

"Hey reader! I thought I'd read enough in this lifetime about people's childhoods and feelings and such and I'd never want to do it again. But Lindy West is such a totally entertaining and original writer she kind of blew that thought out of my head halfway into the first chapter. I dare you to feel differently."

—Ira Glass, *This American Life*

"You have to be careful about what you read when you're writing, or you can end up in total despair, thinking, 'This is what I wanted to say, only she got there first and said it better!'"

—Jennifer Weiner, number one New York Times bestselling author of *Good in Bed* and *The Littlest Bigfoot*

"The surge of love and joy I felt while crylaughing through this book almost made my cold dead heart explode. Lindy is so smart and so funny that it almost hurts my little jealous-ass feelings. She is my most favorite writer ever!"

—Samantha Irby, author of *Meatry: Essays*

"It made me hurt, both from laughing and crying. Required reading if you are a feminist. Recommended reading if you aren't."

—Jenny Lawson, number one bestselling author of *Let's Pretend This Never Happened (A Mostly True Memoir)* and *Furiously Happy: A Funny Book About Horrible Things*

"It's literally the new Bible."

—Caitlin Moran, best-selling author of *How to Be a Woman*

"There's a reason Lindy West is such a beloved writer: she gets to the heart of impossible issues with humor and grace. West will have you cringing, laughing, and crying, all within one page. *Shrill* is a must-read for all women."

—Jessica Valenti, author of *Why Have Kids?: A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness* and *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*

The Witches Are Coming

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Introduction: They Let You Do It

Not long ago, my husband was at a bar in Chicago. A friend had told him to check out this particular bar because it's a cool dive run by queer people of color, with dancing and cheap drinks and a good vibe. So he was sitting there, having a beer, and after a while a guy came in and sat down next to him. White guy, late forties. Polo shirt. Mus-tache probably. Khaki shorts. Standard random white guy.

The guy—his name was Larry or Barry or something, so for the purposes of this story let's call him LarryBarry—struck up a conversation with my husband, asked him if he was having fun. My husband said, "Yeah, this is a fun bar! People are dancing. It's cool." And the guy got a real sad look on his face and said, "Yeah, this is one of my favorite songs. I wish I was dancing right now." So naturally my husband asked, "Well, why don't you go dance?"

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And LarryBarry said, "I'M NOT ALLOWED TO DANCE."

My husband was confused. There did not seem to be any posted restrictions on who was or was not allowed to dance. Other people were dancing. So he inquired, "Larry-Barry, why are you not allowed to dance?"

And then LarryBarry told his tale:

"Well, two nights ago, I came to this bar, because it's the closest bar to my house, and I come here all the time. And they were having a dance night, and I love to dance. So I went out on the dance floor, and there were some people out there dancing, so I just started dancing with this girl, and she said, 'I don't really want to dance with you,' and then her friend got all weird about it. So now I guess I'm *not allowed to dance*."

Can you believe that? He's not allowed to dance!

This is what it's come to, ladies and gentlemen. This is what the PC police have done to us. It's as though the PC police don't even care how much LarryBarry likes that song! Or how important it is that he continue his ongoing research into the worst ways to move the human body!

Well, sorry if I don't want to live in a world where straight white men in their forties with mustaches can't go to the queer POC dance night and nonconsensually grind on lesbians they don't know without people getting weird about it! Last time I checked, this was America!

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My husband said kindly, "LarryBarry, I'm pretty sure if you just go out there and dance and don't touch anyone, you'll be fine."

And LarryBarry thought, "Humm, don't touch anyone? What's that?" But he decided to go for it, and as he got up from the bar he looked my husband in the eyes and said, man to man, "If something goes wrong out there, will you back me up?"

And my husband said, "If something goes wrong, you will look over here, and you will find that this chair is empty, and you will never see me again, because I don't know you."

This modern fable—the Ballad of LarryBarry—tells us quite a bit about our current moment in history.

It seems that a lot of men are confusing being asked not to violate other people's sexual boundaries with being forbidden to participate in basic human activities such as dancing, dating, chatting, walking around, going to work, and telling jokes.

