

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.