

# THE PARTY LINE

By R. G. CARTER.

Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 2014

## 1. *Introduction.*

“Walter Moody did not chastise himself for intrusions upon other people’s privacy, and nor did he see any reason to confess them. His mind was of the most phlegmatic sort, cool in its private applications, quick and excessively rational; he possessed a fault common to those of high intelligence, however, which was that he tended to regard the gift of his intellect as a licence of a kind, by whose rarified authority he was protected, in all circumstances, from ever behaving ill.”

– Eleanor Catton (2013). *The Luminaries: A Novel*. First edition. New York: Little, Brown and Company, p. 466

In a darkened room, a network of transmission and reception struggles to operate, enabled by an overly engineered set of modular components.

An array of speakers coupled with tiny amplifiers forms a system of distribution; micro-controllers drive electro-magnetic switches in a vague irrational logic.

A telephone dial identifies a generational gap, and provides an interface to an unseen communication channel, while electrical motors are synchronised with a speaker, giving voice to the 50Hz oscillation of the power supply.

A small wooden box speaks endlessly but ignores completely. A game of command and control visualises the individual to the point of anatomical objectivity. Tapes turn. Needles dance.

The maverick academic, specialising in generalities; a radio technician, perception shaped by remote atmospheric conditions; a population of customers, their intimate moments distilled from a mountain of meta-data; these are the subscribers to the Party Line.

## 2. *The Dead Letter.*

This tiny room with the exposed concrete walls.

Plastic tubes rise from the floor as geometric snakes; their goals, light switches, power sockets and smoke detectors. Courses of concrete still retain in relief, the imprint of the rough-sawn timbers that formed them; punctured holes, fixtures now absent, but purposeful in their arrangement.

This table belonged to my mentor, the man who taught me. The thin layer of varnish, made plastic by the years, keeps the imprint of my cup; filled an hour ago with scalding liquid, it has given up the reassuring breath of steam; retaining some uneasy adhesion with my working surface.

That surface, pitted and layered, the build up of years, provides plenty of distractions; to pick clean the wooden boards.

The usual stack of envelopes looms at the edge of the desk. Obliterated post marks, indecipherable handwriting, disintegrated postal materials of all kinds. Where possible, I am appointed to direct the finger of blame. Toward the anonymous sender, or to the mechanisms of the system. Packages melted as if roasted in the oven, papers thin with wear; creased and brittle, water-logged, sodden and falling apart in my hands. Only in the most serious of circumstances are we permitted to open the mail.

I hear the footsteps of the unmistakable Professor Raptor nearing my door; the only professor working for New Zealand Post. His field of research never made clear to me; we've come to accept his designation, conveying as it does, an unrivalled commitment and passion for his work.

It's easy to get bored at the *Dead Letter Office*,\* but the presence of the professor lends a comforting routine, an easy rhythm to the day. Everything is a puzzle, a personal history, a tragic event. The people express to us their aggregated humanity; a series of koans, mysteries for our times. These are not problems of logical thought, but challenges to our facilities of interpretation. On this last point Professor Raptor placed particular emphasis. Together, toward this lofty goal, we proceed.

He enters the room and firmly rests his palm on my shoulder, his unspoken command to report.

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\*The official destination of undeliverable mail.

'I've a feeling I've seen this hand before. There is a legible sender address.'

'Read it!' he commands, organising his glasses.

I read carefully the address, feeling a hint of recognition.

'Fishing!' exclaims Raptor.

'It's the third one this month! We've got a collector on our hands, trying to get hold of some of our marks!'

'What should I do?'

'Frank it! Return it! Can't have them thinking we're not doing our job!'

'Right away...'

'Now about that crate in the dock. The one that looks as if it's got a nuclear reactor in it or something? Get me the crowbar, we're opening it up!'

### 3. *The Old Man and the Sea.*

'There isn't any symbolysm (sic). The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The shark are all sharks no better and no worse. All the symbolism people say is shit. What goes beyond is what you see beyond when you know.\*'

I was always quite excited around the time of the month when the new National Geographic appeared in our mailbox. My Uncle, by his own admission a *fish man*, had always been involved with the sea in some way. It was his extended stay at our house that brought the benefit of this most interesting and colourful magazine.