One thing we've been hearing a lot recently when a man—particularly a man a lot of people really like—is accused of something awful is that the accusations aren't real but in fact are part of a baseless, bloodthirsty, politically motivated mass hysteria known as a "witch hunt."

This is a relatively new usage of the term. Traditionally, "witch hunt" has been used in reference to the witch trials

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of early modern Europe and colonial America, during which an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 people were brutally tortured by being briefly ostracized at work and having a lot of people yell at them.

Wait. That's wrong. They were actually hanged, beheaded, or burned at the stake. Still, though. Very, very similar to the modern-day witch hunts against rapists!

Imagine, if you will, a fine woodcut print of a colonial witch burning. A town square, a black sky, perhaps a fat bristly pig. A massive bonfire crackles hungrily, and at its heart, three screaming women are bound to a post, burning to death in agony. Nearby, a group of angry men in pantalons and buckled hats stoke the flames with long poles. A bat-winged demon harries the dying women from above, while all around the townspeople froth at the mouth and howl in a frenzy of bloodlust. Here and there, corpses litter the ground, but the townspeople seem not to notice or care. Some fricking knave beheads the pig with a sword.

Now, in case you're not familiar with classic seventeenth-century iconography, I, an art historian,* have compiled a handy reference guide to what each of these elements represents:

Women burning to death = Men who did nothing wrong

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Men stoking the fire = Feminists (third-wave, boooooooooo!)

Demon = How Sharon's butt looked in those pants

The fire = Call-out culture

Townspeople = The court of public opinion

The pig = Due process

The knave = Salma Hayek

Corpses = Free speech, comedy, human reproduction, the legacy of Matt Lauer

I think we can all agree that this fully checks out and that, indeed, it is men who are the true victims of witch hunts. Which they invented. To kill women.

But the "witch hunt" deflection isn't only for rapists! It has the power to transform pretty much any credible accusation against a man into an unfair—may, unconstitutional—and unfounded smear campaign. Accused of racism? Witch hunt! Accused of undermining the integrity of democracy itself? Witch hunt! Accused of willfully letting children die in concentration camps on the southern border of the United States? A pure, unadulterated, hysterical, bitchy witch hunt!!!

Perhaps no one is as fond of this rhetorical maneuver as the United States' forty-fifth president, Donald J. Trump. Based on a simple Twitter search, he has tweeted the phrase at least two hundred times since taking office, betraying a ceaseless, all-consuming paranoid panic that

* Honorary degree, Trump University.

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is definitely safe and good to have in a world leader. A minuscule sampling of the fucking hundreds of them I found:

May 15, 2016: "The media is really on a witch-hunt against me. False reporting, and plenty of it - but we will prevail!"

January 10, 2017: "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!"

February 27, 2018: "WITCH HUNT!"

March 19, 2018: "A total WITCH HUNT with massive conflicts of interest!"

April 10, 2018: "A TOTAL WITCH HUNT!!!!!"

April 22, 2018: "A complete Witch Hunt!"

May 23, 2018: "WITCH HUNT!"

June 5, 2018: "... The greatest Witch Hunt in political history!"

August 22, 2018: "NO COLLUSION - RIGGED WITCH HUNT!"

December 13, 2018: "WITCH HUNT!"

January 26, 2019: "WITCH HUNT!"

Very normal, very cool!

So, just to clarify, you guys get to be the witch-hunters and the witches and the witch-hunter-hunters who hunt down any witches who are witch-hunting too hard. And the rest of us get burned.

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To be fair, Donald Trump framing himself as a witch actually makes a bit more sense than it does for most of the guilty little wormies who try to do it. Every iota of Trump's success is a con, a dark magic trick, built on illusion and hypnosis and the impenetrable magical thinking of his followers. Even the repetition in those tweets—WITCH HUNT, WITCH HUNT, WITCH HUNT—is a kind of incantation, calling itself into being. *Of course* a man whose only skill is putting his name on shit understands the power of branding.

