

MY MOTHER'S HARVEST CENTERPIECE

Out of the space of supper plates
pushed back, out of her all-night falling asleep
and waking up to arrange it on the tray

under the hanging lamp, this perfect, twined
circle of twigs and autumn leaves she collected
from the dirt driveway of our tarpapered
garage-house. Out of the next day's forgotten

breakfast and lunch – no appetite now
but for making it -- this cardboard wish
of a house with a picture window, floating

on the soft, unseasonable green
of Easter grass, with longer tufts of grass
on each side of the front door, wide open
to let out a long line of pipe-cleaner kids,

enough to make the women who'll view them
tonight at the square dance club dinner laugh.
Under her smile as she thinks of their laughter

and turns the small world she constructs like a god
to glue on the (omit "last") kids' paper dresses and pants,
the sorrow of her own childhood
raising six younger siblings in the Ozarks,

and pregnant now herself for the fourth time.
Underneath the mother she has made
at the center of the centerpiece,

a faceless clothespin woman that the children
converge upon, who else but herself,
her endless chores on my stepfather's would-be
farm like the woman's impossible chore

of feeding with no hands a flock of jurassic
plastic chickens, nearly as tall as she is?
Underneath this clothespin farmer leaning

toward the woman with no way to touch her,
who but my stepfather, the man now **pacing**
in the twilight and shouting that she's taken so
damn long with the centerpiece, the dinner

is going to start without it? Out of the deep dream
my mother goes right on dreaming, the wide
outer circle **of vegetables** from our family's unhappy

harvest in the back field: turnips and baby winter
squashes and potatoes like gloomy hills
the little family can't see beyond. From her old
grudges as a wife and the fights of her father

and mother, from her life as the oldest child
far from town in the Ozarks, a pipe-cleaner girl
set apart, waving with a hole in her hand.