

TW: mentions of murder, rape and sexual assault

THE RISE (and consequences) OF ONLINE

ANONYMITY

Dangerous rhetoric does not become less dangerous when shared anonymously. **In fact, it's quite the opposite.**

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YikYak has its roots in the South Carolina college scene. In 2013, two students from Furman University founded the anonymous conversation app, and it took roughly a year for it to truly reach its mid-2010s prominence. College students specifically found YikYak to be a fun pastime because it puts the user in an anonymous communication feed with people within a five-mile radius, accounting for users' entire campus.

However, as quickly as YikYak began frequenting the home screens of young people, the app hit a sharp downfall in the following years and eventually became completely defunct. The reason? A plethora of threats of violence against minorities, women and other groups, some of which actually resulted in violent actions.

Recently, YikYak has taken the country by storm once again, most notably on college campuses. The aspect of anonymity allows students to say essentially anything they wish without fear of their words being traced back to them. Any USC student who frequents the forum knows that while most of what is said is harmless or even funny, there is still no shortage of hurtful or dangerous verbiage in the local feed.

As this article is being written, some "Yaks" within the USC five-mile radius include "upvote if you like soup," "i wish i was bulimic" and "run back the holocaust."

USC freshman Sarah Lynch downloaded YikYak in high school as the app started regaining popularity on college campuses. While this newfound interest in YikYak

started out harmless at Lynch's school, it wasn't long before the famously problematic forum was banned and several students were suspended.

Lynch said that she and her friends began limiting their presence on YikYak after her school's feed became filled with instances of racism, fat shaming, slut shaming and frequent bullying of students and teachers. "It was really difficult because you'd be on it and you'd think, 'wow, this is so funny,' but then the next one you'd see would be something completely ridiculous and out of pocket. There were slurs being used and stuff like that, and it was just disgusting."

Lynch says that the anonymous feature emboldened students to spread hate freely without much fear of getting caught. "Especially since it's not going to be traced back to them," Lynch said. "They just hide behind that mask."

Some students are concerned about hateful rhetoric being circulated around campus via YikYak without any knowledge of who said it. Sadly, they have good reason to be worried.

In 2015, a student at the University of Mary Washington named Grace Mann was murdered by a member of the school's rugby team. Mann was a leader in a campus feminist group called Feminists United, and after her murder, it was found that there was a host of YikYaks put out by the other members of the rugby team calling for violent acts such as rape and necrophilia against women, especially those associated with Mann and Feminists United.

Friends of Mann and others on campus tried to hold UMW and YikYak responsible for inaction despite being aware of the situation, but they were ultimately unsuccessful. There isn't much recourse to trace dangerous words back to their origin without a search warrant or something of similar weight. Historically, institutions and the platform itself have done a poor job of preventing real-life violence from manifesting as a result.

Another popular forum among high school and college students is Discord, a communication platform intended to connect people with others who share their interests. While Discord is not advertised as an anonymous space, there is a great deal of anonymity among the users, who often use nicknames, fake profile pictures or fake ages and genders. While this personalized online presence is usually completely harmless and makes it easier to connect with others, there are cases where this anonymity has been manipulated to exploit young Discord users.

While the term "Discord kittens" is commonly associated with cringe culture, it actually originated to refer to the countless teenage girls groomed on the forum by older men pretending to be of similar age and sometimes even the same gender as the girls they targeted. The girls would be engaged in days- or even months-long conversations with their new online "friends" before being pressured into doing things such as sharing their home addresses or sending pornographic images or videos. In November of 2020, Discord shut down an





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entire server of over 500 men who had been illegally sharing such photos and videos that they had acquired.

Young women on Discord also conceal their identity, but with a set of very different intentions. Women often find that they are not respected by men on the forum unless they present as men themselves. Discord is highly saturated by members of the gaming community, and there is a famous stigma against gamer girls imposed by male members. In order to avoid verbal harassment, some female gamers will go so far as to use a voice changer to sound more masculine. While the necessity to do so is a problem in itself, online anonymity can give those who appear feminine a way to find more acceptance in the gaming community.

