

Cultural Daily

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Unexpected Visitors

William Zinsser · Thursday, July 14th, 2011

“What is your favorite word?”

That question came in the mail recently from an editor compiling a book in which various authors would name their favorite word and explain their reasons.

“I don’t have a favorite word like *williwaw* that I keep in a display case to moon over,” I wrote back. “Those words please me when I see (and hear) them, but unless they fill a precise need—*oscillate*, *lapidary*, *filigree*—I abstain, fearful of being sucked into the bog of academic prose where monsters like *adumbrate* and *ineluctable* lurk.”

My favorites are the hundreds of vivid replacements for words that are just too dull—too *humdrum*—to make writing come alive. *Brazen*, used instead of *bold*, not only catches the reader off guard with the fanciful *z*; its sound exactly conveys its meaning. A brazen scheme is more than merely bold; listen and you’ll hear a mountebank.

I write by ear, and sound is what leads me to what I’m rummaging for.

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