Trump is not a witch, but he is adept at one spell. He knows that, at least in this country at the moment, all you have to do is say something is true. If you say you're a self-made billionaire, you're a billionaire. If you say you'll make something great, sure, it will be. It's a witch hunt? If you say so.

Let's go back to before the fullest expression of the power of that brand. It was October 2016, and we were doing so well. It felt like we were doing so well, anyway. Thanks to decades of bloody, incremental, hard-won victories by generations of activists and organizers, the traditional presumption of white male authority had grown translucent, vulnerable. The term *feminist* was no longer so stigmatized that teenage girls were afraid to assert their innate equality and celebrities were afraid to utter it in interviews. Marriage equality passed, and the pits of Hell did not open beneath us. Black Lives Matter forced the

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facts of racialized police violence through the generally impenetrable psyches of Middle Americans, whether they liked it or not. Sure, the environment was fucked and we'd been at war for nearly twenty years (since I was a teenager and since my teenagers were babies), but there was a palpable momentum, an undeniable feeling that progress had the upper hand. We were just a hairsbreadth from electing the United States' first female president to succeed the United States' first black president. Justice Antonin Scalia passed away unexpectedly and, despite Mitch McConnell's best efforts at subverting democracy, she was going to choose his replacement. We weren't done, but we were doing it.

And then, true to form—like the Balrog's whip catching Gandalf by his little gray bootie, like the husband in a Lifetime movie hissing "If I can't have you, no one can"—white American voters and the electoral college and a few Russian troll farms shoved an incompetent, racist con man into the White House.

Trump wasn't a former reality TV star, a failed businessman who became an actor who played a successful businessman on a bad TV show—he was a *current* reality TV star. He came straight from the set. And to regurgitate the first and most basic President Trump media take, he brought not just his showbiz sensibilities but his *reality TV instincts* into the Oval Office: a savant's understanding of Americans' hunger for "reality" over reality, for the out-

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rageous, for the cruelty of Simon Cowell and the brazen individualism of "I'm not here to make friends."

Reality TV, as we all know by now, is scripted. This is the most frightening vestige of President Trump's TV career: in his world, reality doesn't dictate the script; the script dictates reality. When reality doesn't favor or flatter him, he simply says what he *wants* to be true. And in the minds of his fanatics—absolutely blitzed on a decade or three of antimedia, antiacademia, paranoid propaganda—it *becomes true*. It's a kind of magic.

A vast and verdant journalistic subgenre has sprung up around the president's passion for lying: websites devoted solely to fact checking, ever-lengthening lists of falsehoods at major media outlets. The *Washington Post's* Fact Checker page reported (at the time of this writing) that Trump had made 10,796 false or misleading statements during the first 869 days of his presidency. After special counsel Robert Mueller released his report on Russian interference in the 2016 election in April 2019, Trump tweeted, "No collusion. No obstruction. For the haters and the radical left Democrats—GAME OVER," never mind the fact that the report said no such thing. Thanks to the baby-soft Left's willingness to hear all "sides" of an "argument," no matter how blatantly disingenuous, even Trump's most obvious rewritings of reality, from the relatively benign (the size of his inauguration crowd) to the truly dangerous (the "very fine people" marching for white

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supremacy in Charlottesville), have been entered into the public record with some degree of legitimacy. Even people who didn't overtly hate Hillary Clinton took "Lock her up!" to the polls with them, and maybe just enough of them had just enough doubt that they skipped over that bubble or didn't bother to go at all. Who knows what kind of an impact that tiny margin could have had, cumulatively, when replicated over a population of 245 million eligible voters?

The infamous *Access Hollywood* tape was the first time we really saw Donald Trump's plot armor in action. On the tape, which was recorded in 2005 and resurfaced just before the 2016 election, you can hear Billy Bush—a first cousin of the man we were so *sure* would be history's worst president—wheezing ecstatically as Trump brags, inadvertently into a hot mic, about sexually harassing and groping women. The pair, along with a passel of unidentified men, were on a bus en route to film an *Access Hollywood* segment with the actress Arianne Zucker.

