

The Style Invitational

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

Week 707: What Would YOU Do?



BY BOB STAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

This year marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most brilliant examples of literary minimalism: "The Cat in the Hat," Dr. Seuss's masterpiece of anarchy, subversiveness and sloshing goldfish, all created in perfect English syntax with a vocabulary of just 236 words, including plurals — the vast majority of them exceedingly simple one-syllable words. This week: Use only the words appearing in "The Cat in the Hat" (see the list below) to create your own work of "literature" of no more than 75 words (though a much shorter entry is quite welcome). It can be in verse, like Kevin Dopart's example above; it can be a narrative or dialogue; it may sound Seussian or not. You must use the words exactly in the form on the list, except that you may combine them into compound words, and you may use any capitalization and punctuation you like.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up receives a 2-foot-long bright red sign that says "Naked," salvaged by Tim Vanderlee of Austin from a supermarket display advertising this brand of juice. This is definitely what every Loser ought to hang from the ceiling above his office cubicle.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable Mentions (or whatever they're called that week) 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 or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, April 9. Put "Week 707" 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 April 29. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. This week's Honorable Mentions name is by Kevin Dopart. Next week's revised title is by Pete Morelewicz of Washington.

REPORT FROM WEEK 703

In which we asked you for a "barter" posting like those on Craigslist, but funny. Oh, well. It doesn't happen very often, in our exalted opinion, but this is one of those rare Invitational contests that just went pbbffff. Even the most reliably clever Losers couldn't do much with this one, producing not the usual astonishing strings of guffaw-producers but only a heh or two. Fortunately, the previous contest, Week 702, generated more kooky "Unreal Facts" than we had room for. So we'll share some more Honorable Mentions this week, below the smattering of worthies from Week 703.

TRADING DOWN

Looking for tough, durable electric nose-hair trimmer. Will trade theater tickets plus unopened carton of condoms. (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.)

Late adopter seeks to trade box of 8-track tapes for pack of floppy disks. Please respond by mail to . . . (Sue Lin Chong, Baltimore)

Certain Korean nuclear arms control concessions for hand in marriage of Angelina Jolie (must wear flats). — K.I.S., Pyongyang (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

Will trade all copies of clandestine tape recordings made in the Oval Office (2003-06) for a full presidential pardon. — I.L. Libby, Washington (Jeff Brechlin)

Will trade black hole (small) for closet organizer system. I keep losing things. (Martin Bancroft, Rochester)

Willing to swap Boston cream pie for complete collection of Piaf records. I really don't want to trade, but I know I can't have my cake and Edith too. (Russell Beland)

Will trade my reputation as an honest, principled man for the Republican nomination. God Bless you. (Chuck Smith)

Will trade one peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich for your bag of Cheetos. My agent will also be happy to discuss yesterday's geography homework, which I've already completed. (Jay Shuck, Minneapolis)

Looking to trade a used computer for two years of Hustler. I figure it does the same thing but saves on electricity. (Seth Brown, North Adams, Mass.)

Will trade 1,000-watt car stereo with super bazooka subwoofer for front and rear windshields to a 2003 Honda Civic. (Peter Metrinko, Chantilly)

Have horse, midstream Potomac River. Will swap for another. Discretion a must. — G.W.B., Northwest Washington (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

Will swap late fetal paws for a good book of palindromes. (Jeff Brechlin)

Several hours of thought for one original idea. (Ross Elliffe, Pictou, New Zealand)

4 Offering: customized vocabulary-building lessons. In trade for: one of those whatchamacallits with the big thingy on the side. (Russell Beland, Springfield)

3 A third-round draft pick for a 33-year-old dead-arm quarterback with a seven-year, \$43 million contract and an \$8.6 million signing bonus. Yeah, right, like anyone would take me up on that one. (Roy Ashley, Washington)

2 The winner of the bizarre alleged medical remedy from Oman: Adder's fork, blind-worm's sting, lizard's leg and howlet's wing for eye of Newt. Complete potion available in exchange for whole head. — H.R.C., New York (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

AND THE WINNER OF THE INKER

Golf clubs for tennis racket: Decided it would be less painful if I beat myself in the head with the racket. (Rick Haynes, Potomac)

MORE HONORABLE MENTIONS FROM WEEK 702

"Unreal Facts." We have a creeping feeling that some of these will shortly be spread around the Internet, sans the Un-.

