

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows
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A

adomania

n. the sense that the future is arriving ahead of schedule, that all those years with fantastical names like '2013' are bursting from their hypothetical cages into the arena of the present, furiously bucking the grip of your expectations while you lean and slip in your saddle, one hand reaching for reins, the other waving up high like a schoolkid who finally knows the answer to the question.

adronitis

n. frustration with how long it takes to get to know someone—spending the first few weeks chatting in their psychological entryway, with each subsequent conversation like entering a different anteroom, each a little closer to the center of the house—wishing instead that you could start there and work your way out, exchanging your deepest secrets first, before easing into casualness, until you've built up enough mystery over the years to ask them where they're from, and what they do for a living.

agnosthesia

n. the state of not knowing how you really feel about something, which forces you to sift through clues hidden in your behavior, as if you were some other person—noticing a twist of acid in your voice, an obscene amount of effort put into something trifling, or an inexplicable weight on your shoulders that makes it difficult to get out of bed.

aimonomia

n. fear that learning the name of something—a bird, a constellation, an attractive stranger—will somehow ruin it, transforming a lucky discovery into a conceptual husk pinned in a glass case, which leaves one less mystery to flutter around your head, trying to get in.

Altschmerz

n. weariness with the same old issues that you've always had—the same boring flaws and anxieties you've been gnawing on for years, which leaves them soggy and tasteless and inert, with nothing interesting left to think about, nothing left to do but spit them out and wander off to the backyard, ready to dig up some fresher pain you might have buried long ago.

ambedo

n. a kind of melancholic trance in which you become completely absorbed in vivid sensory details—raindrops skittering down a window, tall trees leaning in the wind, clouds of cream swirling in your coffee—which leads to a dawning awareness of the haunting fragility of life, a mood whose only known cure is the vuvuzela.

ameneurosis

n. the half-forlorn, half-escapist ache of a train whistle calling in the distance at night.

anchorage

n. the desire to hold on to time as it passes, like trying to keep your grip on a rock in the middle of a river, feeling the weight of the current against your chest while your elders float on downstream, calling over the roar of the rapids, "Just let go—it's okay—let go."

anecdote

n. a conversation in which everyone is talking but nobody is listening, simply overlaying disconnected words like a game of Scrabble, with each player borrowing bits of other anecdotes as a way to increase their own score, until we all run out of things to say.

antematter

n. the dream versions of things in your life, which appear totally foreign but are still somehow yours—your anteschool, your antefriends, your antehome—all part of a parallel world whose gravitational pull raises your life's emotional stakes, increasing the chances you'll end up betting everything you have.

anthrodynia

n. a state of exhaustion with how shitty people can be to each other, typically causing a countervailing sense of affection for things that are sincere but not judgmental, are unabashedly joyful, or just are.

apomakrysmenophobia

n. fear that your connections with people are ultimately shallow, that although your relationships feel congenial at the time, an audit of your life would produce an emotional safety deposit box of low-interest holdings and uninvested windfall profits, which will indicate you were never really at risk of joy, sacrifice or loss.

B

backmasking

n. the instinctive tendency to see someone as you knew them in their youth, a burned-in image of grass-stained knees, graffitied backpacks or handfuls of birthday cake superimposed on an adult with a degree, an illusion formed when someone opens the door to your emotional darkroom while the memory is still developing.

the **bends**

n. frustration that you're not enjoying an experience as much as you should, even something you've worked for years to attain, which prompts you to plug in various thought combinations to try for anything more than static emotional blankness, as if your heart had been accidentally demagnetized by a surge of expectations.

C

catoptric tristesse

n. the sadness that you'll never really know what other people think of you, whether good, bad or if at all—that although we reflect on each other with the sharpness of a mirror, the true picture of how we're coming off somehow reaches us softened and distorted, as if each mirror was preoccupied with twisting around, desperately trying to look itself in the eye.

chrysalism

n. the amniotic tranquility of being indoors during a thunderstorm, listening to waves of rain pattering against the roof like an argument upstairs, whose muffled words are unintelligible but whose crackling release of built-up tension you understand perfectly.

contact high-five

n. an innocuous touch by someone just doing their job—a barber, yoga instructor or friendly waitress—that you enjoy more than you'd like to admit, a feeling of connection so stupefyingly simple that it cheapens the power of the written word, so that by the year 2025, aspiring novelists would be better off just giving people a hug.

la cuna

n. a twinge of sadness that there's no frontier left, that as the last explorer trudged with his armies toward a blank spot on the map, he didn't suddenly remember his daughter's upcoming piano recital and turn for home, leaving a new continent unexplored so we could set its mists and mountains aside as a strategic reserve of mystery, if only to answer more of our children's questions with "Nobody knows! Out there, anything is possible."

