

L i f e f o r m T h r e e
R o z M o r r i s

‘Beautifully written, meaningful, top-drawer storytelling.
An extraordinary novel in the tradition of great old-school
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LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY AUTHORS

Misty woods; abandoned towns; secrets in the landscape;
a forbidden life by night; the scent of bygone days; a past that
lies below the surface; and a door in a dream that seems
to hold the answers.

Paftoo is a ‘bod’; made to serve. He is a groundsman in the last
remaining countryside estate, once known as Harkaway Hall
and now a theme park. Paftoo holds scattered memories of the
old days but they are regularly deleted to keep him productive.

When he starts to have dreams of the Lost Lands past, Paftoo is
thrown into a nocturnal battle for his memories, his soul and
his cherished connection with Lifeform Three.

‘I really didn’t want this book to end; it’s that good’
BUILD ANOTHER BOOKCASE

This edition includes an appendix of reading group questions.

ALSO BY ROZ MORRIS

fiction

My Memories of a Future Life

non-fiction

*Nail Your Novel: Why Writers Abandon Books and How
You Can Draft, Fix and Finish With Confidence*

*Nail Your Novel: Write Characters Who'll Keep
Readers Enthralled*

Roz Morris lives in London. She began her fiction career by ghostwriting novels for bestselling authors and is now coming into the daylight with novels of her own. She is also an editor and writing coach, and the author of the acclaimed *Nail Your Novel* series.

Lifeform Three is her second novel under her real name.

Praise for Roz's first novel, *My Memories of a Future Life*:

‘Ambitious... Enthralling’

Critical Mass

‘A stunning achievement... Reminded me of Doris Lessing, though Morris is much more readable’

Amazon Top 500 Reviewer

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l i f e f o r m

t h r e e

R O Z M O R R I S

t h a n k s

For advice, support and wise counsel, to
Piers Blofeld, Maurice Lyon, Peter Snell, John and
Liz Whitbourn, Porter Anderson, Frazer Payne
and most of all to my husband, Dave Morris.
And to Byron, the ancestor of Pea.

1

Paftoo leads the horse towards the shelter. He can feel the storm is coming.

The horse knows it too. He jostles at Paftoo's shoulder, jerking his head like a dog driven mad by fleas. When thunder and lightning glower in the clouds, the world is full of threats. They murmur to his nerves from the rustling hedge, the shadowed grass and the brooding sky.

On the horse's front leg is a cut. Blood is trickling into his chestnut fur, which is mostly plastered in mud. Paftoo needs to hose it and check it's not deep – if the horse will let him. He's just as likely to swipe at Paftoo's head with an irritated hoof.

The shelter is a lorry parked in the field, its back door down like a drawbridge. Once they're inside, the horse will be calmer.

If he'll go in. Horses are not known for being logical.

A gust of wind hisses through the trees. A bin tips over and clatters along the road. It's not even close but the horse bounds forwards, sure it is coming to kill him. Paftoo is ready and tugs on the halter. It's thin as a thread,

home-made from knotted twine, but the horse quietens, reminded his protector is there.

‘Whoa there, fella. We’ll get you indoors, then everything will be fine.’

The next second, the horse kicks in fury. He tears the leadrope out of Paftoo’s hands and explodes into a gallop, streaking away up the field. Just as abruptly he halts, pivots round and stares with accusing, glossy eyes.

A car is driving across the grass, bumping on its axles. Music thuds and whines from its open windows.

The visitors are not supposed to drive into the fields. It upsets the animals. Especially this one.

Paftoo runs to the car, waving. ‘Excuse me, please would you leave the field?’

Brakes squeak. The car stops. A head in a baseball cap pops out of the window. Small eyes squint at Paftoo. ‘Why?’

‘Because I need to get the horse in the shelter and you’re scaring him.’

‘We can go wherever we like, can’t we? I thought that was the point.’ The man doesn’t wait to be told if he can or can’t. He drives on, further into the field.

Up in the clouds there is a dim flash, then a growl of thunder. The storm is nearly overhead. The horse shivers and bolts away.

Paftoo turns and runs after him.

The next moment Paftoo sees a vast vein of lightning, right in front of him. Then he can’t see anything. There is only whiteness, even inside his eyelids. Slowly, the whiteness turns dark, as though it was always that way. In his ears is a silence as profound as snow.