Through the window of the bus, Bush seems to spot Zucker first, as she waits to greet them. "Sheesh," he blurts out, breathless, telling Trump how hot "your girl" is. You can feel Bush's giddiness, a contact high, at getting to join a more powerful man in the oldest and most sacred of male bonding exercises: objectifying women.

Trump spies Zucker too. "Whoa!"

"Yes!" Bush grunts, Beavis-esque. "Yes, the Donald has scored!"

Of course, "the Donald" has not "scored." The Donald is on the NBC lot to shoot a guest appearance on *Days of Our Lives* at the behest of his employer to promote his reality show, *The Apprentice*, while *Access Hollywood* produces an accompanying puff piece. This is work within work within work. Bush is at work. Trump is at work. Zucker is at work, and not only is she not Trump's "girl," she is a complete stranger who is also on camera and being paid to smile.

"Heh heh heh," Bush snickers. "My man!"

Such has it always been: powerful men sorting women's bodies into property and trash and "good" guys, average guys, guys you know, guys you love, guys on the *Today* show, going along with it. Snickering. Licking a boot here and there, joining in if they're feeling especially bitter or transgressive or insecure or far from the cameras that day. Perhaps, at their most noble, staying silent. Never speaking up, because the social cost is too high. It's easier to leave that for the victims to bear. After all, they're used to it.

"I gotta use some Tic Tacs," Trump says, still inside the bus, "just in case I start kissing her. You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them, it's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab

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them by the pussy. You can do anything.” Bush and the bus toadies laugh.

Every woman knows a version of Donald Trump. Most of us have known more of them than we can (or care to) recall. He’s the boss who thinks you owe him something; the date who thinks that silence means “yes” and “no” means “try harder”; the stranger who thinks your body’s mere existence constitutes an invitation to touch, take, own, and destroy. He’s every deadbeat hookup, every narcissistic loser, every man who’s ever tried to leverage power, money, fame, credibility, or physical strength to snap your boundaries like matchsticks. He is hot fear and cold dread and a pit in your stomach. He’s the man who held you back, who never took you seriously, who treated you like nothing until you started to believe it, who raped you and told you it was your fault and whose daddy was a cop, so who would believe you anyway?

Donald Trump is rape culture’s blathering id, and just a few days after the *Access Hollywood* tape dropped, then Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton (who, no doubt, has just as many man-made scars as the rest of us) was required to stand next to him on a stage for a presidential debate and remain unflappable while being held to an astronomically higher standard and pretend that he was her equal while his followers persisted in howling that sexism is a feminist myth. While Trump bragged about sexual assault and vowed to suppress disobedient media, cable

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news pundits spent their time taking a protractor to Clinton’s smile—a constant, churning microanalysis of nothing, a subtle subversion of democracy that they are poised to repeat in 2020. And then she lost. (Actually, in a particularly painful living metaphor, she won, but because of institutional peculiarities put in place by long-dead white men, they took it from her and gave it to the man with fewer votes.)

In the intervening years, I have returned again and again to what Donald told Billy on the bus. “When you’re a star they let you do it,” he said. They let you do it. “It” being assault. “They” being a soap star unlucky enough to be standing near him or a businesswoman seated next to him on a flight or a reporter for *People* magazine on a tour of Mar-a-Lago or an aspiring model at a nightclub or a contestant on *The Apprentice* or Miss Finland 2006 or any of the other twenty-two (and counting) women who have accused the forty-fifth president of the United States of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape. Setting aside the fact that a touch or a sex act cannot be both consensual and non-consensual, how much can any population with little institutional power really be said to “let” themselves be victimized by the powerful? Systemic inequality makes choice an illusion.

“They let you do it” was in 2005. In 2017, Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood mogul behind half of your favorite shit, everything from *Pulp Fiction* to *Project*

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Rumrwy, was exposed as a serial sexual predator. Dozens of women accused Weinstein of rape and sexual abuse, a pattern of coercive behavior that had lasted for at least three decades despite being an open secret in Hollywood and the press. Through some combination of time, rage, incremental political victories, and feminist sweat, we did not let him do it anymore.