D

daguerreologue

n. an imaginary interview with an old photo of yourself, an enigmatic figure who still lives in the grainy and color-warped house you grew up in, who may well spend a lot of their day wondering where you are and what you're doing now, like an old grandma whose kids live far away and don't call much anymore.

dead reckoning

n. to find yourself bothered by someone's death more than you would have expected, as if you assumed they would always be part of the landscape, like a lighthouse you could pass by for years until the night it suddenly goes dark, leaving you with one less landmark to navigate by—still able to find your bearings, but feeling all that much more adrift.

deep cut

n. an emotion you haven't felt in years that you might have forgotten about completely if your emotional playlist hadn't been left on shuffle—a feeling whose opening riff tugs on all your other neurons like a dog on a leash waiting for you to open the door.

degrassé

adj. entranced and unsettled by the vastness of the universe, experienced in a jolt of recognition that the night sky is not just a wallpaper but a deeply foreign ocean whose currents are steadily carrying off all other castaways, who share our predicament but are already well out of earshot—worlds and stars who would've been lost entirely except for the scrap of light they were able to fling out into the dark, a message in a bottle that's only just now washing up in the Earth's atmosphere, an invitation to a party that already ended a million years ago.

dialecstatic

adj. hearing a person with a thick accent pronounce a certain phrase—the Texan “cooler,” the South African “bastard,” the Kiwi “thirty years ago”—and wanting them to repeat it over and over until the vowels pool in the air and congeal into a linguistic taffy you could break apart and give as presents.

dream fever

n. the intense heat on the skin of a sleeping person, a radioactive byproduct of an idle mind humming with secret delusions which then vaporize when plunged into the cooling bath of reality, thus preventing a meltdown that could endanger those close by, who tolerate the risk because it gives them energy.

E

ecstatic shock

n. the surge of energy upon catching a glance from someone you like—a thrill that starts in your stomach, arcs up through your lungs and flashes into a spontaneous smile—which scrambles your ungrounded circuits and tempts you to chase that feeling with a kite and a key.

ellipsism

n. sadness that you'll never be able to know how history will turn out, that you'll dutifully pass on the joke of being alive without ever learning the punchline—the name of the beneficiary of all human struggle, the sum of the final payout of every investment ever made in the future—which may not suit your sense of humor anyway and will probably involve how many people it takes to change a lightbulb.

énouement

n. the bittersweetness of having arrived here in the future, where you can finally get the answers to how things turn out in the real world—who your baby sister would become, what your friends would end up doing, where your choices would lead you, exactly when you'd lose the people you took for granted—which is priceless intel that you instinctively want to share with anybody who hadn't already made the journey, as if there was some part of you who had volunteered to stay behind, who was still stationed at a forgotten outpost somewhere in the past, still eagerly awaiting news from the front.

exulansis

n. the tendency to give up trying to talk about an experience because people are unable to relate to it—whether through envy or pity or simple foreignness—which allows it to drift away from the rest of your life story, until the memory itself feels out of place, almost mythical, wandering restlessly in the fog, no longer even looking for a place to land.

F

fata organa

n. a flash of real emotion glimpsed in someone sitting across the room, idly locked in the middle of some group conversation, their eyes glinting with vulnerability or quiet anticipation or cosmic boredom—as if you could see backstage through a gap in the curtains, watching stagehands holding their ropes at the ready, actors in costume mouthing their lines, fragments of bizarre sets waiting for some other production.

fitzcarraldo

n. an image that somehow becomes lodged deep in your brain—maybe washed there by a dream, or smuggled inside a book, or planted during a casual conversation—which then grows into a wild and impractical vision that keeps scrambling back and forth in your head like a dog stuck in a car that's about to arrive home, just itching for a chance to leap headlong into reality.

flashover

n. the moment a conversation becomes real and alive, which occurs when a spark of trust shorts out the delicate circuits you keep insulated under layers of irony, momentarily grounding the static emotional charge you've built up through decades of friction with the world.

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Funkenzwangsvorstellung

n. the instinctive trance of a campfire in the dark, spending hours roasting and watching as it settles and sinks into the ground like a heap of shipwrecks whose sailors raise their flickering sails trying to signal that the prevailing winds of your life are about to shift, that the edge of the Earth is real and looming just a few years ahead, and that your marshmallow is on fire.

