

# A GUIDEBOOK TO LIFE ELSEWHERE



# C.A.T. CONTENT

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**TOOLS**

**LANDING**

**TEMPORAL ATTRACTORS**

**IV**

Brishty Alam

As you entered the landing the first thing that greeted you once the trees parted was a battered hut. On the left lay a wooden wardrobe, flat on its back with its insides half open to receive the leaves that had begun abandoning their posts as autumn crept in. The angle in which it lay pointed out the piles of white chalky bricks where a second hut had stood only a few months ago, and behind which you could already see the upstairs curve down and begin its descent to downstairs. Perhaps it was cries from the up-turned creature that compelled us. Or perhaps it was the failure of our attempts at lamenting the bricks back into a hut that drove us to action. In any case, the wardrobe was quickly helped to its feet before anyone asked whether or not we should interfere in its affairs. For some reason upright was unquestionably better.

The wardrobe soon resumed its gathering. At first it would store precious findings – an X-ray, a tie, a piece of metal gauze. Then it started calling things in from across the landing and turning into something that resembled a toolshed: full of things that you think you will use, most of which you don't. Piled inside was a piece of hose, some colours, a soil probe, a couple of axes, some hammers, a mallet, a bag and a jug of nails, some agendas, a rake, a rope, more rope, a spade, a bucket, a second spade and so on.

\* \* \*

The landing pulled things towards it. It provided expansive edges that we could spread out into, hiding ourselves in the trees, or behind a slope, away from others, in our own space. The exposed areas gathered us as a group. Those that did work there did so intermittently before returning to the concentration of the recesses.

The topology of the landing attracted some things to it. A protocolist settled quite quickly into the corner of the clearing at the top of the slope behind the walnut tree. It carefully assembled its home for the next forty-eight hours – places to sit, a moss bed, an arrangement of tree stumps and, most importantly, a view. An overview. From there it would watch the events unfold below and clack out its stories through its platter of teeth. It hardly moved from this position, though its tentacles would often extend down across the land gathering up walnuts and anecdotes for it to chew on later. Then the excited tring of its tongue would resound through the space catching you wherever you were, notifying you of its ongoing digestion.

The incline of the woodland area by the entrance eventually drew a pair of probers that were surveying the terrain for vehicles without brakes to pass safely through. The sparse undergrowth

and fairly smooth surface also made it preferable to other parts of the landing. The probers stood tall and thin, working in rhythm. The first would prod down into the earth and take note of what lay beneath: rocks, stones, soils, holes, small shrubs, roots; points of interest to highlight, potential dangers to remove or avoid. It would then stabilise the pair while the second swung forward to repeat the procedure at the next spot. And so they continued down the slope, past the well, through the grove, clearing a corridor out into the plain.

The plain had two slopes going up either side, creating a small valley. One was slightly rougher, more dishevelled, and the other smoother, more consistent, with long grass lining its surface. This part drew the fireplace, just above the bottom of the curve, so that any water could run off at a safe distance below it. The fire took centre stage. It rolled the white chalky bricks down from the ruins upstairs, arranging them in a circle to protect itself from the wind. It dragged huge piles of wood out from the forest floor and warmed us in its light when night came.

In turn many more things became attached to the fire. An alchemist sat by the edges of the flames, pulling plant matter into its waters and gurgling them in fire. It wanted to find out what colours were hidden in the area. Once released, the liberated pigments were caught on rectangles of cloth and left to dry. The leftover carcasses were put back for the landing to recycle.

A type of peg-board that had initially taken root upstairs soon grew out of the corner and down the hill to the fireplace. It flourished in the gaps where others did not. It supplied promising smells and warming conversation and allowed us to relax together when we were not operating. It was particularly active at night, motivating us to pay attention to the late hours of the night and the hazy hours of the day that followed, gently sharing a bit of the fire in its belly.

Those that engaged most closely with the fire became partly fire, feeding it through the night and soaking up some of its ways in the process. One such fire-dweller would then unexpectedly unleash this chaos into the landing. In the middle of the second day it released a group from the nearby village across the fields. At first they ran in looping circles on the side of the hill, building up momentum and kneading a cacophony of clapping, and jingling, and whooping, and thumping, and screaming, and anarchy into the earth. Their freedom was captivating. They reappeared when the rain pushed us aside and screeched through the deserted landscape, spreading their colours across it.

The vegetation was another attractor. The moss at the top of the plain drew a sanctuary to it. The damp, cool calmness was a welcome break from the fervent activity below. It invited you to lie in its embrace and held you there to look peacefully at the patch of floor that it had framed below.

Another quiet character found a home amid the scrubs between the plain and the woodland. It was one of the smallest among us but its smooth whiteness could be seen from across the field, silently standing out against the uninviting green thicket in which it sat.

In contrast, a constant rustling and hammering came from the trees behind the fireplace, combined with the unidentifiable calls that could be heard from the dirt road that ran alongside the landing. The nooks and crannies and twigs and branches that this plot provided were ideal resources for the surprises that assembled there. They were a playful group, composed of care and anticipation. They would wait patiently, speculating on what could come their way.

The upstairs drew a mandala of patterns to decorate the area. These motifs had travelled here from nearby houses on small cards and were now thriving on the facade of a hut. The hut itself drew cleaners and fixers, new straw for its beds and new sheets for its walls. It anticipated the rain that would arrive on the next afternoon, allowing us to store our things and ourselves.

Then there were the temporal attractors. The morning set a herd of sheep and goats through the terrain. Meal times brought spreads and care in Tupperware boxes and silver bowls, spun on old tractor parts and stewed in great cauldrons. The much-awaited rain created a pause and brought us together. It gave the belly-measurer a chance to work. It in turn enlisted its followers to traipse around in the rain to find trees that matched the statuses of the bellies it had studied. Some lay close to the rain shelter, but the last few bellies could only be found in the depths of the woods behind the hills.

And finally there were those that were attached to the activity of others. Some would pop out of nowhere, grab some light and store it away to share in the future. Some were incapacitated by everything that was going on into doing nothing. They tried to point and draw lines but these led to nothing. So that's what they did. They sat and they watched.

One that had a particular grip on me was a grid, five down and four across. It was rather inconspicuous but could trap you for half a day if you looked through it. It lay across what you were

doing, dividing it into twenty smaller chunks and then helped you examine these smaller sections in close detail, imploring you to try to evaluate each section from one to five. It had higher expectations than most. Sometimes it wasn't possible and the matter refused, deforming the grid along the way. Even now it sometimes appears in front of me, rearranging my view through the sieve of its twenty-point checklist.

\* \* \*

Back at the toolshed, there were now pairs of nails handle-width apart, on which the hammers hung. Another two pairs for the axes. The bag hung from one nail and the jug hung from the railing. The agendas, colours and other small items were lying side by side on the top shelf. All the ropes and the piece of hose sat coiled up at the bottom left of the unit. This meant that all the long, thin, pole-like tools – the probe, the mallet, the rake, the spades – were leaning into the right corner.

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