(Weinstein also once, in 2016, told my husband to “keep it down” in a hotel bar, and my husband, not recognizing Weinstein, said, “Excuse me?” and Weinstein wilted like a tiny baby buttercup and was like “Oh, I guess, uh, we did sit a little bit close to you, sorry,” and my husband said, “Yeah, you did,” and Harvey Weinstein skulked away licking his own ass like a beaten dog, and this is my porno.)

As I’m sure you’re aware if you’re reading this book, the allegations against Weinstein—or, more accurately, the fact that an undeniable number of high-profile victims came forward and the allegations actually stuck—formed the keystone of a collective grassroots awakening known as the “Me Too” movement, started by the activist Tarana Burke in 2006. Since then, #MeToo has exploded into a large-scale cultural reckoning that so far has not remotely faded, victims striding bravely and angrily out of the shadows to tell their stories of exploitation, predation, terror, abuse, derailed careers, and sabotaged potential for the first time, as well as building bridges of solidarity across

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industries and socioeconomic strata to demand meaningful, widespread, systemic change.

Or, you might know it as *the thing where men get into trouble*.

Men have been very concerned about the thing where men get into trouble. Almost as soon as powerful men began falling to the truth (and by “falling” I mean “having to say sorry for bad things they chose to do and retreat to their mansions for a few months before booking sold-out comeback tours”), other men began *just asking questions* about redemption, about forgiveness, about when reckoning goes too far and turns into a witch hunt.

And look. I am sympathetic to people who feel they’re being left behind in this new world. In a lot of ways, we all are. I understand that it’s scary to suddenly face consequences for things that used to be socially acceptable—I grew up on Pepe Le Pew too—and I hear a lot of agita from men about how they’re going to adapt. Won’t it affect women’s upward mobility if men are afraid to work with them? How are people supposed to date and procreate in this minefield? What if I get fired over a simple misunderstanding? If we believe victims unconditionally, won’t the mob eventually come for us all?

I’m sorry to say it, but you just might have to tiptoe through the minefield for a while. We’re tearing down old systems, but we haven’t built new systems yet. (*Feeling uncomfortable at work? What’s that like?*)

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Let's return for a moment to LarryBarry, who wasn't allowed to dance. For the purposes of a cleaner narrative flow, I considered fudging the truth and telling you that it was me who had the encounter with LarryBarry at the bar, instead of relaying the story secondhand through my husband. It would have made for smoother storytelling.

But I realized that the story doesn't work with me sitting at the bar, because LarryBarry would never have said that to me. The frustration that LarryBarry expressed to my husband—at not being “allowed” to dance anymore because women are so sensitive these days—was contingent on the assumption of a shared understanding, a collective lamentation between men. He wasn't trying to complain to my husband; he was trying to commiserate with him—about the loss of power and freedom, of no longer being the one who makes the rules, of no longer having the benefit of the doubt in every interaction.

This moment in history is about more than individual interactions between individual people. Those matter, too—it matters how you made your subordinate feel with that comment, and it matters quite a lot that the woman on the bus went home and sobbed after you groped her—but, as Rebecca Traister wrote in December 2017 on *The Cut*: “This moment isn't just about sex. It's really about work.”

It's about who feels at home in the workplace and who feels like an outsider—which, by extension, dictates who gets to thrive and ascend, who gets to hire their replace-

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ments, who gets to set their children up for success, who gets credit and glory, and who gets forgotten. It's about who feels safe in public spaces and who doesn't. Which is to say, it's about everything.

There's so much talk right now about being on the wrong side or the right side of history. The truth is that we have no idea whether the things we do are going to land us on the right side or the wrong side. Who knows how people are going to talk about meat eaters in two hundred years? There's a vegan lady who comes on my Instagram and calls me a rapist for drinking milk, and I hate that lady! But maybe she's right!

The reason #MeToo has been so terrifying to so many people is that we got a quick glimpse of what history is going to say about us. For just a moment, we could see the curvature of the earth.

