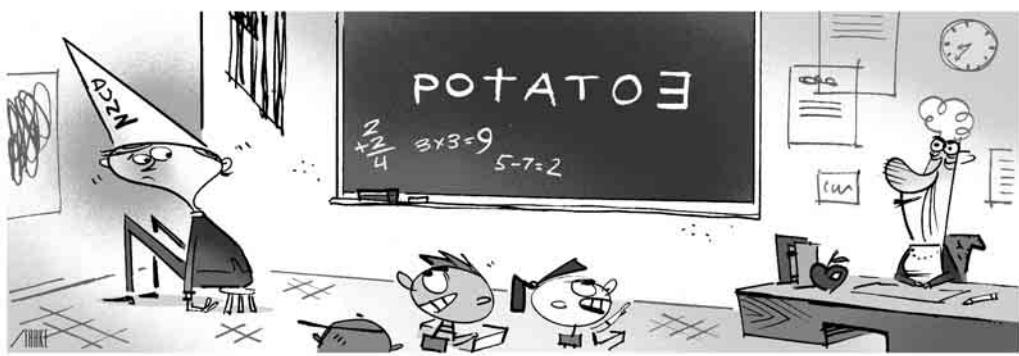


## The Style Invitational

### Week 570: Timeline Rhyme Lines



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

*Quayle the Veep sank fast and faster  
Once a tater spelled disaster.*

*Wilbur Mills met his disgrace in  
The shallows of the Tidal Basin.*

*Mayor Barry, at the Vista,  
Was set up by a vengeful sista.*

*Mata Hari was the greatest of spies;  
She learned many secrets by using her thighs.*

**This week's contest** was suggested by Tom Ponton of Columbia, who lives on a street with such a silly name that it's amazing that any real estate is ever sold there. Tom recalls the rhymes he was taught as a schoolboy to remember historical events ("Back in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue"; "Spain's armada, once so great, was sunk in 1588") and figured that the Losers could produce a much more colorful chronicle of couplets about some historical event. Of course you can. Like all decent doggerel, they must rhyme well and be in good meter, or the Empress will imperiously sail them smack into the Dustbin of Invitational History.

First-prize winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational Trophy. First runner-up wins the CD "Yodeling the Classics," by Mary Schneider. "Australia's Queen of Yodeling," donated with glee by Peter Metrinko of Plymouth, Minn. This incredibly fabulous disc features such gems as a full-out yodel of the "William Tell" Overture, complete with full orchestra. We can pretty much guarantee you have never heard anything like it. Other runners-up win the coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to [losers@washpost.com](mailto:losers@washpost.com) or by fax to 202-334-4312.

Deadline is Monday, Aug. 16. Put the week number in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Sept. 5. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's contest is by Russell Beland of Springfield.

**Report from Week 566**, in which we asked for Googlewhacks, two-word phrases that, when entered into the Google search engine, would produce one and only one Web site. The entries below were written three to four weeks ago, and some already have lost their one-hit-wonder status.

◆ **Third runner-up: One-hundred-fourteenth dimension:** The lowest dimension that fits the rules of this contest—until The Post puts these results on its Web page. (Russell Beland, Springfield)

◆ **Second runner-up: Tautologous Googlewhacking:** Googlewhacking that is tautologous. (Mark Hagenau, Derry, N.H.)

◆ **First runner-up, the winner of the "Subliminal Persuasion" cassette tape to stop hair loss: Decimated triskaidekaphobia:** Fear of the number 11.7. (Myra Snow, Clarksville)

◆ **And the winner of the Inker: Tapioca natatoriums:** One way to slow down Michael Phelps. (Pam Sweeney, Germantown)

#### ◆ Honorable Mentions:

**Abecedary fuehrer:** Leader of a sect that believes that the Aryans are the penultimate master race, second only to the Aborigines. (Danny Bravman, Potomac)

**Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious speechwriter:** The staffer who convinced the president that "if you say it loud enough you'll always sound precocious." (Carolee Eubanks, San Marcos, Calif.)

