

The Style Invitational »

REPORT FROM WEEK 811

In which we asked for signs that the economy has hit rock bottom. Only a few people took that to mean that things had finally started to turn around — the best of these was from Jim Lubell of Mechanicsville, Md., who said: "After being told for the past two years that my property wasn't worth \$%&, I'm finally being told that my property IS worth \$%&." Most everyone else sent jokes along the line of "The economy is so bad that..."



- 2 Al Gore is burning old car tires in his furnace. (JL Strickland, Valley, Ala.)
- 3 Crate and Barrel starts selling crates and barrels. (David Epstein, Potomac)
- 4 The Virgin Mary appears in Akron on a loaf of bread, which is immediately eaten. (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.)

SPLINTERS FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL: HONORABLE MENTIONS

The dollar is propped up by an emergency loan from Zimbabwe. (Jeffrey Contompasis, Ashburn)

When waiters at snooty restaurants scrape the crumbs off your table with one of those fancy tools, they ask if you would like a birdie bag. (Roy Ashley, Washington)

"I work for the government" is finally a good pickup line in a bar. (Rick Haynes, Potomac)

The Petco flier in the Sunday paper has a page of recipes. (Bridget Goodman, Philadelphia)

The Republicans can't find anyone rich enough to deserve a tax cut. (Cy Gardner, Arlington)

"The Amazing Race" is run entirely in Gaithersburg. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

People in India with broken computers now call here. (Cy Gardner)

"Day financiers" hang out in parking lots hoping to get hired for a day of commodities speculation. (Michael Reinemer, Annandale)

Mattel is asking for a government bailout for its Hot Wheels division. (JL Strickland)

"The Office" replaces highly paid actors with real Dunder Mifflin employees. (Chuck Smith)

NASA announces that free meals will no longer be provided on space shuttle flights. (Mike Czuhajewski, Severn)

McDonald's introduces the Totally Bumped Out Meal. (Mike)

Czuhajewski; Toni Gagnon Ross, Alexandria, a First Offender)

The Detroit Pistons change the team name to something more geographically accurate, like the Detroit Squeegie Guys. (Russell Beland, Fairfax)

Mattress companies are making box springs with cash compartments. (Beverly Sharp, Washington)

Hugh Hefner has to scale back to just twins. (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)

Foreign journalists now throw flip-flops at world leaders. (Lee Dobbins, Arlington)

911 now requires a "convenience charge." (Chuck Smith)

Frank McCourt yearns for the good old days. (Barbara Turner, Takoma Park)

Your kid's Career Day speakers include a pencil seller, a repo man and a subsistence small-game hunter. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

A share of stock in the New York Times costs less than a copy of the New York Times. (David Kleinbard, Jersey City)

The closing bell on Wall Street was melted down for scrap metal. (Sue Lin Chong, Baltimore)

People are actually eating fortune cookies after breaking them open. (Tom Lacombe, Browntown, Va.)

In San Francisco, hollow-eyed men are standing in focaccia lines. (Chuck Smith)

If you open a bank account, they give you a piece of toast. (Kevin Dopart)

The Navy is spending 25 percent of its fuel budget on oars. (Bob Reichenbach, Middletown, Del.)

The Five-Second Rule has been changed to 10 for chocolate and pecans. (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)

A homeowner in Potomac was seen mowing his own lawn. (Larry Yungk, Arlington)

A new ad campaign: "Fancy Feast: It's Not Just for Seniors Anymore." (Chad Pridgen, Marshall, Va.)

Pink slips must be returned for use by the next laid-off employee. (John O'Byrne, Dublin)

And Last: Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives General Motors, donated by Detroit, Michigan (Mike Czuhajewski)

Next Week: Rx-Rated Humor, or Doctor My Lies

NEW ON WASHINGTONPOST.COM: THE STYLE CONVERSATIONAL

Starting today, the Express hosts an ongoing discussion group about The Style Invitational and various other matters of national importance. Talk with her and the Losers online at www.washingtonpost.com/styleconversational.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Week 815: Wittecisms