Most store-bought honey these days comes not from bees but from roaches. (Russell Beland)

Anchovies are one of the 23 ingredients in Dr Pepper. (Laurel Gainer, Great Falls)

On any given day, the average human hears at least two words that are new to his vocabulary. Sometimes more. — G.W.B., Washington (Sue Lin Chong)

Janis Joplin only wore panties labeled "Tuesday." (Russell Beland)

Cave-aged cheese contains trace amounts of gold and bat guano. (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)

Four of the ingredients in a Burger King milkshake can be found in windshield washer fluid. (Dean Evangelista, Rockville)

In the early days of the NFL, football was considered a "gentlemen's game" like tennis or golf, and spectators were expected to keep silent for each play until the ball was snapped. (Roy Ashley)

As a young man, Steve Martin dyed his hair white. (Russell Beland)

Genghis Khan never rode without taking his pet hamster. (Andrew Hoening, Rockville)

Viagra was originally developed to keep celery fresh. (Andy Bassett, New Plymouth, New Zealand)

In recipes calling for skunk urine, you may substitute an equal amount of water, plus one tablespoon of ammonia. (Susan Thompson, Cary, N.C.)

Crack cocaine got its name by people originally using it in suppository form. (Russell Beland)

An ant is capable of lifting an object five times its own weight but is incapable of getting off its lazy thorax and taking out the garbage. — Anita Ant, Ant Farm, Rockville (Stephen Dudzik)

Each of NASA's Apollo missions carried an extra astronaut in case of emergency. (Bob Dalton, Arlington)

Until organizers found out and canceled the contract in 1999, Vegan Action pamphlets were printed in ink containing pigments made from cow blood. (Kevin Dopart)

Alexander the Great's name more accurately translates into English as Alexander the Above Average. (Russell Beland)

There is as much nutrition in the peel of one potato as in a 12-ounce serving of carpet tacks. (Brendan Beary)

Iridium and beryllium are the only two elements known to mate. (Bob Dalton)

Adrian Fenty's fedora used to belong to Jack Abramoff. (Kevin Dopart)

By October 1941, Roosevelt had secretly learned of four things we had to fear in addition to fear itself. (Russell Beland)

Next Week: Another Game of Tag, or Plate Tectonics

The Words Used in "The Cat in the Hat"

a	bad	bumps	did	fox	had	his	it	look	my	pack	run	shook	sunny	thing	two	white
about	ball	but	dish	from	hall	hit	jump	looked	near	pat	sad	should	tail	things	up	who
after	be	cake	do	fun	hand	hold	jumps	lot	net	pick	said	show	take	think	us	why
all	bed	call	dots	funny	hands	home	kicks	lots	new	picked	sally	shut	tall	this	wall	will
always	bent	came	down	game	has	hook	kind	made	no	pink	sank	sit	tame	those	want	wish
and	bet	can	fall	games	hat	hop	kinds	make	not	play	sat	so	tell	thump	was	with
another	big	cat	fan	gave	have	hops	kite	man	nothing	playthings	saw	some	that	thumps	way	wood
any	bit	cold	fast	get	he	house	kites	mat	now	plop	way	something	the	tip	we	would
are	bite	come	fear	give	head	how	know	me	of	pot	see	stand	their	to	well	yes
as	book	could	fell	go	hear	I	last	mess	oh	put	shake	step	them	too	went	yet
asked	books	cup	find	gone	her	if	let	milk	on	rake	shame	stop	then	top	were	you
at	bow	day	fish	good	here	in	like	mind	one	ran	she	string	there	toy	wet	your
away	box	dear	fly	got	high	into	lit	mother	our	red	shine	strings	these	trick	what	
back	bump	deep	for	gown	him	is	little	mother's	out	rid	ship	sun	they	tricks	when	

Cancer: Optimism vs. Reality

CANCER, From D1

retary, announced their cancers — hers breast, his colon — had reappeared.

At the daily briefing where she described Snow's news to reporters, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said that "if you know Tony, then you know that he's a fighter. . . . He told me that he beat this thing before and he intends to beat it again." In a separate statement, President Bush said his press secretary "is not going to let this whip him."

At the news conference Elizabeth Edwards and her husband held, the emphasis was more on optimism, less on pugilism.

John Edwards spoke of the need to "keep your head up, keep moving, be strong." He likened her metastatic cancer to diabetes, a chronic disease in which "you take your medicine." Elizabeth Edwards said she does "not expect my life to be significantly different" for the foreseeable future.

It's understandable where these approaches to bad cancer news come from.

In many ways, the fighting metaphors make sense. Treating cancer is more like a military campaign than treating congestive heart failure. Cancer begins at a distinct place in the body's geography, but can spread to and overrun distant territory, often by surprise. Therapy involves destroying or recapturing occupied territory, or visibly weakening the invader.

The optimism, on the other hand, flows from the resilience and hopefulness of both patients and the doctors treating them. These are natural reactions to adversity. But like the disease itself, cancer optimism is different from ordinary optimism.

Elizabeth Edwards and Tony Snow today have life expectancies substantially less than five years — if their illnesses follow a course similar

to that of most patients in their circumstance.