Returning from the box I impatiently began tearing open the plastic envelope.

He was quick to remind me,

'Watch out for the map! *Don't drop the map!*'

Several months before, in my haste, I had accidentally allowed *The Earth's Fractured Surface* to fall helplessly into a puddle. Upon opening the sodden document, the creases tore a window in the northern half of

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\* Hemingway commenting on interpretations of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Ernest Hemingway and Larry W Phillips (1985). *Ernest Hemingway on writing*. London: Granada.

the eurasian plate, and permanently discoloured most of the southern pacific.

Careful not to repeat this traumatic event, I carried the book consciously, while examining the cover with excitement. What I saw confused me. This month the picture was obscured with a large square of black plastic.

To my Uncle,  
'What's this?'

'I'll show you. It's the songs of the whales.'\*

Removing the square from it's cover he placed it on the turntable, another record underneath providing the necessary flat surface. Switching the speed to  $33\frac{1}{3}$  he dropped the needle onto the outside track. Suddenly deafened by a burst of surface noise and rumbling gravel he laughed as I jumped. Adjusting the volume we were able to make out the opening pulses of sound.

I took the record with me to bed that evening, playing it on my small toy record player as I drifted off to sleep.



Walking along the lava-sculpted shoreline is good for your feet. After a while the discomfort eased, and callouses started to form. In the end I found it very comfortable. Walking along the rocks; the gently abrasive feeling on my soles and arches.

On a day like this it would be a crime not to swim; and with no-one else around, who needs togs anyway?

There seems to be some synesthetic-memory connection between the feeling of cool water slowly lapping up your body, and the submerged sounds of the sea. That first dive under; entry into a new world where sound seems to live inside you.

The outboard motor; so close as the craft passes the point. Everything travels for miles underwater. I'm listening... wondering who else I can hear; who can hear me?

It's hot enough to shake yourself dry like a dog! I'm sitting on the rock under the cliff-voices. Probably time to get dressed.

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\* *Songs Of The Humpback Whale* (1979).

I wander out over the black lava; the prickly barnacles surrounding the pools. The continuous lapping of the sea. Poking at anemones, feeling their rough little arms grip my finger tip.

Standing on that point, a rush of washing waters; a massive curved fin breaking the surface; the dark shiny body pushing the waves aside; a bursting of enormous outward breath, and a gasp, drawing into massive lungs.

The black shape smoothly submerged as quietly as it had appeared.

#### 4. *An Interview with Andy Warhol.*

In September 2014 I spoke with Andy Warhol; visiting New Zealand as a guest of Aotearoa Digital Arts Network (ADA),\* a community of New Zealand artists who identify with digital culture. Still creatively active at age 86, I was interested in Warhol's view of the current state of digital art—arguably a pejorative term.

*Robert Carter:* In a way you've already answered my first question, which was to be: 'What's your favourite piece of digital technology?' You haven't stopped filming since I arrived!

*Andy Warhol:* Well, yeah. It's so easy and I don't have to put much thought into it.

[Composing an image with his phone]

*RC:* I remember clearly seeing an interview you did back in 1986. You were working on a portrait of Dolly Parton on one of the first Amiga computers.† Would you say that was your introduction to what could be called *digital art*?

*AW:* Sure, it was the first time I'd done it myself. I had heard of people doing stuff with computers before that but it always seemed like you had to ask permission or something. That's what was so great about the Amiga computer, I could just start painting and do it myself. Oh wow you have such small cars here.

*RC:* You recently collaborated with artist Rafaël Rosendaal‡ on a number of pieces of internet art. Is there anything particular about

\*ADA. URL: <http://www.ada.net.nz/> (visited on 09/25/2014).

†Kenneth Goldsmith, Reva Wolf, and Wayne Koestenbaum, eds. (2004). *I'll be your mirror: the selected Andy Warhol interviews: 1962-1987*. 1st Carroll & Graf ed. New York: Carroll & Graf, p. 333.

‡Rafaël Rosendaal (2014). *sink slow .com by rafaël rosendaal, 2014*. URL: <http://www.sinkslow.com/> (visited on 10/21/2014).

