

The Style Invitational

Week 624: Limerixon 2



LIMERICK BY CHRIS J. STROLIN; ILLUSTRATION BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**The beehive at first was created
So thousands of bees could be crated.
It's either the home
Where they make honeycomb
Or a hairstyle that's grossly outdated.**

Just about this time last year, we introduced you to a Web site called the Omnificent English Dictionary in Limerick Form, whose founder, Chris J. Strolin, aimed to compile one or more limericks for every word in the English language. At the time, Chris J. was up to words beginning with "ad-" and had just passed 600 limericks. Since then, after much publicity and input (not least from Invitational Losers), the OEDILF has burgeoned into a massive cybervault of more than 17,000 five-line definitions. And it's still on the B's! So for **this week's contest: Supply a limerick based on any word in the dictionary (except proper nouns) beginning with bd- through bl-**. Don't worry, any standard dictionary has lots and lots of words in this range. The limerick can define the word or simply illustrate its meaning. Once the Empress posts the results on Sept. 18, you may submit your entries (inking or not) to www.oedilf.com as well. Note: To prevent last year's, er, discussion as to what constitutes a limerick, you can see the guidelines for rhyme and meter at www.oedilf.com. The standards are looser than some people's, stricter than others.

Winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up gets a DVD of "Manos: The Hands of Fate," a 1966 horror flick touted on its own box as "regarded as one of the most inept movies ever made," donated by Peter Metrinko of Chantilly.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lust-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or, if you really have to, by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Aug. 29. Put "Week 624" 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. Entries 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. 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 Tom Witte of Montgomery Village.

Report from Week 620, in which we sought ways to boost The Post's declining circulation. This contest drew thousands of enthusiastic entries with lots of ideas; unfortunately, most of the ideas were each submitted by dozens of readers, thus rendering them unprizeworthy. A few of these: (a) Have tie-ins with bird cage manufacturers and parakeet breeders; (b) make the paper especially attractive to puppies, or especially absorbent, or hardly absorbent at all (thus requiring many more newspapers); (c) print the paper on two-ply perforated rolls; (d) wrap the paper around a bottle of bordeaux; use a page of uncut \$20 bills instead of a plastic bag, etc.; and (e) make the newsprint out of loofah, because, see, when you rub it on your skin, you, heh heh, increase circulation.

A number of people suggested that The Post offer its readers the "employee discount" for subscriptions. Actually, folks, you're already *getting* the employee discount.

- ◆ **Third runner-up: Add more exciting verbs to attract younger readers: "President Bush TOTALLY STUCK IT TO Uzbekistan for, like, all that stuff they did. And Uzbekistan was, like, literally going INSANE."** (Ezra Deutsch-Feldman, Bethesda)
- ◆ **Second runner-up: Occasionally replace writers' names with whatever the spell checker suggests. So Tony Kornheiser would be Tony Cornhusker and Dan Froomkin would be Dan Foreskin. (Try it!)** (Russell Beland, Springfield)
- ◆ **First runner-up, the winner of the porcelain bald eagle sitting on a brown thing: Add a box on each day's front page explaining how to read.** (Peter Reppert, Beltsville)
- ◆ **And the winner of the Inker: Write and arrange the stories so that if you fill in all the o's, the front page reveals the nude picture of a celebrity.** (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)

- ◆ **Honorable Mentions:**
 - Reformat it into a circular design to fit inside steering wheels.** (Robin D. Grove, Woodbridge)
 - Set up a store and repackage the paper into distinct levels: from *le notizie* (the A-section, Style and Sports), selling at \$3.49, up to the *ricchezza della notizie* (full Sunday edition), at \$8.95. Customers would wait in long lines and feel grateful when a snotty *paparista* deigns to serve them. Then just stand back and let the money flow in.** (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)
 - Attract more readers by lowering the price of the daily paper from 35 cents to 34 cents. Of course, you'll have to modify all your vending machines to take pennies.** (Russell Beland)
 - Since most people want to read only what fits their beliefs, start publishing "red" and "blue" editions of the same news. The beauty is, the policy wonks will feel obliged to buy both copies!** (Brendan Beary; Danny Bravman, St. Louis; Wayne Rodgers, Satellite Beach, Fla.)
 - Start a column devoted to dishing dirt on Bob Novak's wife.** (Mark Eckenwiler, Washington)
 - Wrap each morning's home delivery around a ripe banana. The toss will go farther, the dog can find it more easily, and you have an instant breakfast.** (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)
 - Use scratch-and-sniff paper for notices of restaurant closings due to sewage backups, or for the story about the house where that woman had the 400 cats.** (Roy Ashley, Washington; Beau Bigelow, Annapolis)
 - Point out to readers that using The Post to line their bird cages is much less expensive than using their laptop computer.** (Rick Haynes, Potomac)
 - Print it on beer.** (Janet Arrowsmith-Lowe, Ruidoso, N.M.)
 - Just give every employee a \$1,000 raise, provided most of it is spent on subscriptions.** (Russell Beland)
 - More pictures of humans doing really cute things. (Mei Xiang, Washington)** (Dan Seidman, Watertown, Mass.)

