

Zak Podmore

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Clouds were flowing over the mountains when I arrived at the Montello Foundation cabin on a late May evening. They were massive thunderheads with great billowing tops that glowed pink in the sunset. Dark coattails of rain trailed from their flat bottoms. Lightning flashed, too distant to hear the thunder.

I lit a candle as dusk settled, made a quick dinner, and fell asleep, thinking I'd go for a long hike the next day. When I awoke, the mountains were framed perfectly by the plate glass doors that invite the northern Nevada landscape into the cabin. The dawn alpenglow reflected on the snow that still clung to the high ridges, and another storm was moving in. I put off my hike.

During my two-week stay, I never made it to the mountains. I watched them instead. I set my laptop on the small table beside a stack of research material in front of the windows. The clouds kept arriving. When rain fell nearby, the gray clay roads — which never seemed to see any use — turned to a thick impassable gumbo. Once the sun broke back through, the roads dried quickly, and I'd go for a walk or a short run before the next storm arrived.

I was writing the final chapters of a book about how drought and climate change are revealing Glen Canyon from the waters of Lake Powell. The sea of sagebrush around the cabin allowed my mind, which had been mired in policy reports and climate models, to relax into the story I was trying to tell.

The days blended together in wonderful uneventfulness. I was used to backcountry trips that took me away from phone reception, but I was always moving on those trips, backpacking or running rivers. It had been years since I'd worked for days without internet access. The silence engulfed me, and the pages poured off my keyboard. Chapters that I'd been picking at for months coalesced between sunrises and sunsets. When I was tired of writing, I'd lift a book off of the desk or choose one from the cabin shelves and read for hours. Then dusk, lightning, and another solitary dinner by candlelight.

Only twice was this rhythm broken. About five days into the retreat, I decided to drive to a ridgetop to contact the outside world. I passed a car ten miles from the cabin, and its driver asked me if I'd seen his horse. I hadn't. But when I got back to the cabin, a mare was standing in front of the window, wearing a bridle and chewing

on a clump of grass. I searched for its owner, but he'd left. The horse returned twice daily, and it wouldn't let me get near. I eventually drove back to service and contacted one of the neighbors, who called a local cowboy. By the time the cowboy arrived with a trailer the next day, the horse had vanished like the wispy virga that was falling from the clouds. The animal never returned to the cabin.

Virga turned back into rain, and I settled in for more mudbound isolation. Sometime in the second week, my writing progress suddenly ceased. I was trying to tell the story of a hike I took to a Las Vegas casino in the middle of a four-month-long kayak trip down the length of the Colorado River, but I wasn't happy with any of the gambling scenes — a setting that seemed so far removed from the sagebrush and juniper out the door. So I decided to break my solitude again. I timed a getaway between storms and drove to Jackpot, Nevada. After the cabin, the modest floor of Cactus Pete's Casino might as well have been on the Las Vegas strip. I stayed up half the night, throwing red dice down the green craps table with roughnecks and elderly men in cowboy hats. I chatted with the dealers as servers brought me cold beers on black trays. I pushed chips around the roulette board, watching them go up and down for hours until they finally disappeared. I was \$100 poorer when I got back in my truck to catch a few hours of sleep.

I returned to the cabin and finished the chapter while rain poured off the roof in sheets.

After that, I'm pleased to report, absolutely nothing happened. It was perfect.