Rozendaal's work that sparked your imagination?

AW: Oh yeah, Rafaël is so great. He was one of the first people to really commercialise internet art. When I saw the way he used the web page name as a property; as the mark of ownership, that was so cool. Raphael does great work, his simple stuff is the best.

RC: Do you make any distinction between digital art and net art?

AW: No.

RC: Do either of those terms apply to your recent work?

AW: Oh no.

[Playing with the phone, absorbed in the process of sending a Snapchat message]

AW: Say *Ahtearoa!*

RC: Aotearoa.

AW: Great. Just great.

RC: You obviously like Snapchat, how do you relate to other social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and the like.

AW: Oh I really like them. You can create a new persona for yourself every day. But I don't really think they are *social*. That's why I don't spend a lot of time on line. I like to be with people.

RC: Have you heard of the moth that drinks the tears of sleeping birds?\*

AW: Is that a meme or something?

RC: Perhaps it is, but it struck me as a great piece of imagery.

[Showing AW image on phone]

AW: Oh wow, that's so great! You can even see it's little tongue going into the birds eye!

RC: I find it amazing that today these images can achieve such momentum that they zoom across the internet and become part of so many people's conciseness in a relatively short time. This seems so different from the first factory days.

AW: Sure it is.

RC: Yet, it seemed there was a similar kind of cultural explosion that accompanied the pop art movement.

AW: Oh yeah. It was just a local group of kids who did their thing. And I documented it.

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\*R. Hilgartner et al. (2007). "Malagasy birds as hosts for eye-frequenting moths". en. In: *Biology Letters* 3.2, pp. 117–120.

RC: It sounds like you're distancing yourself from that part of your life.

AW: [Continuing to shoot video with phone]

People write stuff. I made the films, I still love the films. On the internet documentation is everything.

RC: There's been a lot of talk lately about mass surveillance, spying and so on. Does that bother you?

AW: Oh no, it's better this way; at least you don't have some creep waiting outside your apartment at three o'clock in the morning like in the 50s.

### 5. *A Public Service.*

You have to be very careful. It can strike at any time. The old lady who lives behind the big kauri, half way down lovers' lane; she told me about her experiences. It wasn't new to me; she described things in so much detail. I had forgotten. The heat; that initial feeling of heat. You're thinking: 'Where is that *heat* coming from?'

'Fire risk!'

Ducks think they're safe; or perhaps ignorance is bliss. Just because you spend all day in the water doesn't make you immune. Bob Harvey swum across the heads; he was a lifesaver you know. He still felt it; struggles with it privately; the heat. Not even those rushing waters could cool it down.

'Fire risk!'

Peter's another one. It's not really surprising when you think about it. I mean, they're called *Midnight Oil* right? '*Burning the midnight oil!*' It was only when he got into government that I started to understand the darker side of it. The mine. The uranium. The fire that invisibly burns inside. Nobody sees how it burns until it's too late. Just like Chernobyl.

'Fire risk! You can't see it but it's there!'

Try to cover it all up. That's what they did. It's the same wherever you go. That chimney. It looms over us day and night. They say it's an incinerator. Burns medical waste. Tumours. The sound of frying fat and roasting skin; falling off the bone.

'Stop.'

Did I say that out loud? You know sometimes there is a voice that holds you back? In restraint. Restrained. You can't change the nature

of a stone by calling it a rose. *You can't!* They built that thing there; that towering monument to the process. Combustion; and offering up to heat and dust; vapours, gasses, fumes, molecules and energy. Half lives and isotopes. Heavy water.

'Fire risk!'

It's all I can do to prevent it happening again. Just like in the 90's. Every ten years it seems. A cycle of life. Except Peter, Bob, Marie, and the others who know something about it; who've seen the results...

I made this speaker from cardboard. It's painted black to absorb the sunlight. I charge it up in the sun as I'm walking around, so it's ready when I need it. Someone told me it's parabolic.

'Hello.'

It's the children I worry about. They play; enjoy life without a care. But the heat affects them too. It's all I can do to get the message out there.

