

Construction is a process of connection. Use the nail to fix two boards of wood, glue the flowers to the page, knit the strands of yarn together in knots. But the possibilities expand beyond crafts. We construct networks that connect devices, studies to connect ideas, and paths to connect locations.

This piece is concerned with a certain kind of path. Not ones made by laying down asphalt or bark chips. Not even ones made by treading ground until it weathers into well-defined grooves. For now, I want to explore paths plotted out by a series of connected clues. Our titular example being a trail of breadcrumbs left behind for others to follow.

I find a lot of things interesting about Breadcrumbs, which is what I will call these types of paths for now.

1. Breadcrumbs do not bring attention to themselves

Breadcrumbs don't announce their presence with signs or flashing lights. You don't notice literal breadcrumbs on the trail unless you are paying attention. Even then, only the most curious may follow where they go.

2. Breadcrumbs invite travelers

This may seem to contradict the point above at first, but it's not as if breadcrumbs are trying to hide. While they may not demand your attention, they do point in a direction. They don't grab you by the shoulders and shove you toward their destination, but they are ready to welcome and guide you to wherever they lead, if you are interested.

3. Breadcrumbs fade

While breadcrumbs do not pressure you down their path, they can be time sensitive. Some of the trail may be swept or blown away, consumed, or—eventually—composted back to the earth.

This may seem like a weakness in the system, but I see it as a strength. Breadcrumbs don't piss on every tree to claim it for themselves. They don't try to leave a mark on this earth. They aren't initials scarred in the living bark of an ancient tree or some plastic slop that will never decompose. Breadcrumbs will not overstay their welcome. Eventually they will become some forest critter's snack or turn back to soil.

4. Breadcrumbs are not the destination

The breadcrumbs themselves connect the traveler's starting point to the breadcrumb's endpoint. What lies at the end could be anything, good or ill. Hansel and Gretel, from whom we get this narrative device, left behind breadcrumbs to lead them back home. The pieces of pastry were merely the means of marking the way back to their father.

Yet isn't the wafting smell of the witch's home—made of and filled with baked delights—its own form of breadcrumbs? Whether laid upon the ground in crumbs or strewn through the air in fragrance, they are the same mechanism. Why would we ever take such a gamble as to follow a path that we are unsure of where it leads?

Hansel and Gretel are intelligent and watchful children. They are driven towards the witch's house by what drives everyone's actions in the story: hunger. Famine is what prompts the woodcutter's wife to leave the children in the woods. Hunger is what leads the birds to eat the breadcrumbs showing the children their way back. A woman in the woods satiates her hunger by eating children.

But there is something strange about that last part, isn't there? This witch is surrounded by an abundance of treats. Why then would she need to eat children? And if she was in such dire need of protein, why wait until Hansel was plump on sweets to do so? Why was she sitting on wealth and treasure that could have been used to raise livestock for milk and eggs or purchase meat from the butcher?

And wait a minute. When the children return home, don't they find that their wicked stepmother who banished them is dead? Suspiciously within the same timeframe that they trapped and killed the witch? The pieces start to come together that maybe hunger is not the driving force. Perhaps it is a woman who could double dip by ridding herself of the troublesome children attached to her husband then trap the very same children and eat them. What a wicked witch indeed.

Witches have long been used as symbols of dark and forbidden magic. And troublesome women have been burned throughout time through the reasoning that they were engaging in such affairs. The misogyny here is not hard to peel apart. The evil stepmother, the evil witch. Either multiple loathsome women or a single conniving temptress. Make women the problem, especially if they have any kind of power.

But why does the father get a pass? Is he not party to their parental abandonment? At the end he welcomes his children home and says he's missed them all along. A convenient thing to say when your children return with wealth and jewels, no? I'm not buying it.

The salvation of these children does not come from the benevolence of their patriarch. It comes from the resourcefulness of the children in manipulating the greed of those who should have protected them. From Hansel and Gretel being insightful and clever enough to turn adults' selfishness against them. To lock the villain in the very oven she was planning on cooking them with. To appeal to their neglectful father with their newfound wealth.