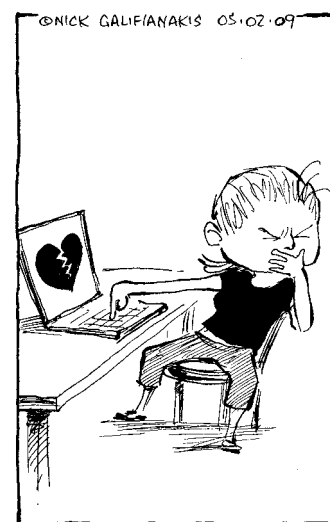
Twitteronomy: Book 5 of the iPhone Ultra-Condensed Bible

Last Saturday marked yet another Milestone in Brain Cell Waste: The just too perfectly named Tom Witte of Montgomery Village has amassed his 1,000th blot of ink, joining the super-exclusive Double Hall of Fame previously including only Russell Beland and Chris Doyle. It is entirely irrelevant that Chris, Russell and Tom all are or were for many years in the employ of the United States Department of Defense.

Tom, who has been entering the Invitational almost without fail since Week 7 in 1993, has gotten ink in 469 contests and has won the whole thing 21 times. But he has a specialty: He's a master of the short-form contest, especially those for neologisms, or word-coining. And so we honor him thus, on the collegial suggestion of Dr. Beland: **This week: Create an original word containing — in any order — at least a W, an I, two T's and an E,** as in the example above, and define it. The five letters don't have to appear next to one another.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place gets — to rectify recent complaints that some Invitational prizes are juvenile and tasteless, and not of the caliber of a newspaper that still has no ads on its front page — the illuminating fine-art-reproduction light switch plate pictured here, donated by 10-time Loser Melissa Yorks of Gaithersburg.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly tree-shaped air "freshener" (Fir Stink for their First Ink). 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, May 11. Put "Week 815" 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 May 30. 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 D'Eustachio of Beltsville; the revised title for next week's results is by Chris Doyle of Ponder, Tex.



BY NICK CALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

CAROLYN HAX

Adapted from a recent online discussion.

Dear Carolyn:

Is it okay to break up with someone via e-mail if you think the actual conversation will involve lots of tears? I promise to keep it really short and not to criticize him. It would not be a surprise — we've been having this conversation for a while. I just don't think the alternative (my bursting into tears) will be very productive.

New York

I think it's important that he knows you're not dumping him lightly. You might be able to talk me out of this, but I'm leaning toward sloppy and inconvenient displays of emotion over expediency.

I think I need to clarify that: You can talk me out of it if you can make a credible case that you're doing this to make it easier on him. If it's to make it easier on you, I'm not budging.

Dear Carolyn:

I'm an idiot. I just thought very briefly about how I would feel if he decided to break up with me via e-mail, and it put the whole thing in perspective. I can't do that to him. I'll suck it up.

E-mail Break-Up Girl

Good then.

But don't be so hard on yourself — an idiot would have gone through with the e-mail.

Dear Carolyn:

I was supposed to get married last December, but midway we canceled the wedding and worked some things out. We had already asked people to be our groomsmen/bridesmaids before we canceled the wedding.

We have decided to get married this December. Would it be completely wrong to change any member of the wedding party? We haven't seen two of them in nearly a year and they live in the same city. We have grown closer to two other people during this time (both of whom we've known for a few years).

We want to do the right thing here. And, no, we can't just add two more people here because it would be a little awkward to have non-so-close friends stand up with us. But we'll deal with awkwardness if that's the right thing to do.

New Wedding Question, I Promise!

I would just go without a wedding party. It's hardly a necessity to have one, and not having one would solve your problem without making even a little bit of a mess. That would officially be a new wrinkle on the wedding question.

Re: Wedding:

But what if she WANTS a wedding party? I know there's a movement to tamp down the industrial wedding corporation, but can't we leave just a little bit of room for people to have the wedding they want, even if that wedding — horrors! — includes bridesmaids?

Anonymous

(Ow! Ow! Ow! Sore forehead.) I prefer "bridal-industrial complex."

And I'll happily wave the ruffled silk flag for wedding parties, but in this case, the wedding they want has been overtaken by events — which include a postponed wedding and a change of heart about their choice of attendants. Grown-up people do not keep insisting upon getting what they want when faced with evidence that the price tag will include needless mess or hard feelings. It's just not that [stinkin'] important to get one's ceremonial druthers.

Good match, good marriage. Everything else is just so much buttercream on the cake.

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays on www.washingtonpost.com/discussions.

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.