The visitors in the car do stop then. Dad, in baseball

cap, Mum and five-year-old Freddy, out for a day in the country park. They stare at the figure that stands a few yards in front of them. He is thin and angular, with purple-black hair, now straggled in the rain.

His slender limbs glow extraordinary blue for a few seconds, then cool. His red waistcoat bears a smoking burn on one side, high on the chest: the kiss of the lightning.

Freddy's game lies bleeping on the seat as it carries on playing without him. Freddy stares at Paftoo. He whispers: 'Is he all right?'

'Oh you don't need to worry about that,' says Dad, and takes a picture. 'It's only one of those bods.'

Tired of streets? Ask your podcar to find The Lost Lands of Harkaway Hall.

Discover an estate that kept its secrets for more than a century – a perfect valley of trees, streams, lakes and meadows. Teach your children about the old countryside. Make friends with lifeforms as they roam and play – cows, sheep and horses, just as they were in olden times. Cruise in your own personal tour car with fully interactive facilities. Try a footpath. Chill out in our five-star cafés. Browse our galleries for the ideal gift – there’s something for everyone!

The Lost Lands of Harkaway Hall – a hidden valley of the past, preserved for ever, for you to explore.

Paftoo is at work, cleaning the meadows for the day’s Intrepid Guests (visitors). The lifeform 4s (cows) and lifeform 3s (horses) have stomped through the grass by the hayricks and water troughs and churned it to mud. They have also contributed brown substances of their own.

Paftoo is hoovering the field, riding along on a ma-

chine that blasts water onto the grass and sucks it clean. It's slow going. The field is the size of several football pitches, if football pitches were ever sited on slopes.

He reaches the hedge and pauses. He has to turn and clean the next strip but he's forgotten which way he's already done. Each lap takes so long that he's fallen into a daze.

Should he go left or right? He looks back at the acres of pale winter grass. Another bod is further down the hill, also chugging along on a poover. His back is straight, his chin lifted; a model of determination and focus.

Paftoo's own machine ticks and slurps. He chooses left and starts back down the field. The grass in front of him is glistening and rather clean. He has already hoovered this strip. Maybe more than once.

Five lifeform 4s watch from a distance, flicking their tails and rotating cud in their jaws.

Many lengths later, Paftoo meets the other bod in the middle. At last he can stop.

The bod points to his dashboard and grins. 'Nearly a quarter of a tonne cleared from that one.' Above his head is a glowing cloud that contains text. *I helped clear 0.24 tonnes of dung this morning!* He looks perfectly delighted with it all.

Paftoo notices that he has his own cloud, which bears similar news. He doesn't feel as thrilled about it as the other bod, but he manages a smile.

'I notice you did a few strips twice,' says the bod. 'That's not efficient. Are you finding this hard?'

'Just getting used to it,' says Paftoo.

'Let's hope you do better with the next one,' says the bod. He turns his poover for the gate.

Paftoo follows him. The rear half of the vehicle is a giant blue bag. With dismay, Paftoo sees it is nowhere near full. Emptying the machines would at least be a break. There is no hope of stopping yet.

As Paftoo drives out of the gates, the lifeform 4s amble back to the troughs. Their sharp feet chop the cleaned area to slurry, which they garnish with fresh dollops of steaming dung.

Paftoo and the other bod slosh into another enormous field. They are going to do this again. And after that, they will do it yet again.

At last the poovers can be emptied. On the way to the maintenance sheds, the other bod is boasting about his scores. Paftoo can only nod; he has had quite enough. All he has heard for hours is the rattling slurp of his machine and it has put him half to sleep.

The other bods have already arrived. Their skinny limbs look fragile as they drag hoses to their machines. Paftoo parks in a free space and does the same.

Behind him, a bod says: 'Smoke in the barn. Fire, maybe.'

Paftoo looks round. Behind a row of parked tractors is the hay barn. It is emitting a greyish haze, even though the sky is clear and cloudless.

'I'll get help,' says another bod. He sprints away, purple hair bouncing in the morning sun.

Paftoo pulls the barn door open. Inside, the smoke is thick. He waves it away and sees the barn has been used for a picnic, even though Intrepid Guests are not supposed to go in there. Hay bales have been arranged as a table and

benches. Scattered on them are snack wrappers and instant-heating cups. One of the cups is now singeing a bale and the hay is smoking.