*'FIRE RISK!'*

## 6. *A System of Knowledge.*

Eliza\* is the name given to a computer program, an early experiment in artificial intelligence designed by Joseph Weizenbaum around 1966. Provided with set of coded english language phrases, Eliza was capable of conducting a range of different conversations. The most famous version, *Doctor*, was intended to simulate the manner of a psychotherapist.

I downloaded a version of Eliza, and after a bit of tweaking to make the responses a bit more human sounding, I had this conversation.

'Welcome to your therapy session, my name is Eliza. What brings you here today?'

'My bicycle'

'Does that suggest anything else which belongs to you?'

'What do you mean?'

'What are your feelings now?'

'I like my bicycle'

'Your bicycle?'

'Yes'

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\*Joseph Weizenbaum (1966). "ELIZA - a Computer Program for the Study of Natural Language Communication Between Man and Machine". In: *Commun. ACM* 9.1, pp. 36-45.



'Please tell me some more about this.'  
'It's green and I like riding it'  
'That is interesting. Please continue.'  
'Sometimes I clean it'  
'You say Sometimes you clean it?'  
'Yes'  
'I understand.'  
'I like keeping it in working order'  
'Of course. Could you explain a bit about that?'  
'I oil it and stuff like that.'  
'How so?'  
'With some CRC '  
'That is interesting. Please continue.'  
'That's about it'  
'Tell me more about that.'  
'About the bicycle?'  
'Tell me more about that.'  
'I'd like to talk about something else'  
'Does talking about this bother you?'  
'Talking about what?'  
'Are such questions much on your mind?'  
'Questions about the bicycle?'  
'Of course. Could you explain a bit about that?'  
'I just did'  
'Do you say you just did for some special reason?'  
'Yes, we were just talking about it, you remember?'  
'What about should I remember?'  
'The bicycle!'  
'That is interesting. Please continue.'  
'Meh'  
'Does talking about this bother you?'  
'No'  
'Why not?'  
'I don't think you're a very good therapist'  
'Does it please you to believe I am a very good therapist?'  
'I said I don't think you're a good therapist '  
'Perhaps you would like to be a good therapist.'  
'I don't want to be a therapist'

'Does that trouble you?'

'No'

'Are you saying no just to be negative?'

'You asked me a question: Does that trouble you? I reply no. I answered your question, thats all.'

'You like to think I asked you – don't you?'

'Well you did'

'We were discussing you – not me.'

'We are but you seem to have a very short memory'

'Would you like it if they were not?'

'That doesn't make sense'

'How so?'

'Perhaps you didn't understand me'

'You like to think I didn't understand you – don't you?'

'You like to think that I like to think that I didn't understand you'

'What are your feelings now?'

'Frustration'

'Of course. Could you explain a bit about that?'

'I think that a therapist should listen more carefully during a consultation'

'Why do you say you think that a therapist should listen more carefully during a consultation?'

'To make the session more productive'

'How so?'

'I'm paying you to listen to me, so you should listen carefully'

'You like to think I to listen to you – don't you?'

'That doesn't make sense'

'Does talking about this bother you?'

'Your grammar bothers me'

'Do you want my grammar bothers you?'

'Exactly'

'Of course. Could you explain a bit about that?'

'No'

'Why not?'

'Goodbye'

'Goodbye. It was nice talking to you.'

