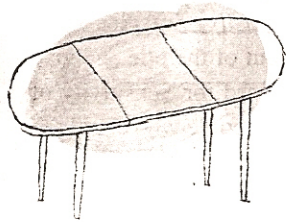


The Poetry Judge

by GARRISON KEILLOR

THERE are four hundred poems," the president of the poetry society said over the phone, "but judging won't take you that long, because most of them are pretty bad." The next day the poems arrived in an apple carton, three bundles bound with rubber bands, and I spread them out in the squares of sunshine on my dining-room table. *O dining-room table, dear old friend, home of my mournful mashed potatoes.* Four hundred poems, enough to fill a bread box, by ninety-three poets who hoped to win one of four modest cash prizes—modest to you, but no prize is modest to a poet. Poets are starved for prizes—awards, with cash stipends, named after ladies with three names. And what poet truly feels, deep down in his or her heart, that he or she is unworthy of much, much more recognition, *right away?* Not me. I won the Anna von Helmholtz Phelan Prize for poetry in 1962 and am starved for another, even though I am no longer a poet. When I took the rubber bands off the bundles of poems, I could hear a faint sucking, an inhalation of poem breath, poems whispering, *Please, sir. Please.*



The president had asked me to judge the society's annual contest because, she admitted, she was having a hard time finding people to do it, and, though I had no time to give her, none, I said yes because I was angry about some awful stuff I'd read recently. It was dreadful garbage, and because dreadful people have plenty of time to serve as judges, this garbage had won awards. It was a book of essays by a Minnesota guy who specializes in taking walks in the woods and looking at the reflections of sunlight on small bodies of water and feeling grievous and wounded in a vague way—a thoughtful guy in a harsh, unfeeling world with too much molded-plastic furniture, and he pouts for a few pages and then resolves to soldier on as a sensitive person in a crass



The poetic imagination, imagined

world. This guy's stuff reads like a very long letter from someone you wish would write to someone else; it is mournful and piteous, as if he were about to ask if he could come and live in your home for a few months, but it won awards because it is pretentiously sad and is "about" something, maleness or the millennium, and that means his books will find their way into schools, his glum reflections will be disseminated among innocent schoolchildren, and they will learn that a great writer is one who can lead the reader away from the dangerous edge of strong feeling and into the barns of boredom. So the brighter ones—though they love to write stories!—will decide not to be writers, and we'll have another writerless generation like the thirtysomething adolescents of today, and our beloved country will sink ever deeper into the great couch of despond and vanish in the Internet. That is why I agreed to judge the poetry contest: to save America. Otherwise, why bother?

ATWO-foot stack of poems on the dining-room table, the names of the poets blacked out, each poet a number, each poem assigned a letter: 1a, 1b, 1c. *O Poem 1a, yearning, naked, wet, would you mind getting dressed, please, 1a?*

1a was an elegy to a dead cat, with classic elegiac touches—the gray sky weeping rain, dead flowers in a vase, bare boughs of trees, brown leaves skittering across the vacant yard where once Kitty had chased them—but mainly the poem was a bitter complaint against Daddy.

I was your happy dancing little Daddy's girl
starving for your love
but no you were too busy Daddy