Much less innocently, anonymity has been proven to protect the interests of online hate groups. The introduction of the internet into society has provided all manners of hate groups with a place to disseminate their ideologies, and it can be argued that one of the most popular hubs for such activity is Reddit. Like Discord, Reddit does not promote itself as an anonymous forum, but the user base typically chooses to present itself more or less anonymously.

Reddit is famously brimming with people promoting sexism, racism and violence. There is an entire Wikipedia page dedicated to subreddits that were

banned for promoting notably dangerous behavior, including r/BeatingWomen, r/DarkNetMarkets and r/frenworld, the last of which became a haven for neo-Nazis and Holocaust deniers. Other subreddits listed on the Wikipedia page are still active.

The vast majority of those who engage in these kinds of subreddits shield their identities using various degrees of online anonymity. Often, the most that can be done to prevent the spread of harmful rhetoric is shutting down the platforms. Unfortunately, without being able to identify the perpetrators, it is expected that they will then form a new subreddit or move to a new forum. This results in an endless cycle of banning and regrouping.

While people have argued that banning these groups from social media platforms infringes upon their free speech, according to an article by the Council of Foreign Relations, “Hate speech online has been linked to a global increase in violence toward minorities, including mass shootings, lynchings and ethnic cleansing.”

This issue is not limited to the United States, but the most prominent source of this violence in the US has come from white supremacist ideologies. Many of the perpetrators of violence against minorities can have their motives linked back to dangerous rhetoric they were exposed to on online forums.