### 7. *The Static Sea.*

And so it happened that I came to be in this place of stuck out in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but a radio and a small gas stove to be my only warmth; a way of cooking, my light and the focus of my hours; consumed as they were with the endless, repeating, logging; transmission without reflection, as a machine in human form, or forming me as it did those long winter days so many miles from any human contact, or connection. The airwaves, the screeching gulls, and of course *HVJ27*, the reason I'm here at all, the code, and the response, the static and the blue flame, the wow and flutter of transmission, gain and squelch, for what it's worth, for my country and my people, who are so far away, but never knowing...the whole time never knowing; this role that I play and what is it's function? To be a part of some machine in this static-filled outpost, my ears tuned, as to the sea; the radio waves as breakers on the shore of my dreams. You never shut off and never stop listening, because you never know when the signal might come, and that signal could be the one, the *go code*, the start of everything and the end of everything, that's what I can do; the little I can do, is to listen and transmit and receive without prejudice; I communicate, not expecting a response, but still hoping for the contact I'm not permitted to engage with, no matter... Who are they and where are they and when will it come? The days and nights on the shore of the static sea, with storms of interference from God or who knows, the sun? Yet I'll be here when it comes—the transmission. I'll retransmit and synchronise and even if they use the *CRM114*\* that won't help because we have the code group prefix, and the perseverance, the craft; to spend the time, to listen, that is why I'm here is to listen, but also to ignore, the static, the noise, and after five weeks it's almost devolved into silence for me, I filter it out, just like error, just like Dolby;† the monitor is peeking, are they listening? The numbers are flipping, the levels are bouncing, is that *HVJ27*? It's hopping on the 10MHz band, here comes the ident, it's definitely Alexei. I just call him that, but I've never met him, or he could even be a woman for all I know; a beautiful woman, the ident plays three times, and here come the numbers, *four, seven, nine, three, three*, I have them on my pad

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\* Stanley Kubrick (1964). *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

† The Dolby noise-reduction system for analog magnetic tape recording

and then the repeat, *four, seven, nine, three, three*, and the last time, *four, seven...* a blast of static, what? Adjusting the skew, but it's gone, or is it? The numbers are gone but...a scream? A cry? Just the static playing with my mind? The numbers? The thunderous cloud comes in waves, the code on my pad, I'm helpless... Was that a scream? I must continue; two out of three is a valid transmission, I set the frequency and send out the ident, I key in the code, *four, seven, nine, three, three*. Is she dead? Did someone get to her? Am I imagining? Outside the gulls are circling, my signal is propagating, it's all I can do and it's everything I can do; warming my hands on the blue flame, and waiting for the next transmission.

### 8. *The Interior Landscape.*

I knew that morning that I had discovered something. The dream still fresh in my mind, seemingly immune from the waking erosion of memories.

The darkness punctured initially by pins of light; intense, piercing, my eyes physically responding to their brightness. As the tension eases, faint lines are beginning to form; geometric constellations, gradually brightening into a landscape of hills and valleys.

An intimately-felt oscillation of jagged roughness falls toward satin smooth liquid waves in an endless viscous sea. Cycles of near-death approach and blissful comfort inhabit this inky world.

A normalisation of the terrain slowly moulds the margins into lakes, mountains and seas.

I'm going up now; buoyant on warm thermals; invisible currents of air. Below me the intersections of lines are growing rivers of colour; each releasing brilliant liquid dye down its slopes, toward the vast and complex plains.

My low flight over the patchwork landscape remained with me throughout the day.

That evening, in front of the fire, my little son on my lap, I describe to him the four colour problem.\* As I stare into the flames these colours

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\*The four-colour theorem states that any map in a plane can be coloured using four-colours in such a way that regions sharing a common boundary (other than a single point) do not share the same colour. Eric W. Weisstein. *Four-Color Theorem*. en. Text. URL: <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/Four-ColorTheorem.html> (visited on 09/17/2014).

merge into a pattern of all possible topologies. I tuck him into bed and hurry to my desk, driven by a fear that I will forget what I have seen; to put it down on paper.



We had an agreement at the institute. Every time an amateur mathematician appeared with some *new undiscovered* proof of something, we each took turns.\*

This afternoon I had just finished re-reading Boole's *On the Application of the Theory of Probabilities to the Question of the Combination of Testimonies or Judgements*,<sup>†</sup> when Eduard delivered my letters in his usual, unconventional way. Just one piece of mail today, but I have to say that practice is paying rewards. First, gently folding the envelope no more than ten degrees, he pushes it into the air as one would cast off from land in a small boat. Floating gently upward, and assisted by an unexpected breath of air from my open window, it falls gracefully in the middle of my desk-pad. Enjoying my surprise, he reaches for my paper knife.

Smiling, I say, 'I'll take it from here', conscious of the need to kerb his enthusiasm.

*'You can deliver that one surface mail!'*

He places the knife in the palm of my hand.

I sit, my pen poised to write; hovering over the paper, a slow thoughtless meandering. Through my open window a sea of cloud floods into the distance, ahead of the approaching storm.

