


 Invitation

You said, "I like your husband. How long
 have you two been together?" Which was
 an invitation to say more, the way
 we got together, why. But which I took
 at face value. My answer was like
 a stone skipping over water, the speed,
 the eerie sound it made: "Four years,"
 but what I should have said is that we met
 the summer I turned forty. That there
 had been three men, that one was marrying
 someone else. I thought I'd put him
 at the side of my life, on a back burner,
 as I told my friend, though I kept
 the taste of his name in my mouth.
 Another, younger than I, who had written
 Happy Birthday on a card forty times,
 then called one night, suicidal. "I can't
 be alone," he said. A poor connection. I swore
 I heard the stammer of the rain. But it
 was just his voice knocking on the wooden dark.
 I hadn't gone. So there was just my husband
 after all left real. And what I remember most
 about that summer was a time he wasn't there,
 before I'd even begun thinking of him
 when he wasn't there. A picnic at the Lakes
 by a narrow, gingerbread bridge
 built for an exposition and other structures
 now abandoned, nearly falling down.
 My friend's friend, the magician, sat beside me,
 making an egg appear and disappear. Something
 was bothering him, something was wrong. His girl,
 an Amazonian blonde from the Midwest,
 she was an actress, kept going to the water's edge
 and looking in. His trick was like a secret future
 of company, a way of drawing
 someone to you. It was like the sun
 skittering behind clouds as it had that day,
 making our surroundings seem to appear
 and disappear, the dull grass and white bedspread
 over it. This must have been a Sunday.
 I was thinking of a job I wanted
 and whether they, or anyone,
 would call me the next morning.

The Language of Salt

As harvesters approach the salt lake,
they change the pitch of their voices.

The words they speak are like their own words
written upside down and backward.

They must not fart or fornicate on the journey.
No one who does can return

to the village where the women
and barking dogs wait to greet them.

Salt is a jealous goddess. If a woman were
to go to the lake the salt would disappear,
even if a woman were only to turn
her face in its direction.

The men make a new world
to one another, the world of salt.

One is *margen*, old mother, another, *pargen*,
old father. The others, their loved sons.

They go from tent to tent, eating
dumpling soup and discussing things.

At night the lord of animals
watches over the good yak.

It is a strong and versatile beast
that will eat sand where there is no grass.

Its intestines can twist, causing it
to grow ill and die. But it goes forward
to where the lake starts, and returns
in silence with its load of salt.