- Persuade Christo to construct his next \$21 million installation entirely of copies of The Post.** (Sue Lin Chong, Baltimore)
- Using a time machine, go back 20 years and pay the right person a handsome bribe not to invent the Internet. (Anonymous Cable Mogul, New York)** (Mark Eckenwiler)
- Start rumors in Asia that pellets made from The Washington Post are a potent aphrodisiac.** (Barbara Turner, Takoma Park)
- An Origami of the Day feature, such as an Army helmet out of the front page, or a hypodermic syringe from the sports front.** (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)
- Use more modern spelling and syntax (sample editorial: "GWB wuz like omg! WTF????!!")** (Ezra Deutsch-Feldman; Mark Eckenwiler)
- Rather than making us wait, print the corrections immediately following each article.** (Kevin Jamison, Montgomery Village)
- Lots more puns in the obit headlines!** (Elden Carnahan, Laure)
- Snazzy new section names: The obituary page would be "Post Crypts," and Weekend would be "Get Your Big Butt Up and Out."** (Howard Walderman, Columbia)
- Every week, it's "Make Up Your Own News Friday."** (Russell Beland)
- The Style and Weekend sections ignore far too many movies and videos. For instance, "Naughty Nurses Volume 8: Sponge Bath Taboo" has been out for months, and I still haven't seen a review.** (Brendan Beary)
- Redefine "circulation" to include added readership as a result of recycling the newsprint.** (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)
- Hire a Harvard symbologist to find all the satanic runes in the masthead of the New York Times.** (Elden Carnahan)
- Couldn't you insert The Post into two plastic bags? I need one for the afternoon dog walk, too.** (George Lauermann, Arlington; Beau Bigelow)

Next Week: Questionable Journalism, or Grinquiries

MISS MANNERS

Judith Martin

One for the Books

"But wait — you haven't signed the guest book. You can't go until you've written a little something in our guest book."

Miss Manners cannot be the only person in whose bosom these words strike fear. At the conclusion of a perfectly nice, perhaps even lovely, visit, the host bears down with book and pen, cheerily demanding a few well-chosen words that will capture the occasion with wit and charm.

Like what, for example?

"Thanks for a great weekend?"

"We had a terrific time?"

"Good luck at college, love ya?"

Oh, wait, that last one was in the high school yearbook. And at least copies of that quickly find their way to oblivion in the owners' parents' attics.

In the years following, nothing more dangerous than a sign-in book at a wedding or funeral, or perhaps a log at a B&B, is likely to present itself. Names and addresses are pretty much all that is required, with, at most — if one lacks the foresight to make the signature fill the entire available space — a word or two of congratulation, sympathy or thanks.

And so the scary memory of being expected to produce an aphorism on the spot fades — until one day, when one is halfway out of someone's else's door, the command is issued. Your apparently genial host has revealed himself as someone who keeps a guest book.

Mind you, Miss Manners has no trouble producing an ingratiating summary of a visit when she arrives home and writes a letter of thanks. Not much additional time has passed since her exit from the scene of hospitality, but it is enough to allow her impressions to form themselves into something gracious. A freshly worded paragraph can be fashioned from one or two particulars of the event, and then adding a gracious generalization about the host is all that is required. Her strict injunction to write such letters immediately after the visit is made with the knowledge that the longer one waits, the harder it gets — and the less likely it is to be done at all.

But there is such a thing as too early. That is when the intended recipient is standing there looking expectant. You are going to have to see his expression when he reads what you write. Furthermore, you know that future guests will be reading it, too, be-

cause you skipped furtively through the back pages, for inspiration and to buy time.

There is no use asking, "What shall I write?" because the answer is almost always "Oh, whatever comes to mind." And when it's not, it is because the exercise has been made even more terrifying, and guests are asked to write a poem or draw a picture. A gentleman of Miss Manners's acquaintance has made it somewhat easier by requesting a recipe, although he does specify that they be food or drink — "no recipes for a happy life." Even those who have never entered a kitchen can come up with instructions for mixing gin and vermouth or unwrapping a candy bar.

In other cases, the rule is that it is generally safer to be gracious than original.

Dear Miss Manners:

I have recently moved to the West Coast, and a question that frequently arises is, "Where are you from?" People sometimes recognize the name of the small East Coast town, and respond with some variation of "You must be rich!"

I find that being labeled a rich person (which, sadly, I am not) makes me feel awkward about how to continue the conversation. It doesn't really seem a compliment, so "Thank you" seems inappropriate.

A protestation of "No, no!" even with a laugh, leads to a steadily more undignified wrangling about how much money I must have, how much houses cost in the town, etc. I have tried to answer simply with the state, but most people press for the specific town, saying that they're familiar with the state's geography. A raised eyebrow or an "I beg your pardon" makes me feel as though I am acting the part of a rich snob. What is the proper response to such a verbalized presumption?

"I would be, if I had a nickel for all you folks out here who believe that."