These kids survive by looking out for each other and putting together the clues that were in front of them. Throughout history children have survived terrible parents through careful manipulation, coordination, and mutual care.

So it always surprises me that one of the most popular narratives of Hansel and Gretel is that they were greedy children for eating the witch's house. For fuck's sake, they were hungry. Kids have needs like every human being. But when those needs are inconvenient for adults then kids are being greedy, petulant, or ungrateful.

Now, are kids sometimes greedy, petulant, and ungrateful? Absolutely. They can be incredible assholes that rip your life apart. Parenting is hard and it sucks sometimes. And sometimes you wish things would be easier and resent that the kid has made them harder.

But their brains haven't fully grown yet. They don't know how hard it is to be a parent because they have no context and no capacity to understand your side of it. They aren't trying to make your life hell, they just have needs and don't know how to effectively obtain or communicate those needs. Nobody can ever understand what it's like to try to raise anything until they have done it.

And it is the parent's job to be the literally bigger person and not hold that against them. To try to understand them and teach them how to get what they need. To help them become the person that *they* want to be. And that will be different than what you wanted them to be. It better be. Because that shows that the next generation is building on what we gave them. It's our job to make sure we are surpassed by those who come after. To make it easier for them without shaming them for the struggles that they won't have to face.

I'm fucking tired of children not being treated as human beings. They have needs and will and fears and dreams and skills all their own. And I genuinely think, no matter how illogical it may seem from the outside, that if you took the time to understand and hear someone, you would understand why they do what they do. That doesn't make it right or okay, but it becomes understandable. And sometimes we can help provide another perspective or solve a need that they can't in order to help them move forward more effectively. Try to remember that the next time you think someone is being stupid.

And if it's a child, see if you can try to listen to what they need. It may be the first time that's ever happened for them, and they'll be better for it. And if you don't think you have it in you to do that when things are hard, then maybe it's not the right time to be having kids. They aren't your pet or a mini you or the solution to your marriage. They're a human being. Treat them like one.

But back to Hansel and Gretel. They sure do pin the blame on a lot of places, don't they? It's greedy children daring to eat when they're hungry. It's wicked step-mothers or overbearing wives or evil witches or whatever archetype of a hateful woman you want to point at. Maybe you even blame the birds for eating the breadcrumbs that pointed the way back home.

Yet, who is it that carries the children across the waters back home in the story? A bird (sometimes it's a swan, sometimes it's a duck). Besides, if the children had gone straight home following the path, their stepmother would have marched them right back out there.

If you didn't know, the original story starts with Hansel and Gretel successfully finding their way home the first time the stepmother tried to leave them in the woods. They did this by Hansel dropping white stones behind them on the trip out there. But the stepmother noticed this and locked Hansel up so he couldn't gather stones to do that again. Again, the magic of breadcrumbs is that they aren't nearly as noticable. It is easier to hide from the people you don't want to notice.

You might say that the breadcrumbs ultimately didn't serve their purpose anyway because the birds are them. Or maybe the birds ate the bread to prevent the children from returning too soon. Alternatively, perhaps the children feeding the birds earned their favor for transporting them home after the danger was passed. You could see it as a form of the regenerativity of feeding into an ecosystem.

Which brings me back to hunger. While I don't see the witch as being evil just because she is a woman with magic, I do see her greed and abuse as problematic. And she does receive narrative retribution in alignment with her crimes. The father does not receive justice for his abandonment, but perhaps that happens outside the bounds of this story.

Each finite story must come to an end, which is perhaps a disservice to those of us living in an ongoing story which will most likely not end with us. Perhaps Hansel and Gretel harbor resentment against their father. Perhaps their father squanders their treasure or marries someone else who convinces him to try to get rid of his kids, and the cycle repeats. Perhaps the children's trauma haunts them as they become parents and they pass this pain on in an intergenerational waterfall of trauma and cyclical pain. We smile at the "happily ever after," but nothing short of death is ever the same forever after. We must be careful when reading stories in noticing when the story ends and why the author chose that point in time.