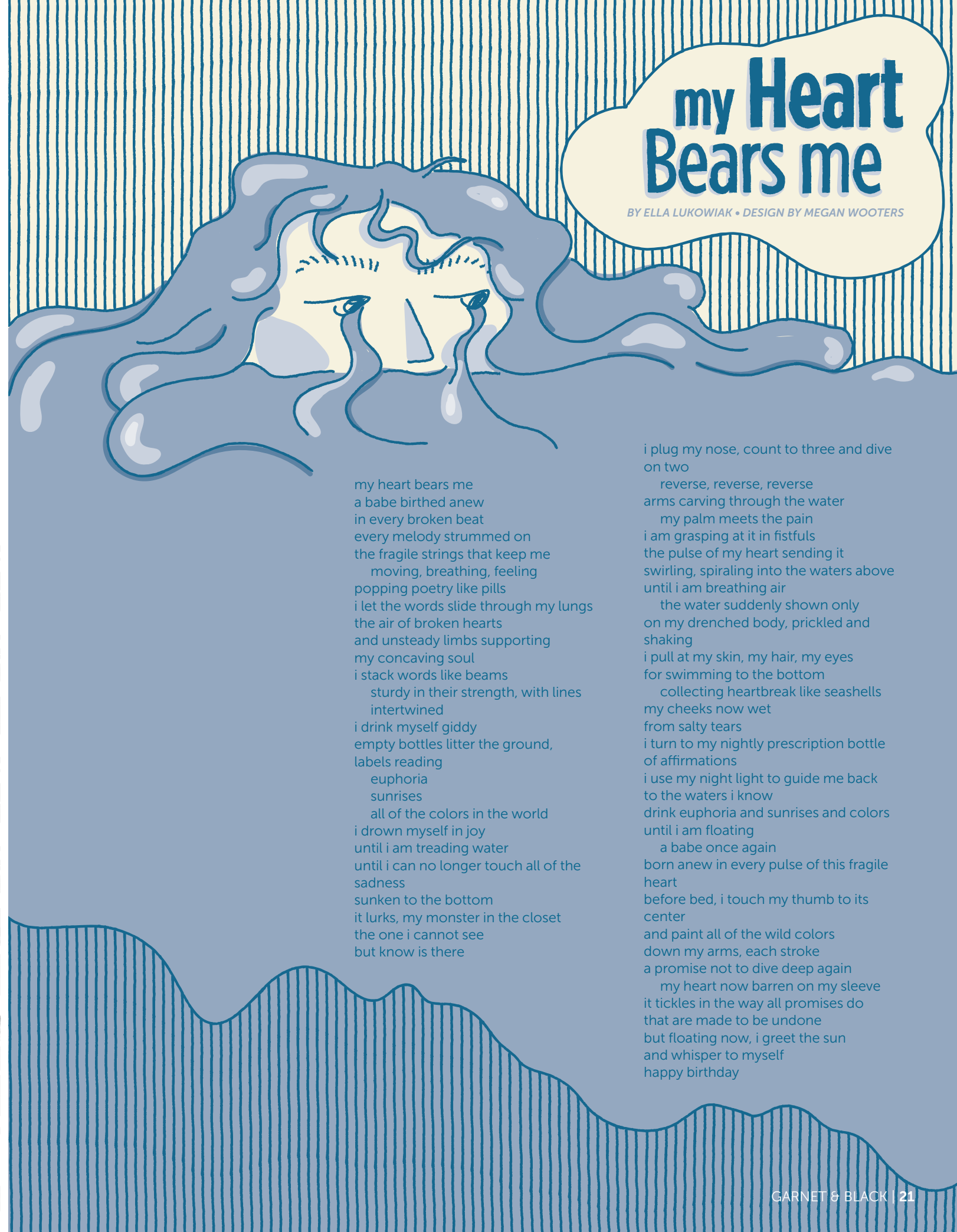
As of late, a staggering number of

domestic terrorist attacks against Black communities have been inspired by an ideology known as the Great Replacement Theory. This conspiracy theory supports the idea that white people in the United States and all around the world are being “replaced” by immigrants, Muslims and other people of color. Racist and xenophobic terrorists will justify their attacks in response to this way of thinking, which has been perpetuated in online spaces for years. A widely discussed case that occurred in the US is the 2022 Buffalo supermarket shooting that killed ten people from a predominantly Black part of the city. This act of violence has been traced directly back to online hate groups promoting the Great Replacement conspiracy.

While platforms and individuals do what they can to extinguish toxic dialogue born from online anonymity, the fact of the matter is that hate groups are not going anywhere anytime soon. When used responsibly, anonymity can help people find acceptance in online communities, and personal vigilance and responsibility are crucial to navigating the modern internet.

It can be easy to feel a sense of false security and protection in online anonymity, but once words are out in the open, they can have devastating consequences. So choose words wisely. ■

but once words are out in the open, they can have **DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES.**”



my Heart Bears me

BY ELLA LUKOWIAK • DESIGN BY MEGAN WOOTERS

my heart bears me
 a babe birthed anew
 in every broken beat
 every melody strummed on
 the fragile strings that keep me
 moving, breathing, feeling
 popping poetry like pills
 i let the words slide through my lungs
 the air of broken hearts
 and unsteady limbs supporting
 my concaving soul
 i stack words like beams
 sturdy in their strength, with lines
 intertwined
 i drink myself giddy
 empty bottles litter the ground,
 labels reading
 euphoria
 sunrises
 all of the colors in the world
 i drown myself in joy
 until i am treading water
 until i can no longer touch all of the
 sadness
 sunken to the bottom
 it lurks, my monster in the closet
 the one i cannot see
 but know is there

i plug my nose, count to three and dive
 on two
 reverse, reverse, reverse
 arms carving through the water
 my palm meets the pain
 i am grasping at it in fistfuls
 the pulse of my heart sending it
 swirling, spiraling into the waters above
 until i am breathing air
 the water suddenly shown only
 on my drenched body, prickled and
 shaking
 i pull at my skin, my hair, my eyes
 for swimming to the bottom
 collecting heartbreak like seashells
 my cheeks now wet
 from salty tears
 i turn to my nightly prescription bottle
 of affirmations
 i use my night light to guide me back
 to the waters i know
 drink euphoria and sunrises and colors
 until i am floating
 a babe once again
 born anew in every pulse of this fragile
 heart
 before bed, i touch my thumb to its
 center
 and paint all of the wild colors
 down my arms, each stroke
 a promise not to dive deep again
 my heart now barren on my sleeve
 it tickles in the way all promises do
 that are made to be undone
 but floating now, i greet the sun
 and whisper to myself
 happy birthday