**Vulcanized perambulator:** A rubber baby buggy. (Chris Doyle, Forsyth, Mo.)

**Homunculus telecommuter:** The little man inside the Internet who delivers all the e-mail. (Liz Starin, New York)

**Bootylicious Catullus:** A tarted-up college humanities course trying to attract today's students. (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

**Heft assizer:** The airline employee who determines if you have to buy two airline tickets for yourself. (Peter Metrinko, Plymouth, Minn.)

**Whisperliner panic:** The sudden doubt that air passing over its wings could ever hold up the plane you're on. (Dan Dunn, Bethel, Conn.)

**Iguanodon vacuuming:** A liposuction procedure for very obese senior citizens. (Lee Gazlay, South Riding)

**Knievel halberds:** The axes of Evel. (Chris Doyle)

**Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis tourette:** A rare disease where you never know what's going to come out of your lungs next. (Bruce W. Alter, Fairfax Station)

**Hypodermic Zambonis:** Botox injections. (Russell Beland)

**Minimum-security vichyssoise:** The first in a line of practical recipes in next month's Martha Stewart Living. (Brendan Beary)

**Decontaminated lederhosen:** What you pick up from the cleaners after an out-of-control "Sound of Music" karaoke session. (Jane Auerbach and David Eberlein, Los Angeles)

**Norge panjandrum:** A refrigerator magnate. (Chris Doyle)

**Pleather scrapple:** all the leftover parts of the pleather. (Mika Smith, Baltimore)

**Paleontological tref:** Jurassic pork. (Danny Bravman)

**Clorox appreciativeness:** Undyeing thanks. (Danny Bravman)

**Evangelicals stir-frying:** Just a closer wok with Thee. (Chris Doyle)

**Nitwitted palindrome:** Able was I ere I saw St. Helena. (Chris Doyle)

**Terpsichorean cooties:** What really closed Studio 54. (Jeff Brechlin, Potomac Falls)

**Scatologic Betelgeuse:** The mess left behind when a star turns into a nova. (Axel Brinck, Montreal)

**Deviant broccoflower:** At last, a vegetable even Mom tells you to avoid. (Jane Auerbach)

**Cucaracha kerfuffle:** Legal slang for a common tenant-landlord dispute. (Brendan Beary)

**Braggartly coral:** Boast reef. (Seth Brown, North Adams, Mass.)

**Kerchoo waggles:** The nose fidgets that precede a gigantic sneeze. (Richard Grantham, North Melbourne, Australia, and Chris Doyle) [This Googlewhack is an anagram of . . .]

**Excrements Zuzette:** Pancakes that taste like crepe. (Russell Beland)

**Gutless sumos:** When you know the South Beach Diet has gone too far. (Peter Boice, Rockville)

**Granitic bialy:** Rock and roll. (Liz Starin, New York)

**Sousaphone tribunals:** A variation of tuba litigations. (Russell Beland)

**Pedestrian Exsanguination:** Latest release for the PlayStation 2: Tagline: "Mow 'em Down on the Sidewalk!" Points earned are determined by pedestrian's mobility and social standing. (Michael Lyons, New Albany, Ohio)