We have a lot to figure out. The very foundations of our culture are marbled with violence, exploitation, and exclusion—the work of brilliant abusers (and mediocre ones), the institutional scaffolding that enabled them, and the invisible absence of their victims. Separating art from artist, to some degree, may not be a choice. We can't un-Michael-Jackson music or de-Alfred-Hitchcock film—nor, necessarily, should we. I don't know the answers. We also have to build mechanisms for navigating the uncomfortable fact that social movements predicated on believing victims are vulnerable to bad-faith exploitation. We have to be

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honest with ourselves about why Bill Cosby is the only high-profile #MeToo perpetrator who's seen a day in prison as of 2019. Accountability hurts, but what's the alternative? The way things were? Harvey Weinstein loosening his bathrobe while your daughter covers in front of him?

Just like Trump, America loves to lie about itself, and Americans love to eat those lies up—anything that obliterates our sins, that tells us everything will be okay, that makes us the infallible, gallant protagonist in the story of Earth. We must root out the assumptions we swallow as fact and the facts we deny. We must not just examine but actively counter the disastrous, narcissistic death grip of mediocre white men on our past century's art, media, and politics. We must start telling true stories about who we are, who is free and who is not, what we are doing to the planet.

This moment feels destabilizing, hopeful but precarious, as though everything could change or nothing could change. We have flesh-and-bone evidence sitting in the White House—but chugging Fox News and eating cheeseburgers and always disturbingly, profoundly alone—of exactly how far the status quo will go to protect itself. We know how deeply racial and gender hierarchies are built into the foundational myths of this country and by extension our stories, our pop culture, our darkest instincts, our most hidden conditioning. We know it's not just “locker room talk,” no matter how many times Melania says so, and she knows it, too.

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At the same time, have we ever been able to see it all more clearly? I cannot remember a more frightening time in all my life. And I cannot remember a time with more moral clarity.

If the Left's loathing of George W. Bush energized us to fight for and ultimately elect Barack Obama, what kind of political revolution might Trump engender? We can only see glimpses so far, but the momentum is real. A record 117 women were elected in the 2018 midterms. Democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, twenty-nine, the youngest woman ever elected to Congress, has since been terrorizing the GOP with steely competence and actually knowing how to use Twitter. A historic number of female candidates have entered the race for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. Whatever the outcome of that election, we have now seen, for the first time in history, enough women together on a presidential debate stage that the fact of their gender cannot be central. It might be too late for me to think I could be president, but it is not too late for our daughters. And all the activists and organizers and storytellers and parents and politicians who've been doing this hard work for decades *without* solidarity, without acclaim—they're all still here, too. There are so, so many of us.

If there is magic in Trump's ability to conjure reality out of hot air and spittle, there is an equally powerful magic in the opposite: in speaking the truth, unvarnished,

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about what we see, what we remember, what has been done to us by people who have assumed power and status as a birthright, rules written just for them. People who are nervous or just trying to wait this moment out until everything settles down. There is power in saying, no, we will not settle down. We will not go back. It's the lifting of a veil, the opposite of a glamour. We have to be the witches they've always said we are, and counter their magic with our own.

So fine, if you insist. This is a witch hunt. We're witches, and we're hunting you.

Choosing the Lie

The first and best viral cat was Lil Bub. A brown tabby with sweet white paws, tiny from congenital dwarfism, tongue lolling between malformed jaws, Bub swept into our lives like a tsunami: low, slow, then deceptively swift, then inexorable, reshaping the land itself. One day we did not know there was a bowlegged, walleyed cat in Bloomington, Indiana; the next day the internet would never be the same.

The internet of 2011 was not quite the internet of now. Instagram had launched only a year prior, in October 2010, and—despite the success of early meme farms such as I Can Has Cheezburger? and the proliferation of cat videos on the young YouTube—viral content still had some spontaneity left in it, some guilelessness, some shades of outsider art. Users on Tumblr and Reddit, where Bub made her debut, posted photos of cute cats because they thought other users would like to see photos of cute cats, not to