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Acquittal report: Montello Foundation

I arrived at Montello in Spring 2025. At that time, I had two fiction manuscripts under contract with my long-time publisher—a novel and a short story collection—both long overdue for submission. For the past two years I had been preoccupied with caring for my father, who is living with esophageal cancer. Any writing-work had been undertaken in weird slivers of time at my childhood kitchen table, in the day oncology unit while my father received treatment, and in my phone's Notes app.

On my first evening, I walked to the top of a nearby hill and I took a picture: the dusty ground covered in sagebrush, sloping down to the house and my rental car. They were dwarfed by the environment—the enormity of the desert sky, the hills and valleys and dry wash, and, in the far distance, snow-capped mountains.

I had suspected it would take me some time to begin to think like a writer

again, and this proved true. But the beautiful cabin with its clean geometry, blond timber and sweeping views was the ideal place to do just that. When I sat down to work at the simple desk in the spare, light-filled studio, I tried to type without thinking too much. With no internet, I couldn't stop to research, or to look up synonyms, or to procrastinate. Every time I hit a troublesome passage—something I needed to Google, or a phrase I couldn't put my finger on—I typed XXXX, marked it in red, and ploughed on. That is a liberating way to work for a person like me who gets snagged on detail, and who is prone to working each sentence over and over as she goes.



My writing is concerned with the intersections of class, geography, gender, and memory. As both a reader and writer, I've always been invested in the minutiae of place, setting, climate, culture, and so on. I want to give a sense of fullness and realism; a time- and labor-intensive ambition. Many (though not all) of my stories grow from time spent in the locations in which they are set. For me, one of the greatest joys of writing is the earliest phase: the thinking, observation and dreaming that happens before any words make it to the page. There is such pleasure in tuning into the frequency of a new place—its climate, its sounds, its idiom, its myths, its patterns. Its ugliness, too: extractive industries, shadows, shame.

In my two weeks at Montello, I worked on my novel, but I also completed a new short story. The latter sprung from many cold nights gazing at up the starry sky, stupefied by its scale and brilliance.

On sunny mornings I drank my coffee sitting the porch watching rabbits darting between the sagebrush. I worked for a few hours until I grew hungry or wanted to take a walk, then returned to my desk. Every evening, I brought my laptop from the studio to the living quarters. I poured a glass of wine in the same glass tumbler, which I drank while I lost track of time building a small fire in the wood heater. Then I prepared dinner while the light left the sky through the wide windows. Even when I was not seated and typing, I was writing: the whole time, I had the sense of swimming in my work for the first time in months. The time and space was nothing short of a gift: it allowed crucial respite from day-to-day responsibilities and provided the silence and solitude I needed re-engage with my creative practice.