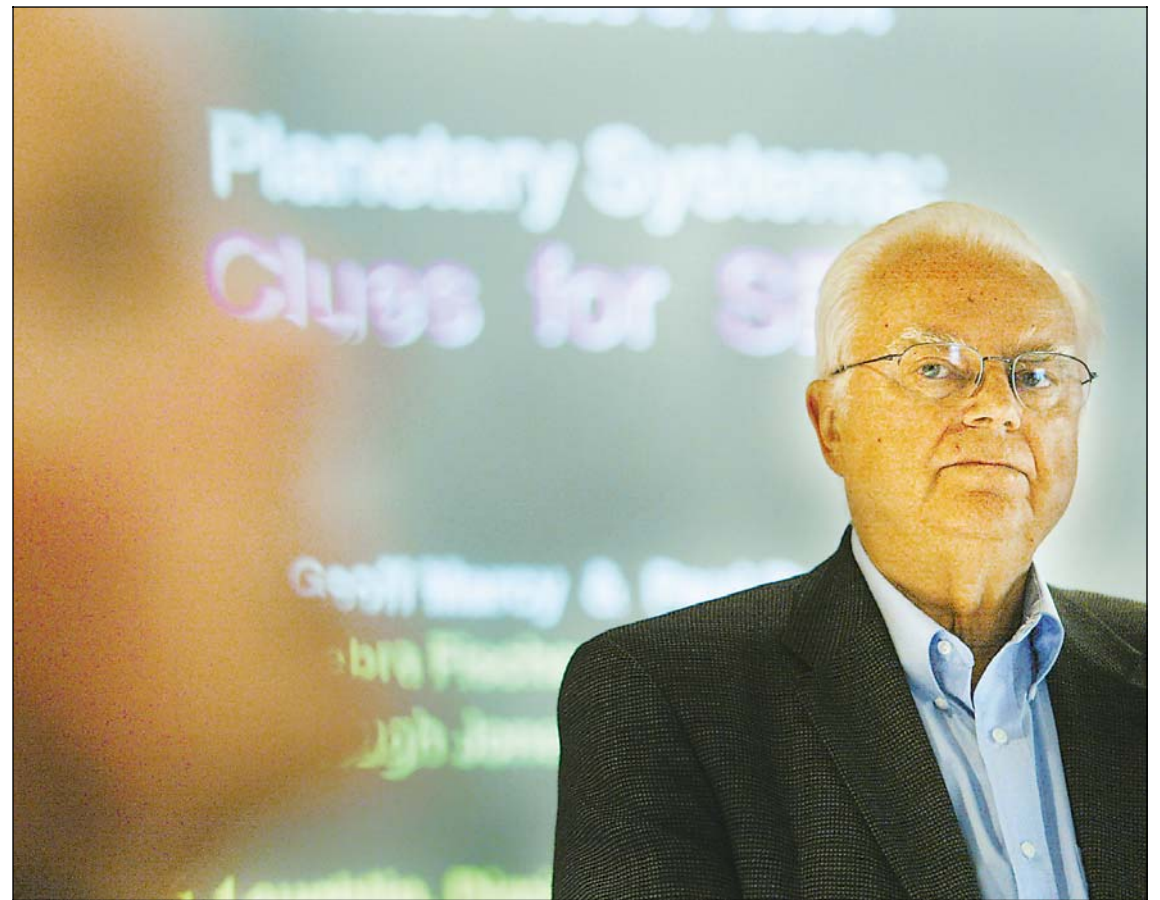
**Figmental fjord:** The gulf where Bush believes Saddam dumped those WMDs. (Phyllis Reinhard, East Fallowfield, Pa.)

**Defenestration rock:** The thing people who lived in glass houses wish they hadn't thrown. (Russell Beland)

**Schmick Cheney:** President Bush's super-secret code name for the veep. (Brendan Beary)

**Triskaidekaphobic Broncos:** Why Elway went for the two-point conversion after tying the game at 12. (Pam Sweeney, Germantown)

**Noiselessness sequoias:** The answer to the tree-falling-in-the-woods conundrums. (Chris Doyle)



PHOTOS BY JULIA MALAKIE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Astronomer Frank Drake says we haven't found alien life because "we just haven't looked at nearly enough stars."

## If E.T. Calls, Will We Hear Him?

SETI, From D1

to admit that they still haven't found what they're looking for. They don't believe in flying saucers and alien abduction. They just believe in the possibilities of life in space.

Among those here were Frank Drake, creator of the famous Drake Equation, the formula for estimating the number of communicative civilizations in our galaxy; Dan Werthimer, who has lured 5 million people to join the cause in a program called SETI@home; Kent Cullers, a physicist whose enthusiasm hasn't waned despite a quarter-century of searches that have yielded only static; and Paul Horowitz, who searches in the optical wavelengths, scanning the sky for an alien laser pulse.