Whatever happens after the end of Hansel and Gretel, I take a few things from it. I see the benefits of caring for one another, whether we are siblings or not. I feel the cycle of nourishment that comes from ecosystems feeding into each other. And I, of course, carry with me a fondness for Breadcrumbs. It is a technology especially good for hiding in plain sight.

As said earlier, Hansel and Gretel were busted for originally using white stones to find their way back home. They were too noticeable. And, as a queer and trans person in the United States in 2025, I am feeling increasingly wary of being noticed.

I love Pride. I really do. Seeing all the people in my community in one place, along with hundreds of others I never knew were queer in my rural community, brings me immense joy. Seeing girls kissing each other in open daylight brings me relief that I am not alone. When another trans girl and I compliment each other's nose jewelry I feel at home. Being visible, feeling seen. That's something you have to feel to understand how important it is.

But I have not always felt good while feeling seen. Not by the wrong people. I lived in a much more conservative town for a period of time and I was afraid to leave my house. I felt their eyes

on me. I heard their scoffs and whispers. I was living there when we found out Big Orange took the white house in 2024. I did not want to be seen at that moment. I wanted to retreat into the woods and never be found.

Lily Alexandre captured this feeling excellently in one video. In it, there is footage of a man running away from the authorities, and you can't help but root for him at some point.

Have you ever been followed? I know some of you have. It is a uniquely terrifying experience. It is the height of fight or flight. It is The Fear. The Original Fear. The Primal Fear that you are being hunted. That something has locked in on you and will make you stop breathing. Will rob you of your future and the chance to say goodbye to your loved ones. It will set your brain ablaze so that it no longer thinks in words, but in directions and hormones and blood pounding in your skull.

Pick up your pace. Get ready to run. Get ready to use your claws and teeth. Get ready to break some bones so they live long enough to heal. We can make more blood later. Ignore the pain in your lungs. Take the limiter off. Regret is for the living. And if they take away our chance to regret, we'll make them feel it for us.

That's how it felt when Trump was elected. Unlike the time I thought I was being followed, though, it didn't stop and I knew I wasn't mistaken. And I thought about running. I thought about fleeing to Canada, the UK, New Zealand, Australia. Christ, I'll learn another language if I have to. Regret is for the—

Living is always hard. But living like this? It's not sustainable. You can't balance your checkbook on adrenaline alone. You have to bring the rest of your brain back online to deal with the complexities of life. But those instincts don't turn off either. You just deal with all of it all at once.

And eventually a few weeks pass and you feel like maybe it won't be as bad as you think. Then you cancel your trip to a conference because it's in a state that just made it illegal for you to go to the bathroom. And that fear comes back. Regret is for—

The next few weeks pass and you relax a little. Then you watch ICE thugs tackle innocent men to the concrete for the crime of being brown at a Home Depot. The blood in your mouth tastes like rust and rage, and you feel at war with yourself as you decide between complacency and criminal charges. After all, they'll come for me next. Regret is—

For a little while you don't know what to do anymore. People are “disappearing.” I think we all know what that means. But you have to go to work, partly because you're broke enough as it is and partly because you know the people you work with need your help. So you go, and you get used to that rust in your mouth. After all, the Republicans are shitting themselves over this Epstein nonsense, so surely they wouldn't do anything they would—

Regret. I wish there was something more I could do. But I also worry I've done too much. Left too many fingerprints in too many places. If they want to hurt me, they know how. I have nowhere to hide, and I don't know that I care to. I make plans for if I get sent to a camp, but I know if it gets that bad there's a more likely outcome.

Hunger. We feel it because we want to live. It drives us to desperation, and we will follow any path that we can find. That's when it is dangerous to follow breadcrumbs. When we have no other choice. Hansel and Gretel were clever enough to get out, but not all kids are so lucky.

When the world is full of people who are bigger and more powerful than us, we feel powerless. Those are the times where we have to be smarter. We have to look out for each other. We have to manipulate the system to turn their greed against themselves. And when it is too dangerous to leave highly visible paths, we leave breadcrumbs. Even if they get swept away, ignored, or destroyed, maybe it will feed our ecosystem. And maybe someday nature will return its thanks for our offerings.

This is why this site exists. To leave breadcrumbs and teach you how to do the same.