Paftoo runs to a water trough and tries to pull it to the barn. It doesn't budge. He calls: 'Someone help me with this.'

The bods don't seem to hear him. One climbs onto a tractor, pulls a lever to start the engine and smiles with satisfaction. Several others are standing at a rack of pitchforks, considering which ones to take.

'Um,' says Paftoo, 'the fire?'

The smoke is now thick. The hay is glinting red, like the lit end of a cigarette. The bods take tools and start walking out of the yard to their next job.

Paftoo snatches a fork from one of them and sprints into the barn. He stabs the smoking bale, hauls it out and hefts it into the tank. It hits the water with a heavy splash.

Two bods scoot backwards as water slops over their feet. The bale belches smoke and steam. The extinguished cup zooms around the water, then sinks with a gurgle.

The bods look at their splashed boots, then at Paftoo.

On tractors and by the trough, a total of eight bods are glaring at him. With their rangy pale limbs, big eyes and playful mops of hair they are identical as a row of matches. And they are all looking identically annoyed with Paftoo.

'It's not our job to put out the fire,' says one bod.

'That water's for washing the vehicles,' says another.

Paftoo says: 'But the whole barn would have burned. The machines are in there. The hay for the lifeforms.'

'The Dispose bods are bringing the proper equipment,' says another bod.

Paftoo can see they are. A small truck is speeding along the road, crewed by figures in black jumpsuits, in ready positions. But a fire is a fire. Was he really supposed to leave it?

The bod on the tractor frowns. 'So what are we going to tell the Dispose bods?'

To Paftoo, the answer is simple. Tell them they stopped the barn burning down. But it's clear the others have heard quite enough from him.

A bod steps forwards and retrieves the fork from the steaming hay. 'I'm worried about you, Paftoo. I think something has gone wrong with your instructions. When fires or other mishaps occur, the Dispose bods deal with them. We don't. Our job is to redo the fields.'

'We'll have to say it wasn't us,' says another bod. He walks to a tractor.

And so the matter is settled. Tools are collected. Vehicles are started.

Next to Paftoo, a bod reaches to take a fork. Paftoo is in the way so he passes it to him. The bod stares past him as though he isn't there and takes another from the rack. He doesn't speak to Paftoo. Neither do any of the others.

Finally, the sun starts to set. The sky is darkening and the clouds are tipped with orange. Soon it will be night.

Paftoo feels such relief. He is looking forward to night. That's when they switch off.

He is still tidying the fields, but now he is scooping fallen leaves off the grass. With him is another bod.

His name is Pafnine and at least he isn't being surly like the others. He's chatting and also trying to hum at the

same time. This makes his conversation slow, as though he is explaining a procedure to a person who keeps getting everything wrong. It slows down his work too, prolonging the agony.

‘Today we have redone one-point-four tonnes of sweepings. Hmmm hmmm hmmm. Isn’t that good?’

‘Yes,’ says Paftoo, although he is too weary to feel anything about it; let alone good.

Pafnine’s cloud is glowing as it updates his haul of leaves. ‘We all, hmmm hmmm, cleared a tonne and a half of dung today. Tomorrow we might hit a tonne-point-six.’

Paftoo wishes Pafnine wouldn’t try to chat. The humming is bad enough.

The sun is now a bright band narrowing on the horizon. It’s been a while since Paftoo saw any Intrepid Guests. They must all have left. He leans on his shovel. Since Pafnine is being friendly, he says: ‘Why don’t we go to the top of that hill? Before night we can watch the sunset.’

Pafnine dumps a heap of leaves in the trailer. ‘There’s five minutes yet. Think of how much we can pick up. Hmm hmmm hmm.’ He stumps back to get more. Just as enthusiastic.

Paftoo looks up. The branches lean over the field, fine as black lace. The air is speckled with drifting leaves. As fast as they are cleared, more are falling.

‘Pafnine,’ he calls, ‘you know what we should do? If we trim those branches they won’t drop leaves in the field.’

Pafnine pulls the rake with such vigour it carves grooves into the grass. ‘Paftoo, I’ve told the others you didn’t mean to act out of turn this morning. So no one will mention again what happened with the fire.’