At the African Art Museum, High Tide for Mami Wata

ART, From Page C1

quintessential Bond girl, stepping from the waves in the movie "Dr. No," they all are Mami Wata, as are the three sirens in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?," whose singing lures the hicks. Susanna in her bath being ogled by the elders, and Diana in her grotto pond, and the nude young thing in "Autumn Morn," and Daniel Chester French's figures on the Dupont Circle fountain, they're Mami Wata, too. So is Miss America. She dresses in a swimsuit while hoping to be crowned; when finally victorious, she gets to frolic in the surf.

A visitor from ancient Greece encountering this show would recog-

nize her instantly. The naiads, nymphs and nereids who flickered through the antique world were Mami Wata's kin.

Faithful monotheists, who prefer to see divinity as one instead of many, will notice how these metaphors, like the streams that feed a river, gather to partake of one numinous identity. Mami Wata isn't only African. She's Jungian, she's universal.

Also, she's a mermaid, half-human and half-fish.

In the first picture that you see — a painting from Kinshasa, circa 1990 — she is seated on the waters, holding her moon-mirror and combing her long hair. Curator Henry John Drewal, who organized the exhibi-

Mami Wata is restless. Her show is restless, too. It won't settle. It keeps your thinking flowing. . . . It keeps moving on and on.

tion, thinks that that image might have come from the carvings on the wooden ships that plied the coast of Africa in the age of sail. To make that point explicit, precisely such a figurehead, bare-breasted and gilded, has been borrowed (from the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Va.) for inclusion in the show. Sometimes Mami Wata has many

arms and heads. This, too, is a borrowing, though it doesn't come from Europe, it comes from Hindu India. Time and time again, Mami Wata imitates. Sometimes she resembles a Portuguese Madonna, and sometimes she's as blond as Daryl Hannah was in "Splash."

She has not borrowed her snakes. Mami Wata has always had them. They're one of her chief attributes. In one painting from Lubumbashi, snakes wind around her fishtail. The spirit of the waters also holds her snake aloft so that it becomes a kind of scaly rainbow that arcs above her head. Her relation with the snake is not a new association. In a 19th-century headdress carved by the Sherbro-Bullom peoples of Sierra Leone, two snakes, clearly twins, coil just above her ears.

Mami Wata in a good mood, as her priestesses will tell you, is entirely beneficent. Mami Wata in a bad mood is as harrowingly scary as the sea itself. Snakes can bite and kill, as Cleopatra's asp did, and can be as low and cunning as the serpent is in Genesis, but they have their good sides, too. Snakes stand for immortality, perhaps because they seem reborn each time they shed their skins, and they also stand for healing. That's why two are seen entwined around the caduceus, the physician's symbolic staff.

Snakes, when they appear in the flicker of the images, seem to have a clear affinity for beautiful young women, not just Cleopatra, but Nastassja Kinski, too, who was very famously photographed by Richard Avedon, as you may recall, wearing just her python. This intimate association is older than Dr. Freud. Its



BY DON COLE — FOWLER MUSEUM

A 19th-century headdress by the Sherbro-Bullom of Sierra Leone.

most famous representations are from the 16th century B.C., from the temple of Knossos in Crete, where, in figurines of ivory, the goddess with her hands upraised shows the world the serpents wrapped around her arms. An early 20th-century carving by the Annang-Ibibio peoples of southeastern Nigeria strikes the same pose.

The African Museum is mostly underground, and so peculiarly constructed that no matter where you stand in the Mami Wata exhibition you can see a kind of movie screen high above your head. Projected on that screen is "Watertime," a recent video by David and Hi-jin Hodge, who shot a stretch of the Pacific each day at the same time for an entire year. The video they made is not particularly original. Always the same and always different — like the objects shown — it's just right for this show.

Mami Wata is restless. Her show is restless, too. It won't settle. It keeps your thinking flowing, from Ghana to New Jersey, from the past into the present, it keeps moving on and on.

Drewal, the curator, has been in touch with Mami Wata for more than 30 years, and his commitment is apparent in the range of what you see. Drewal is a professor of art history and Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin. He organized this heartfelt and memorable show, and wrote its learned catalogue, for the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas will remain on view at the National Museum of African Art, 950 Independence Ave. SW, through July 26. For information call 202-633-4600. Hours are daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free.

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