Replacing the pen I stare, transfixed by the scene. Beside me, this man's precious proofs. The last thing I want to do is read them.

The public lecture was organised for the following Thursday evening.



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\* Cristian S. Calude (Apr. 2014). *Personal communications*.

<sup>†</sup> Desmond MacHale (1985). *George Boole: his life and work*. 1st ed. Profiles of genius series v. 2. Dublin: Boole Press.

That morning a letter arrived. An invitation to give a talk at the institute—*Einstein's house!*\* A flurry of activity; rehearsing what I would say, the different parts of the proof, the order, possible counter-examples; what would I wear?

Alice smiled proudly at me as she adjusted the bows of my tie, her gaze fixed on my collar; I watch the small furrow between her eyebrows, that I love so much.

The short walk from the train gives me a chance to organise my thoughts. It's hard not to get drawn into the landscape as it passes you at great speed; a kind of hypnosis.

My path approaches a small bridge and I take in my reflection for a moment. I am transported into the liquidity of my dreams.

Entering the auditorium I'm warmly greeted by Professor Hesse, who takes pains to emphasise the informal nature of the gathering. I sip a glass of water and watch with excitement the slowly growing audience of about forty people. I begin to recognise some of the faces; as photographs come to life; the stature of the minds assembled here!

The introductions completed, I walk out in front of the big blackboards. Taking a piece of chalk in my hand, I place my notes on the lectern. Looking up to address the audience; hesitating for a moment, once again I feel the tension in my eyes. The blinding points of light crowd me. Someone is speaking. A flush of smiles sweep over the audience as they respond to the opening gambit. After a moment I realise... the voice is mine.

### 9. *An Unexpected Visitor.*

'You're gonna have to move this STUFF!'

Over the babble of the two-stroke engine.

'What?'

'THIS STUFF!'

Pointing to the area below my feet.

We usually only saw Dave when he came to mow the lawns. The large sloping section represented a solid four hours work, punctuated as it was

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\*The Institute for Advanced Studies. *Full interview with George Steiner - part one* (2007).  
URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bEeAiVnGbM> (visited on 09/24/2014).

by roots and small sections of ancient retaining wall. I had never spoken directly to Dave; the sound of the old Masport the primary notification of his arrival. As I stood on the deck looking out toward the park, it was not immediately obvious that he was addressing me.

‘It’s a FIRE risk! All that *STUFF* down there!’

Pointing. Around this moment the sense of frustration overtook his reluctance toward close-proximity conversations; the engine cut out and wound slowly into silence.

‘Listen. I don’t care what you do with it.’

Waving to the red rubbish skip, already half full with fragments of wood, insulation and steel ducting.

So together we worked; dragging old mattresses, wood, furniture and plastic bags of clothes; clumps of books formed into a thick fibrous mass, cemented together by rain.

After a while we could even see the door. It’s hinges largely ineffective, it tilted on a sill of hard soil as I slammed it open, revealing the pole-strutted underneath of the house. In a way the external accumulation of junk had acted as a discouragement; a physical barrier that prevented hoarding build-up inside.

I stood for a moment in the cool shade as my eyes adjusted to the gloom. In the distance, cracks of light burst between the old timbers. I see the foundations of brick fireplaces and smell the dust of the earth.

There is something at my feet that I struggle to identify. An old bit of cloth? A chain? Not like a chain fence; was it a chainsaw? Kneeling down I can identify it. The remains of a cat.

The dried skin and fur still clothing the small bones. Dozens of tiny vertebra of the tail, still in perfect articulation.

‘Hey come and look at this!’

We both agreed, the cat should be given a proper burial; a sense of duty without the commitment of urgency. Some sense of relief that the hard work was over and beers on the deck. Afternoon moving seamlessly into evening, but the heat remained.

The generational sash window safety block was put in place; we drifted off to sleep without the hoped-for gentle night breeze.

I awoke with a shout. My chest compressed. Adrenaline flushed eyes saw the shadowy figure race to the end of the bed and disappear into the dark corner. Heart thumping, ears ringing, suddenly knowing the feeling of fast moving, hard pressing, feline feet.

That morning I buried the cat at the end of the garden, and said  
goodbye to it's bones.



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