Act out of turn? Paftoo must swallow what he wants to say. He did what he thought was right. But the other bods have clearly had a discussion about it.

‘We’re going to give you a second chance,’ says Pafnine, and stomps away to deposit another load.

A second chance. That sounds bad, in a good way. Mainly bad, though. ‘Thank you,’ says Paftoo.

‘And just to let you know, we’re not trimming trees today. We’re clearing up leaves. Hmm hmm hmm.’

That tune again. It’s the Harkawaday Loyal Friends song. Earlier they had to link arms and sing it to Intrepid Guests. Pafnine has been humming it ever since.

Paftoo tips another load into the trailer. When he returns, the grass is spotted with as many new leaves as he has just cleared. And there must be thousands more in the trees above.

A hundred and twenty more shovels. Paftoo counts them, because he needs something to think about. Perhaps that’s how the others tolerate it; they simply concentrate.

Pretty soon, he can’t bear to concentrate.

Does anyone else find this hard? Will tomorrow be exactly the same or will they do something else? What did they do yesterday?

He doesn’t remember a yesterday. Before today there is nothing in his memory at all.

The very earliest moment he remembers is when he opened his eyes this morning.

He was standing in a bare, bright room with a crowd of other bods. One bod blinked his big eyes as though being able to see was a surprise. One of them shuddered and shook his purple-black hair. One said: ‘How do you do?’ and another said: ‘What?’

A hissing noise started above their heads. Hot chemicals whooshed down from the ceiling. When that happened, Paftoo knew what to do, and so did all the others. They washed themselves.

This was when Paftoo understood. There had been a group sharing. Their minds had been wiped and updated. Now they were to scrub off their old costumes.

In such a cramped space, showering was a contorted business. Lifted elbows and thrusting arms made it hard for Paftoo to see if he was doing a thorough job. But whenever he glanced down, there was a mark that wouldn't wash away. Eventually he got a bit of space and had a good look.

There it was. High on his chest. A jagged black streak.

Around him, the other bods' costumes were sliding off in sticky fragments. No one else had a mark like this. How he got it, he didn't know; that knowledge had vanished in the sharing. It wasn't oil or woodstain. It seemed to be branded into his body. And it wasn't coming off.

When the others finished, he gave up. Perhaps it didn't matter.

Paftoo left the sharing suite with a squirt of paint, some splodges of glue and scraps of material to make a T-shirt and shorts. He followed the other bods into the winter morning. Their wet boots made tracks across the concrete forecourt. Left-right, left-right: 9, 9: that was Pafnine. 7, 7: Pafseven. Paftoo stamped his feet a couple of times and leaped aside to inspect the result. 2, 2.

That was when he remembered his own name. Paftoo. And his job. Park Asset Field Redo bod.

Paftoo wrests his mind back to the spade in his hands. Shovel the leaves; don't think. Hum a tune. That's

the way to make it easier. A bod's life is redoing. Because all the time, the Lost Lands are being undone. By the lifeforms, the rain, the wind, the seasons that strip the trees in autumn and make them grow like nonsense in the spring. And by the Intrepid Guests, who drive where they shouldn't, break the fences, spread litter and set fire to the barn.

Paftoo has counted seventy-four more loads when the photosynthesisers in his skin stop receiving power. He settles on the floor with his back against the wheel of the trailer. What a relief.

Beside him, Pafnine kneels and puts his scoop down.

Paftoo says: 'Tomorrow will we do anything else? As well as all this?'

'Oh plenty,' says Pafnine. 'We've got our targets.'

Paftoo brightens. 'New targets?'

'No; the same targets.'

Paftoo wishes he hadn't asked.

'That's why sharings are so good,' says Pafnine. 'They keep us focused. You'll get the hang of it, Paftoo, don't worry.' He nods his head forwards and becomes still.

Paftoo looks up into the inky sky. Get the hang of it. Today he's put out a fire, made himself unpopular and he's got a mark that won't wash off.

He doesn't feel like he'll get the hang of it at all.

All around the park, the Redo bods are stopping. Night mode is like sleep, but the bods don't go to beds or even to a sleeping house. To provide such places would waste space. To get there would waste working time. They halt their vehicles or drop their tools and sink into their inner circuits. Whether it rains, snows or blows a gale, they will wait where they are until morning.