Murray titled the workshop "The Significance of Negative SETI Results." It was a rather provocative title. SETI scientists don't talk much about negative results. You can't prove a negative, they say. You can't discover the absence of the extraterrestrials, because the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

But Murray wanted them to consider that, surely, four decades of a null result should tell us something about the hypothesis that there are intelligent, communicative civilizations in space. Ever since Drake aimed an 85-foot radio telescope in Green Bank, W.Va., toward two star systems in 1960, the SETI faithful have conducted numerous surveys of the night sky. They have known that it was a high-risk, high-reward business. Chances are that they'll find nothing, because our instruments remain primitive (cosmically speaking). But they might possibly make the greatest discovery in the history of mankind.

Though there is no evidence of ETI, the Copernican Principle says that there is nothing particularly special about the Earth, that whatever has happened here might happen elsewhere. There are upwards of 100 billion stars in our galaxy alone, and there are tens of billions of galaxies in the observable universe. Life emerges from ordinary matter, stuff like carbon and oxygen, and there's plenty of it in the cosmos. On the basic question, the people in this room have no doubt: They're out there.

SETI makes another leap, presuming that some of those civilizations will be communicative, and that this period of communication will overlap our own period of listening (it doesn't do us any good if a communicative civilization collapsed 2 billion years ago and its radio transmitters have become buried in the dark green soil of the planet Tralfamadore.)

In the past four decades, there've been tantalizing moments, false alarms, some inexplicable blips, some intriguing anomalies, but nothing that has come close to meeting the standard of scientific proof.

"We just haven't looked at nearly enough stars," Drake told a reporter before the meeting began. "We shouldn't have succeeded yet."

Drake and others concede only that, in the wavelengths they've searched, there doesn't appear to be any nearby intelligent civilization sending an intentional beacon toward Earth ("We've ruled out

omnidirectional beacons of more than 10<sup>13</sup> watts with a steady duty cycle.")

Project Phoenix, a search sponsored by Drake's organization, the SETI Institute, has been the most sensitive survey so far, examining many possible radio wavelengths, but it targeted only 1,000 nearby stars. That's a tiny portion of the galaxy, never mind all the other galaxies out there.

"Earthlings are just getting into the game," said Werthimer, a fast-talking University of California-Berkeley professor who is chief scientist for SETI@home. He urged against making too many assumptions about the way extraterrestrials would want to communicate. About half of all great discoveries are purely serendipitous, he said. The breakthrough might not even come from a SETI search. "It'll be somebody doing a dark matter experiment, or a gravity wave experiment," he said.

Werthimer showed a slide with

about ET motivations. There's a lot of interstellar mind-reading going on.

Ideally we would simply eavesdrop on the cosmos and pick up leakage from alien TV stations. But leakage is faint and extremely hard to detect. Drake and Murray argue that we should look for beacons, the intentional messages from the ETs. But this raises some squishy notions of alien behavior. Why would any intelligent civilization want to shout into the night sky?

"Intelligent creatures do weird things," Drake answered. "They would construct a beacon because it is emotionally or philosophically important."

They might belong to a religious cult, he said.

Geoff Marcy, the famed planet-hunting astronomer, steered the conversation toward the number of potentially habitable worlds in our own galaxy. In the past nine years he and his colleagues have

found more than 100 planets outside our own solar system (he announced another six Saturday). Many are huge, hot Jupiter-like planets with eccentric orbits close to their parent stars, making them unlikely candidates for the emergence of intelligent life. But Marcy's data show that smaller planets are more plentiful than larger ones, and the trend line strongly suggests that the most common ones could be small, rocky planets like Earth, Venus and Mars.

In our galaxy alone, he said, "There must be 20 billion Earth-sized rocky planets with liquid water on the surface right now."

