

Sometime in the late aughts, I stood in the grass of my mother's backyard and downloaded a song onto my iPod Touch via WiFi. I had a thick laptop with a WiFi card that stuck out from the side, so wireless downloading was not quite new to me. But doing it in the backyard, holding a tiny device up to the sky and understanding that a song was being beamed into it from inside the house to outside in the grass, which smelled sweet and hot from the sun, was different. I was not connected to anything except the earth and something invisible.

After my parents divorced, my father put a desktop computer in my bedroom at his house. I don't remember what the desk looked like, but I had a combination bunk-bed-futon with a metal frame. From there, the computer moved into the living room, where we had a computer desk that looked similar to the one in *fig. 1*, dark reddish wood constructed to buttress the computer and its instruments, the printer and the tower and the monitor and the modem. At that desk, I wrote short stories while my father watched television behind me, with a clear view of the computer screen. My feet did not touch the ground yet. At that desk, I listened to New Jersey's then-governor resign for what I understood at the time was being gay. (I also listened to the news media discuss Britney Spears' infamous shaved head while sitting at the desk. These events occurred years apart, but they happen on the same day at the desk in my head.) I wrote my first novel at that desk, which was about a girl with an eating disorder who wanted to die.

At my mother's house, the computer desk was also in the living room. It was made of particle board, and I used my big toe to turn the desktop on and wait for the familiar noises of the computer to greet me. (I would never use my big toe at my father's house.) I wrote more novels, ordered my first object from the Internet, and broke up with my fifth-grade boyfriend at that desk, which moved around the crowded living room in search of the optimal placement. I did not have a cell phone yet, and the Internet was a place you sat down at, with your back to the room, hoping your parents did not read your love emails to the boy you sat next to on the bus. It was a place you left, by getting up off the chair, by pressing your big toe along the front wall of the tower until you hit the button if the screen was frozen, or navigating to the menu if not.



fig. 1

I became a person on the computer, which means I became a person at the desk. I become a person at this desk, too, the one I'm writing from, which is a metal rolling desk I bought off Craigslist from someone with a view of the Williamsburg Bridge. The desk is one of the only pieces of furniture that came with me from New York to San Diego, along with two lamps. The green banker's lamp, which I mistakenly believed was a family heirloom, stopped working correctly a few years ago; the chain broke, so I had to plug the lamp in every time I wanted to sit at my desk and write. I finally replaced it with an Anglepoise lamp last month.

I became a person online, which was initially tethered to the computer. My back was always to the room, and the world, the online, was in front of me. Before social media, my father taught me how to make websites on Blogspot and Google Sites. I don't remember what I wrote about. Did I write about myself? I wrote at all of the computer desks in my family: my mother's, my father's, my grandfather's, the roll top desk that lived in my father's garage and then my uncle's basement and now in his living room. I wrote an alarming number of things about wanting to die. They gifted me a laptop so that I would stop hogging the family computer, which meant that the desk in my room became a Computer Desk. The laptop was too heavy and grew too warm to be used on a lap, especially when I played *The Sims 2*, which made me horny. I was not a particularly exploratory child on the Internet: I mostly read Sims forums and www.gurl.com and messaged friends. But when my Sims leaned their heads close together and were lifted up off the floor in a flurry of hearts and murmurs, something latent sparked in my body. There were cutscenes for first kisses and WooHooing, which took up the whole screen and meant anyone behind you could tell your Sims were fornicating. My mother made me move the laptop from my room to the kitchen table so that she could see what I was doing.



At the time, you had to sit down at the desk, or the kitchen table, to post. When I began using a point-and-shoot camera to make photographs of myself, posting required importing the photos to the computer, editing them (poorly), and uploading them to Flickr. Captions were needed. The photo community of young girls mirrored one another's writing patterns and photographs, too. Every day I went out into the world and made a picture of myself, usually avoiding the eye of the camera, and every day I then sat down at the computer and placed a small part of me online, putting myself in the outstretched hands of whoever would listen. I wrote more earnestly about myself than I had ever previously communicated with anyone. It was new to me then, having to define oneself online; it constituted lists, quizzes, trying to place oneself. I began using Caiti as my name, instead of Caitlin. I asked myself questions I did not know the answers to, because they were questions other people online were asking themselves. I did not consider myself separate from the girl online; there were photographs of me, there was writing about me, it was me I was placing there. I felt concretely at age fifteen that I was the same person online as I was in the world. (I did not know that online was in the world, too.)