"Most," though, isn't what oncologists like to focus on — at least when most patients in these situations don't live very long. Instead, they emphasize the best possible outcome, even when it's an unlikely one.

In statistical terms, they direct attention to the thin, right-hand "tail" of the bell-shaped curve plotting survival. That's the part of the curve

Oncologists emphasize the best possible outcome, even when it's an unlikely one.

representing the few people who live a decade or more. Relatively speaking, doctors don't spend a lot of time talking about the bulging middle of the curve, which represents the usual outcome.

This isn't true for a lot of discussions in medicine. When a physician prescribes a new drug or seeks a patient's consent for surgery, most of the conversation is about what happens to most people — not the rare complications. It's the fat part, not the tails, of the bell curve doctors want to talk about — and patients want to hear about.

In fact, it's very hard for people to get estimates of survival when a fully treated cancer returns, as it has with Edwards and Snow. The data aren't on the National Cancer Institute's Web site, and they aren't on the American Cancer Society's. Even the experts in the field aren't wild about breaking the news.

Longevity after a recurrence of colon cancer — Snow's situation — is a moving target, says Robert J. Mayer, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. It improves al-

most every year as new drugs arrive and new combinations are tried.

"I would tell somebody like him that we don't know for certain anymore exactly what the duration of survival will be, but that it is better than it was before and that we ought to move ahead," he says.

Asked about Edwards's likely prospects, Barry R. Meisenberg, a professor of medicine who is affiliated with the Greenebaum Cancer Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center, remarks, "We try not to focus too much on the statistics." He explains that "within 'average survival' are people who do much, much better than average and people who do much, much worse than average. Since there is no such thing as an 'average person,' statistics are not very helpful."

How (or whether) doctors tell patients they have incurable diseases and are likely to die in a few months or years — and how well patients understand the information and use it to make decisions — are subjects researchers have only started to look at in the last decade or so. One of them is Thomas J. Smith, a professor of medicine and oncologist at Virginia Commonwealth University. He estimates that half of cancer patients never get a full and frank discussion of their chances, and that about 15 percent don't want one.

"It is really hard to give good prognostic information. It is really hard to get it," he says.

One of the reasons is that doctors fear an unvarnished account of the survival odds may rob the patient of hope. However, studies reveal that most patients want to know their chances (even if they go on to revise them upward in their minds). Interestingly, some research has shown that a poor prognosis has little effect on a patient's capacity for hope. Hope, as lottery players know, doesn't depend on statistics.

Given all this, it's not surprising a



BY CHRIS HONDRÓS — GETTY IMAGES

Despite more effective methods of treating cancer, the end results remain largely the same.

lot of unreasonable expectations are floating around.

Research shows that doctors consistently overestimate the length of time their terminal cancer patients will survive — but not as much as the patients do. A 1998 study of 900 people with advanced cancer found that 82 percent had more optimistic estimates of their survival chances than their doctors.

Patients and physicians also tend to play down risky treatments. A 2001 study asked 71 patients awaiting stem-cell transplants about their chances of dying from the treatment. On average they guessed 21 percent. Their doctors said 33 percent. Actual mortality was 42 percent.

And then there's the press agency.

In recent years, news of biotech-born "targeted" drugs — antibodies, growth inhibitors, and other biological molecules — has given the public the impression we're in a new era

of cancer therapy. It's true, we are. Unfortunately, it's still largely governed by the old era's outcomes.

One of the best of these substances, Herceptin, is useful in about one-quarter of breast cancers. A study published in January showed that when added to standard chemotherapy, it cuts by one-third a woman's risk of dying in the two years after her tumor is diagnosed. It may ultimately boost long-term survival; that isn't known.

Others are less impressive. Avastin, which blocks blood vessel growth and was once touted as potentially a general "cure for cancer," slows the progression of advanced colon cancer for four months, and extends life by five months. "These improvements are clinically meaningful," researchers wrote pleadingly in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2004.

Four months may be a gift (especially to those with young children, like Edwards and Snow). But such

advances are hardly turning cancer into a chronic disease like diabetes, the ailment John Edwards compared to his wife's cancer. Most people with diabetes live for decades.

But if that analogy was inapt, Edwards's declaration that his wife's cancer won't be cured showed he understands the central fact about her disease now.

"A surprisingly high proportion of patients with metastatic solid tumors don't realize that there is no chance for cure," says Jane C. Weeks, an oncologist at Dana-Farber Cancer Center in Boston. "I've wondered how many patients in exactly that situation have been shocked to learn otherwise from the coverage about Elizabeth Edwards."

There's a crash course on cancer underway. For better or worse, we're going to see how it touches a number of public lives.

"So they are not in this alone," Weeks says. "They are in it with all of us."