to do?

"What's the matter?" he said as gently as he could.

"I don't know what to do." Her voice was so small.

"You'll have to make your own mind up. I can't decide for you." Oh, it was hard to say that; it went against the male grain and outrage.

"You know?"

"I saw how you looked at him." Bitter wormwood and hemlock!

"Oh," but there were whole books within that sound.

Gino slogged through his meal solely by force of will, all appetite fled.

This was when she was supposed to be falling more and more in love with him until she finally agreed to marry him, but it wasn't working. 'In the pits' said it right. He had suggested Queenstown because he remembered it as the type of place that would cement their relationship. They seemed to be falling apart; he always had dreaded this turning point. Now it had arrived.

During the meal Veronica smiled thinly and looked to either side, did not meet his eye, fiddled with her hair. They were all bad signs.

Things didn't look too bright. So much for the master plan. Maybe the real monster of the lake was Greg, preying on their feelings like some emotional vampire. Shadows, shadows were coming down on him every way he turned.

That line leapt up again, writ large in blood, rang out like silent bells.

Insect in amber cries in pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

* * *

They drove back from Kingston, tired and cold. The temperature had dropped overnight and hadn't rallied to yesterday's high.

They had dived together, Strathmore watching him from behind as they wraithed over gently sloping sand. No buddy, no need to check my diving ability, Gino had thought. Are you blind? Can't you see I've done this many times before?

In the distance Gino thought he saw a fish flick past but a freshening breeze had roiled silt. He was still panicky after yesterday's incident. They shadowed one another across a flat sand bar and Gino wished for a spear-gun, a knife. He had come close to getting what he wanted from Veronica, he had felt it deep inside and was now further away than he had ever been.

"You should have seen this monster that came out of the grey and snaffled Greg. Damn near got me, too, but I buried myself in the sand. It stampeded when a boat went past."

It might work if there was a history of sightings, but there wasn't and it would mean a search. Where to find the boat? The lake would be dragged and bacteria don't work that fast. There would still be evidence in twenty years time.

Besides, he just couldn't guess how Veronica would react. How much could he read into what he had seen?

On the way home Strathmore pointed out Devil's Bluff, a sharp corner high above a very deep part of the lake. He slowed to a stop, there being little traffic, as usual.

"Long way down. The lake was dug out by a glacier, I think. Nothing to see, that's the pinch. Like the rest of the lake. Terrific clarity, but nothing to look at. The trout are as scatty as, haha, trout."

Gino laughed courteously and listened carefully to his lady. Did she laugh too much? Did it reflect something that had gone on between them? Had anything gone on? He wasn't used to this business.

"Some of the larrikins reckon we should start a rumour that we had seen a monster in the lake, as if we didn't have enough tourists already. Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous?"

Gino found it hard to laugh at that. How could Strathmore know anything about that incident? Was it only weed? He had said nothing about it to Veronica, had not explained his motive in buying the amber, although she had taken it. So how could Strathmore know anything about a monster? Surely it must be coincidence.

Yet try as he might he couldn't dismiss it completely. There was something about the lake; it had struck him when he had seen it all those years ago. Something was in it, he knew. Something . . . sinister.

He sat back in the seat and dried his hair in a borrowed towel, burrowed into the seat away from the bite of the wind. There was nothing he could do about a liaison between the two of them. He was sure that if he pressured her it would do no good. They should have gone to New Caledonia. Then he thought about the expatriate Frenchmen. No, not there either.

With sadness he realised that they shouldn't even have sold the snack bar, though there it had been an endless round of uncouth young men ogling those beautiful legs . . .

Three days later, Gino was feeling worse than ever. He was drinking more. Strathmore had been coming up to the hotel bar every night for a friendly chat, and just as often as Gino emerged from the toilet, the two of them had their heads together.

Tonight he had decided to have it out. This just couldn't go on; it was wearing him down. Every night she had been getting colder and colder towards him. He hadn't dared to say anything and the aggression compressed inside seethed. Strathmore and he had dived again but it hadn't been a fun time, just like the first. They weren't friendly. There was a barrier between them.

Gino walked out of the toilet with the speech he had rehearsed ready on his tongue and something exploded inside his head. Strathmore had his hand on Veronica's thigh and she was nibbling his ear.

Then there was confusion. As soon as Veronica saw how he looked, she screamed. Loud. Strathmore struggled to stand and jostled some potted tourists who got belligerent. Chairs went over. Glasses slid off tables. Gino ploughed across the bar like a crazy man, throwing people and chairs every which way. His vision became a tunnel with Strathmore its target and he rushed to collision.

Then he remembered a huge fist speeding towards his nose and a head jarring crack, a red flash. Then the smell of anaesthetic and sterile cloth.

His nose. It had been inflated.

His head. It had been shattered.

His body. It was dully floating.