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DESIGN – CHRISTMAS TO DISH GARDENS

I have two desks now in my studio. They sit perpendicular to one another in a corner (fig. 2). My computer desk is on the left, the desk which came with me from New York and holds my laptop on a stand and a mechanical keyboard and hard drives and the nice lamp.

My other desk is a writing desk, an old tanker. I do not put the computer on this desk; there is no room, and that isn't what this desk is for. Often it is a holding place for things I am working on: books I am writing about, letters I have yet to respond to. Every Monday I clear off the detritus and begin again. I respond to letters, I sort the mail and pay bills, I call my health insurance. The drawers of the desk are full of more detritus, and growing too heavy to pull out smoothly. I avoid them now. The space in this corner is very tight, so that when I sit to write I am boxed in by the two desks, pressed against the wall, forced to do nothing but look at the wall or the page in front of me.

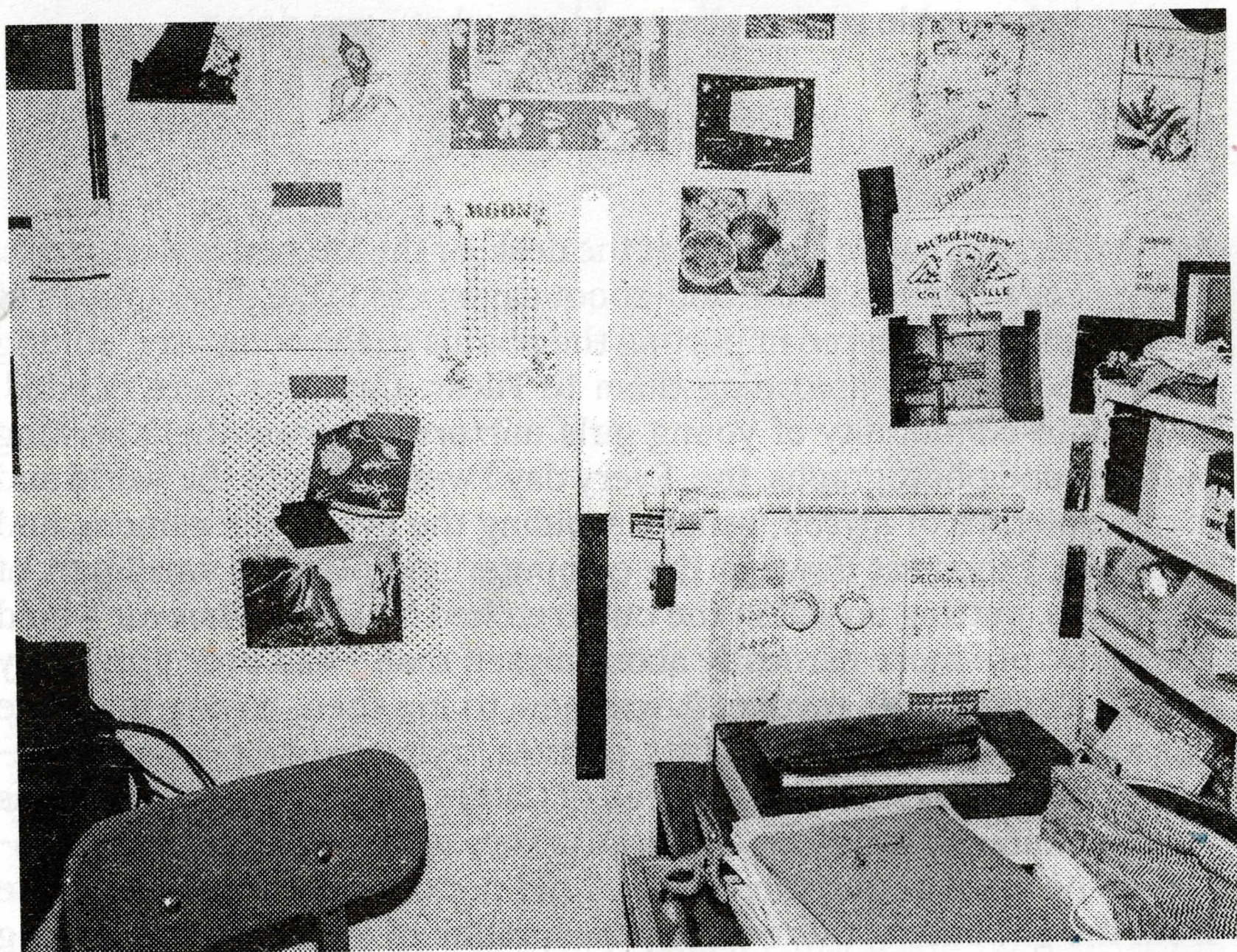


fig. 2