But Marcy has a hunch that intelligence is rather rare in our galaxy. He asked the group why we have found no artifacts, such as robotic probes, from an intelligent civilization. This echoes the famous Fermi Paradox, after the physicist Enrico Fermi, who more than half a century ago asked the question, "Where is everybody?"

Cullers offered one answer: We haven't looked very hard.

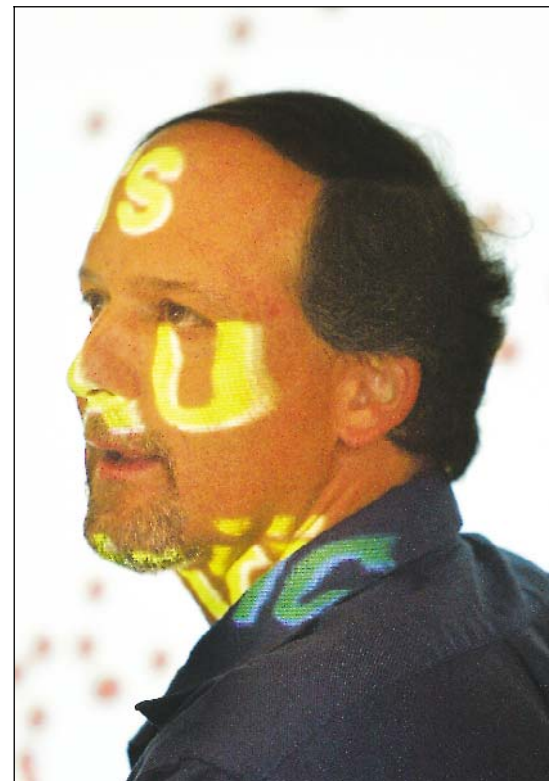
"Our searches for gadgets are terrible," he said. But Marcy said there might be other factors at work. Perhaps there is something about life itself, or intelligence, that makes it rare. This was a line of reasoning that got little attention in the Harvard Faculty Club. The origin of life is a mystery still. It took 3 billion years for life to evolve into something as complex as a worm. No one understands how consciousness emerges from the brain.

The Drake Equation is still largely a string of unknowns. We don't if it's common for a planet to remain habitable for 4 billion years, or if Earth just got lucky. We don't know how long a technological civilization typically survives. We have to wonder how long *we'll* be around.

Werthimer had the best line of the day: "Your best guess is your worst enemy."

At the end of the meeting, Drake thanked everyone for the collegial nature of the event. And it was true: Everyone had been polite, thoughtful, friendly. Searching for the aliens is a difficult, challenging, mind-boggling enterprise, and people need lots of support and encouragement.

When you're in a strange business like this, it's nice to know you're not alone.



Geoff Marcy says, "There must be 20 billion Earth-sized rocky planets with liquid water on the surface."

a newspaper headline: "30 Trillion Fruitless Tries." That's how many different wavelengths from different stars have been examined by SETI searches. But Werthimer said that's still only a start, that new generations of computers and spectrum analyzers will allow researchers to examine far more carefully the radiation coming to Earth.

"I think we need another factor of a million or a billion. So that's 20 or 30 years away," he said.

Cullers, who is blind, told the group, "You wouldn't be very impressed if I looked all over the sky and didn't see anything. Because I can't see." Current SETI searches are still virtually blind, he said. We need bigger telescopes, maybe one on the far side of the moon. Keep trying for 100 years, maybe 200, and we'll find them, he said. "Anybody who spends his or her life devoted to this has to be very hopeful," Murray told a reporter. "My personal analog to this is monks working on an illuminated manuscript in the Middle Ages. They work on one page almost their entire life. They don't expect to see the completed Bible."

The discussion had large dollops of radio-astronomy jargon—this many megahertz, this wavelength. Gravitational lenses. Any such discussion is an odd mixture of hard science, advanced engineering and speculative exo-psychology. We shouldn't presume too much, the visionaries will say, but then a moment later they will reveal their latest hypothesis

Next Week: **A Running Gag, or A Drawn-Out Campaign**