

Badlands: Utah

by [Jeanne Murray Walker](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue

That July I headed in my rental car
to see the eerie tall stone fuchsia/orange/
and purple hoodoos. Soon the boulders
blazed up, sky poured golden fire that singed
my skin, made my head ache.

The overloaded motor
whimpered, smoked, and died. Nothing human
for a hundred miles.

On the rocky shoulder
I stood pondering. I had no phone,
I'd brought no water. I could feel my tongue
swell, my hands go numb, as terror
sent its venom through my veins.
Dead beside the road, a bloated rattler
with garnet eyes, half eaten by a vulture.
Now I know, I thought, how I will die.

I found a rock and tried to dredge for water
in sand:

just sand, more fiery sand.

My shadow lengthened,
a cold breeze dried my sweat. Then thunder
from the rim of the slit horizon shocked
me awake and I began to walk.
Adrift.

Every place the same.

I came back mute
with thirst, maddened by howling rock.
I sat watch, all wild attention.

As night
edged in, a tortoise lugged her shell

across the vast cold desert, a pilgrim
scarring a trail in sand with her stiff tail,
and I thought: *Find what you need, small pilgrim.*

Just before the desert Ranger found me,
I watched her stretch her nose to nuzzle spurge weed.