As the bods become still, the night settles in. A breeze rustles through the ancient trees.

If the trees had memories they would tell so much.

Harkaway Hall was once a private estate with a grand house. Eventually it fell empty. In time, the roof collapsed, leaving the high gables as forlorn triangles pointing at the sky. Trees spread their roots through the gardens like rummaging hands. Inch by inch, they rumpled the lawns and tilted up the terraces, until they reached the house and pushed the walls down.

Outside the estate, the landscape changed too. The sea levels rose. Once, people had liked to live on the coast or by a river, but now the waves came and licked their

homes away. The government built flood walls and the population retreated inland. They needed new cities, factories, farms and power stations. Places to live. Bypasses to drive there more directly. Between the roofs and roads, there was no room for countryside.

People sometimes visited the abandoned towns outside the flood walls. But the beaches had gone. Instead there were mudflats and marshes. The romantic sea was spoiled by the spiny remains of drowned towns: spires; roofs; the tops of office blocks with holed windows and skeleton cellphone masts. A nature documentary called them the Marches and that became the name. After a time, nobody ventured beyond the flood walls.

Then somebody died and the keys to wild, forgotten Harkaway Hall were passed to new owners. Unsuspecting, they unlocked the gates.

They found a thousand acres of valleys, forests and streams.

Deep in one of the woods were traces of the vanished rooms. A toe could dig into the earth and touch the marble tiles of the grand hall or the parquet floor of the ballroom, now soft as cake. You could push through the hollow centre of a holly bush and find a wall with a fireplace as tall as a doorway, shattered and shifting with the trees.

‘This place is like a museum,’ somebody said, and so a museum was built. Research was done. In the old days when Harkaway Hall was a working estate, it used to keep livestock. So sheep, cows and horses were captured (after a struggle) from the Marches and brought to the fields.

The Lost Lands was open for business.

The earliest visitors liked to explore the hills and ruins on foot. But now they greatly prefer the all-terrain

tour cars, with interactive features for the full park experience.

Meanwhile, the Lost Lands management takes keen interest in the punters. From the moment they arrive, their smart and lovely Pebble phones are scanned to discover all the things they like. What snacks and souvenirs they might buy. Which adverts from sponsors they will find funny, cool or wise enough to share with friends. Which friend has a birthday soon and the advert to suggest the perfect present. Harkaway Hall isn't any old day out. It's personally tailored.

In the ancient fields, under the centenarian trees, the bods stand or sit with heads bowed, totally still. They won't stir until the sun returns at dawn. They look like Manga characters, with slender limbs, eager eyes and indigo mop-pet hair. The Intrepid Guests helped design them, when the Lost Lands secretly spied on their favourite films, TV and celebrities.

In Harkaway Hall, even the Intrepid Guests are sharing.

Paftoo closes his eyes. It begins to rain. He feels it on his head and shoulders. He knows the leaves are still falling and that tomorrow he will be clearing them up. He wishes he wasn't thinking about that.

In fact, now it is night he shouldn't be thinking at all. Beside him, Pafnine is already inert.

Paftoo closes his eyes. Bring on the blank oblivion.

But he does not get it.

First he hears sounds. Urgent and deep, like a heart-beat in the ground. Then he sees them. Horses, flashing across the green hills in glorious gallop. Necks reaching, tails streaming. Riders on their backs, urging them faster.

Paftoo opens his eyes. The horses vanish. There is

only darkness, hushed and still. He is in the grey field, leaning against the trailer.

He is supposed to stop at night. What just happened to him?

The rain continues to tread on him with tiny feet.

What did he just see? Will it happen again?

Slowly, Paftoo closes his eyes.

Yes. The horses are still there. They pelt flank to flank through a field, bound over hedges, fences, ditches. Slender legs gather up the miles and throw them out behind. Incredibly, Paftoo is not on the ground, but sitting on a horse's back. White foam flies from its mouth. The rhythm of its stride is in Paftoo's body, so rapid and light it is as if the horse does not use legs but glides on wings.

They plunge through a wood. Branches whip and snag at his legs. Paftoo glimpses a shape – something oblong in the shadows of the trees. The horse leaps sideways, spooked, leaving Paftoo in the air. Then he is on the ground, shaking his head.

