

On month twenty three of my once a month camping streak, I head to the desert. The absent winter, the looming consequences for summer, and the most recent media frenzy demand a change of scenery. Heading west, the light stays for just a little longer, the frigid January winds are just a little more forgiving, the snow even more scant.

I settle on 18 road, a mountain bike and jeep trail area I've been meaning to visit for years. A few miles northeast of Fruita, the BLM area sits at the base of the Bookcliffs, so named because the striated shale and sandstone appeared as stacked books to wandering geologists in the 1800's. The pyramid drainages and multi-shades of grey cast deep shadows that change by the hour. In all the years I have stared at them from a car window, I only just realized that the "books" were imagined to be stacked with their pages facing the highway. I always imagined them standing up, spines out, as they sit on a library shelf. I suppose a tilt of the head could imagine books in any number of arrangements.

I could not free myself from the vines of desk work until 3:00 and so we arrive at dusk. The air is cold and I hurriedly inflate the sleeping pad, arranging the 4-Runner as a crowded sleeping pod for me and my two dogs. Dark falls early in the winter, even ninety miles to the west. I wile away the hours vacillating between reading and keeping my nose warm inside my sleeping bag.

I wake to a few more cars in what's left of the dispersed camping in this area. The first blush of dawn lights up the tawny sand hills and the dogs and I meander among them, seeking what warmth we can find. The trails snake and intersect in every direction— it's obvious that regulation and management are recent to this area. The sign at the end of the road proudly states that what remains of the dispersed camping will be developed as soon as enough fees are collected. The ruts of truck tires make the need apparent, but a part of me feels a little sad.

I spend the morning hours puttering about camp, waiting for the temperature to rise. Around 10, I make my old, fat dogs comfortable and set out on my mountain bike, rounding the soft hills, peak-a-booming in and out of the tight arroyos. Up and down through a monotonous landscape, a palette of mustards, taupes, tans. Snow patches in the shade grab my back wheel, a rough night's sleep affecting my coordination.

The outside world and its firestorm politics seem far from here.

I feel grateful, as I arrived last night in a nihilistic mood, having immersed myself in newscasts for the last hour of the drive. Where I eat my granola bar has been an ocean, is the graveyard of a millenia of crustaceans, the site of endless unseen floods and crashing boulders. It cares little for presidents and their agendas.

I make a wide circle across the landscape, riding back to camp on gravity alone.

I reward the dogs with a hike and remember a timebound mom task that requires wifi. It's twenty minutes to Grand Junction and although this errand should irritate me, it doesn't. I am in the waning hours of active motherhood and my woman behind the curtain act is less and less

critical. I leave the land of impassivity and neutral hues and head for split highways and complicated freeway intersections. Since I am there, before I arrive at Starbucks, I add a few errands, picking up a new book, a camp towel, a fried chicken sandwich. I get the registration done and head back to camp.

I set up the tent for the night, organizing and more puttering. I head out again on my bike, this time following a steep two track, gaining a ridge. The sun turns orange. My two fingers fit just below it and the horizon. My heart pumps hard in my chest. Clicking through the gears, the chill reddens my cheeks. Each pull and push of the pedals is a satisfying effort, my breath heavy in my ears.

Coming to a high point, the yellow mounds repeat below me. The view is vast, the frozen ocean of sand only a foreground, the great valley a yawning mouth beyond. Orange and red fill the sky. The Book Cliffs, so aptly named, say nothing.

In and out, in and out, chaos and peace, paying attention and purposefully disengaging, holding a child while releasing them, the sound and fury of corrupt men and the transparent moon in an afternoon sky. Mountains and madness. Fractures and conscious compartmentalization.

It's enough to make a girl go camping in January

I head downhill, the suspension of the bike flexing beneath me. I stand on my pedals. The pitch is gentle, the movements small. Gliding. While these respites and timeouts from the world are hypnotic and freeing, there is always more puttering to be done, things to be cared for, applications to be submitted. For every breath in, there must be one out.

The evening air bites at my fingers and I coast silently back to camp.