A waspish woman in a white dress tried to restrain him but he soon brushed her to one side, sent a tray of instruments across the floor. He

ripped the hospital gown off, tearing down from the neck and retrieved his trousers from a drawer beside his bed, ominously wavering as he put them on.

Another nurse appeared, squeaked like a trod-on rat and scuttled for reinforcements and a primed needle.

“Got to get out of here or else they’ll lock me up. Got to stop that bastard. Got to get even.”

Gino ran back to their hotel, got into the unit by the back way, searched out their room and found all of Veronica’s stuff gone. Even the paperback she had been sticking her nose into on the flight over from Brisbane was gone.

This was dissolution.

Part of the way tanked but not incapacitated, his nose swollen painfully, Gino questioned the receptionist.

“Yes, a Holden station wagon. Dark long hair, blue dress. Wide shouldered gentleman carrying two bags. What happened to your nose?”

For one heartbeat Gino felt cold and deflated, then he grabbed a phone directory, tracked down the address on the map over the booth and strode forcefully out into the night through the double glass doors. The willows along the shore were wild, waving to the rhythm of the short, vigorous waves crashing on the shingles. His hair blew around in a dark halo. Amongst the hiss of the stones was a heartbeat.

Gino stuck to the old sidewalks. It was late and occasionally a car full of bombed kids cruised past. Something about him made them stay off the brakes.

Up through the mall to the post office he went. He continued up the hill towards the terminus for the gondola, two blocks then right, down a few then there it was, all the windows darkened, the car under the canopy of the carport. He walked past at an innocent, even pace then came back, checked out the car, the piles of junk in the garage and found a familiar, terrible geometry inside and outside.



Halfway down the cliff, Gino thought that the ladder was beginning to slip from where he had fastened it to the crash barrier. He looked up through the darkness before things started to happen. There was the sound of a crash, of tearing metal and one of the antique cars that littered the New Zealand roads flipped over into the void above him as if it were in slow motion, headlights whirling as it fell, broken metal from the shattered crash barrier behind it.

The narrow caving ladder began to coil onto itself as it collapsed and Gino realised that he was falling. Better than from the top. He hoped that the splash would not scare off his Master, but didn't worry about disentangling himself from the ladder. He held his mask on his face and the weight of the tank pulled him in backwards, the wet suit taking most of the sting out of the hard impact. The lake's black and sable and silver expanded out to infinity to swallow him as he fell, welcoming him into its comforting embrace.

Underwater he heard the sound of the sinking car, the very close-by impact of parts of the railing in a staccato shower, and to his ears alone, a deeper, more ancient call that came from the very deepest point of the lake, irresistibly drawing him, a summons.

Behind was the burning house that had cremated two bodies, one with a smashed throat, the other with a spear sticking grotesquely from its gut, the stolen car, an empty oil drum by the side of Devil's Bluff and a caving ladder that had lain forgotten under a shallow layer of neglect in Strathmore's garage. In the front seat of the car was the empty whiskey bottle that had helped him forget the once intertwined bodies that were now inseparable ashes.

She had paid for betraying him. The books were balanced between them. He left the world of men vindicated and righteous for the first time since he had entered it.

Gino took the torch from his spare belt and ascended to the surface to look for debris from the car. There was none bar a small slick. The sacrifice had been made and his master would hopefully be pleased. Perhaps He would even welcome him into His own sanctuary, away from those who had scorned, tricked and hurt Gino. Some of the slick would have come from the tyres of the wreck that was still shy of the bottom, for he had prepared the offering by spreading Strathmore's spare oil on the hairpin

turn of the precipice. He hoped its contents, succulent little morsels, would be enough to satisfy His hunger.

Again Gino descended into the bowels of the lake, in search of the Monster, torch before him, following the rock's harsh outline and stabbing, searching for the reassuring bulk of the Behemoth who needed no name, the smooth grey hide, the huge paddle flippers, the long serpentine neck, the small head with the teeth that would grant him succour and release.

At last, the effects of the high pressure and the drugs charging roughshod through his system blacked him out and the dropped torch fell before him, summoning Him forth in welcome.

To Gino's mangled mind, twisted by the tides of jealousy and paranoia, the dancing beam chiselled the dreambeast from the waterbourne sediments that worsening weather had stirred, giving them substance where before they had none.

As he lost consciousness and coasted to oblivion, Gino moaned a hissing sound of satiation, of appeasement as his Master closed in on him at last, the enormous body coming for him alone, His new disciple, coming for him out of that all-enveloping darkness and murk to bear him away.

Up above, another car slid off the road and tumbled into the lake. Parents at farms along the road were wondering why the kids were so late home from the disco and the cinema.

The water doused ashes of the house fire above the post office were being trodden by firemen wearing oilskins seeking the cause of the blaze.

The receptionist was asleep in her lover's bed. The bartender was drunk. A thief, making the rounds, closed an unlocked hotel door, shone a pencil torch around and counted himself lucky as he held the amber jewel in his palm, slowly closed his fingers on the creature trapped eternally within.