He can see the shape that scared his horse – a door, in the earth bank. He scrambles up. The hoofbeats are drumming into the distance. Should he follow the horses? Or was he meant to find this door?

Paftoo snaps his eyes open. The wood and the horses disappear. He is on an open hill with a heaped trailer and a dozing bod.

He listens, straining for a remnant of the surprising thing that is happening in his closed eyes. He catches the metallic hum of traffic, a long way off. That's normal. He looks hard into the distance. Far away is a smudge of lights; of sprawling cities and crawling cars, the unbroken urban horizon beyond the Lost Lands. Nearer are winking lights

in the sky, like red stars. They are the tops of the electronic wands that boost the signals from Pebble phones. From the adjacent field comes a low bellow from a lifeform 4.

What is happening? Why does he seem to be in two places? When he closes his eyes, he gallops a horse over the hills. He opens them and he is in the dark, drizzling field and nothing has changed.

Paftoo doesn't know what a dream is. All he knows is that he is supposed to turn off at night.

Has Pafnine stopped?

Pafnine is still kneeling, exactly where he dropped. Head down, folded into sleep like a bat (lifeform 100).

Paftoo gets onto all fours and peers at him. Is the dream happening to him too? Will Pafnine open his eyes in a moment and wonder what's going on?

Pafnine is as still as a nail. Paftoo nudges him. He capsizes and hits the ground with a thud.

'Sorry,' squeaks Paftoo and jumps to his feet.

If someone had knocked Paftoo over, he would have woken up. But Pafnine doesn't. He lies on his side like a toppled ornament, his legs still tucked under him, so that he looks like a seat. Paftoo prods him again, harder. No, he really is gone. Paftoo hauls the bod upright and repositions him. Leaves have stuck to the side of Pafnine's face and down his arm. Paftoo peels them away.

With Pafnine back as he should be, Paftoo settles back against the trailer, closes his eyes – and lets the horses claim him.

As the sunlight creeps in from the east, Paftoo hears a noise like sound leaking from headphones. He opens his eyes and the horses are gone.

Beside him, Pafnine is changing. His skin is softening. He is reactivating.

Just a minute ago, Pafnine was totally still. Push him over and his legs, arms and head would stay exactly as they were, as fixed as the tractor and trailer. Now he has life; his face and limbs move by themselves. Watching the change makes Paftoo feel weird.

There's something else weird. Nestled on Pafnine's right ear is a snail (lifeform 329). A long one. Its body is stretched out of the shell and hooked over Pafnine's pinna like a spectacle end. It is flexing in the sunshine like a rude tongue. It must have hitched a ride when Paftoo pushed him over.

Pafnine's eyes open. He yawns, a way of activating his face mechanisms. The snail behind his ear twitches its horns and turns its head.

'Hold still,' says Paftoo and grabs for Pafnine's ear.

Pafnine dodges, grasps Paftoo's nose, tweaks it hard and grins. He obviously thinks it's a game, and is going to reciprocate with brutal gusto. Paftoo grins back. Perhaps this will make Pafnine stop.

Pafnine lets go and gives Paftoo a backslap that sets him staggering. 'Come on. HmMMM hmMM.' He gathers his tools and tosses them into the trailer on top of the heaped leaves.

More leaves have fallen in the night, of course. The grass is deep in them. Even the tractor is covered. Paftoo will have to do the redoing all over again.

But not now. A green tour car is cruising along the cleft of the valley. Mittened hands are aiming Pebbles out of the windows, taking pictures. The bods must greet these first Intrepid Guests. Because happy guests might buy things in the gift shop and cafés.

Two other bods are already closing in, speeding down the slope on a tractor frosted with dew. They jump off and begin a slick dance routine on the verge. Pafnine sprints down the hill, elbows going like pistons, and Paftoo races after him. They join the line and pick up the moves.

At first the Intrepid Guests ignore them and drive on, but as the four bods shrug, moonwalk and spin, they turn their heads. The bods are performing a witty pastiche of their favourite video. Soon the Intrepid Guests are leaning out and filming them, along with the message about fresh muffins in the Sundeck Café.

As Paftoo dances, data swims at him from the Intrepid Guests. Favourite music and films, key words in messages to friends. Paftoo tries to cling to the visions he saw in the night. They are slipping already. The tussocky grass beyond the car rewhispers his thrilling, thundering dream.