Feeling incorrect? E-mail your etiquette questions to Miss Manners (who is distraught that she cannot reply personally) at MissManners@unitedmedia.com or mail to United Media, 200 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

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On the Home Front, Strong Reserves of Volunteer Support

ANGELS, From D1

Somewhere out there in the American expanse, beyond the polls and beneath (or above) the Rush Limbaugh vs. Michael Moore radar, there are tens of thousands of men and women and children who do just that. There are the Soldiers' Angels and Any Soldier, the Wounded Warrior Project, the veterans affairs groups, Girls Scouts and Cub Scouts, the devoutly patriotic and, like Bair, just plain people of goodwill who want to help out.

"My dad was in the service, and my sister is in the Navy Band," she says. "But really, I'm not *that* into the military. I was exchanging an e-mail message with a friend about our dogs and she mentioned the Angels. I thought it sounded like something worthwhile."

There is a solid reserve of support for the troops out there, no matter that support for the war itself seems to be diminishing. Perhaps after the lessons of Vietnam, in which U.S. military personnel were often vilified, today they are instantly dubbed heroes.

"At first, you're almost overwhelmed, all the people who are giving you information, who are wanting to help," says Alice Ziegenfuss, the captain's mother. "There are the volunteers, the army liaisons, the doctors, the nurses. But it winds up being great. They let you focus, let you worry, about your soldier."

"I almost never get a no when I ask for something," says Patti Patton-Bader, who founded Soldiers' Angels in 2003 when her son was shipped out for the war. She has since enlisted more than 40,000 volunteers across the country to do everything from write letters to donate computers, backpacks and body armor to troops in the field. "Companies or individuals. You tell them it's for soldiers, and they'll just do it."

Ziegenfuss, 32, was sent to Iraq in February, leaving his wife, Carren, and their two young children in Fort Riley, Kan. He was commander of Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor. She had left military service on a disability, a back injury. Both are from Pennsylvania. They've been married eight years.

One day in late June, just after first light, he stepped onto a small bridge just outside a village. A crude bomb made from a mortar round, hidden behind a Jersey barrier, went off. It blew him up into the air and off the bridge. He landed in a sewage canal.

Ninety-six hours later, after he'd been stabilized at a military hospital in Germany, this lanky stranger — Bair — was sitting beside him at Walter Reed.

"I had no idea who she was," he remembers now.

Surgical sponges had been sewn into the gaps where the flesh was missing from his left biceps, his left forearm. The outside part of his left hand was gone, as was most of his right thumb. His right arm had been slit open by shrapnel. Both legs, too,



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WILLIAMSON — THE WASHINGTON POST

Kathleen Bair stayed by Capt. Charles Ziegenfuss's side for many hours while his wife, Carren, and mother Alice, below, traveled to Walter Reed. "It made such a difference" to know he wasn't alone, Carren says.



After Ziegenfuss arrived at Walter Reed, it took Carren and Alice Ziegenfuss one more day to make arrangements for the kids and to get to Washington. For Alice, this was sadly familiar terrain. Her husband, William, had served in Vietnam and gotten cancer — from Agent Orange, she believes. She came here with him many times. He died five years ago.

Carren, packing their two children — Creighton, 5, and Adelle, 2 — off to her sister's house in Montana, was relieved when she heard that Soldiers' Angels had latched onto Chuck.

"It made such a difference, knowing one of them was with him," she says. "I mean, we'd never met Kathleen, but she'd sat up with him till midnight, then was back with him in the morning until we got here. I knew my husband wasn't alone."

Days passed, then weeks. The drama of the battlefield faded into the long slog of rehab.

Bair, coming down after work or on weekends, brought the two women everything from toothbrushes to sandwiches. She got Soldiers' Angels to arrange for domestic help for Carren's sister while Chuck and Carren's kids were staying with her. When Ziegenfuss emerged from the fog of pain medication, Soldiers' Angels got him a computer — and, because of his heavily bandaged left hand, where he lost a pinky, added voice-activated software. He got back online with his popular blog,

Tcoverride.blogspot.com. It's gotten 90,000 hits in the past three months.

Now they're all sitting in a room at Mologne House, the outpatient center that's part of the Walter Reed complex. Everyone is headed home next week. Ziegenfuss is wearing walking shorts and a knit shirt. The clothing covers up many of his injuries. The skin over the wounds is purple, bright in some spots and dark in others. He, Carren, Alice and Bair sit around a table talking. They're going for pizza in a minute.

"I think he's had nine operations," says Alice.

"Does that include the ear?" he asks.

"Ten," she corrects herself.

"They took a piece of my head and put it in my ear," he says, explaining surgery to repair a perforated eardrum.

Ziegenfuss is in good spirits, if slightly apprehensive about his future. What does a captain with nine fingers do?

"Get back in line," he says, citing what he most wants to do — return to Iraq and his command.

For Bair, the relationship is winding down. There are other soldiers she looks in on, other wounds to mend. None of it will change the world. Hand-holding and sandwiches and toothbrushes rarely do.

They just make it a little more bearable, these acts of kindness from strangers in a time of war, these things that bind us.