G

la gaudière

n. the glint of goodness inside people, which you can only find by sloshing them back and forth in your mind until everything dark and gray and common falls away, leaving behind a constellation at the bottom of the pan—a rare element trapped in exposed bedrock, washed there by a storm somewhere upstream.

gnasche

n. the intense desire to bite deeply into the forearm of someone you love.

gnossienne

n. a moment of awareness that someone you've known for years still has a private and mysterious inner life, and somewhere in the hallways of their personality is a door locked from the inside, a stairway leading to a wing of the house that you've never fully explored—an unfinished attic that will remain maddeningly unknowable to you, because ultimately neither of you has a map, or a master key, or any way of knowing exactly where you stand.

H

hanker sore

adj. finding a person so attractive it actually kinda pisses you off.

heartworm

n. a relationship or friendship that you can't get out of your head, which you thought had faded long ago but is still somehow alive and unfinished, like an abandoned campsite whose smoldering embers still have the power to start a forest fire.

hiybbprqag

n. the feeling that everything original has already been done, that the experiment of human culture long ago filled its petri dish and now just feeds on itself, endlessly crossbreeding old clichés into a radioactive ooze of sadness.

J

jouska

n. a hypothetical conversation that you compulsively play out in your head—a crisp analysis, a cathartic dialogue, a devastating comeback—which serves as a kind of psychological batting cage where you can connect more deeply with people than in the small ball of everyday life, which is a frustratingly cautious game of change-up pitches, sacrifice bunts, and intentional walks.

K

kairosclerosis

n. the moment you realize that you're currently happy—consciously trying to savor the feeling—which prompts your intellect to identify it, pick it apart and put it in context, where it will slowly dissolve until it's little more than an aftertaste.

kenopsia

n. the eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet—a school hallway in the evening, an unlit office on a weekend, vacant fairgrounds—an emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty, with a total population in the negative, who are so conspicuously absent they glow like neon signs.

keyframe

n. a moment that seemed innocuous at the time but ended up marking a diversion into a strange new era of your life—set in motion not by a series of jolting epiphanies but by tiny imperceptible differences between one ordinary day and the next, until entire years of your memory can be compressed into a handful of indelible images—which prevents you from rewinding the past, but allows you to move forward without endless buffering.

the kinda blues

n. the sad awareness that the unfolding plot of your life feels new and profound but is not unique, just one of a few dozen possible riffs on the same chord progression, while the tunes reverberating from the jukebox in your chest are all covers of old standards from the Great Emotional Songbook, which is 98% identical to that of the chimpanzee.

kuebiko

n. a state of exhaustion inspired by an act of senseless violence, which forces you to revise your image of what can happen in this world—mending the fences of your expectations, weeding out invasive truths, cultivating the perennial good that's buried under the surface—before propping yourself up in the middle of it like an old scarecrow, who's bursting at the seams but powerless to do anything but stand there and watch.

L

lachesism

n. the desire to be struck by disaster—to survive a plane crash, to lose everything in a fire, to plunge over a waterfall—which would put a kink in the smooth arc of your life, and forge it into something hardened and flexible and sharp, not just a stiff prefabricated beam that barely covers the gap between one end of your life and the other.

lalalalia

n. the realization while talking to yourself that someone else is within earshot, which leads you to crossfade into mumbled singing, an auditory sleight of hand that distracts the audience from the exposed platform under your persona while you prepare to saw your confidence in half.

lapyear

n. the age at which you become older than your parents were when you were born, which signals that your leg of the relay race has already begun, having coasted in their slipstream as they tackled the mountain stages of life, leaving you strong, energetic and deeply mortified by their loud yellow jerseys.

lethobenthos

n. the habit of forgetting how important someone is to you until you see them again in person, making you wish your day would begin with a "previously on" recap of your life's various plot arcs, and end with "to be continued..." after those will-they-won't-they cliffhanger episodes that air just before the show goes back into months of repeats.

liberosis

n. the desire to care less about things—to loosen your grip on your life, to stop glancing behind you every few steps, afraid that someone will snatch it from you before you reach the end zone—rather to hold your life loosely and playfully, like a volleyball, keeping it in the air, with only quick fleeting interventions, bouncing freely in the hands of trusted friends, always in play.

lilo

n. a friendship that can lie dormant for years only to pick right back up instantly, as if no time had passed since you last saw each other.

M

mahpiohanzia

n. the disappointment of being unable to fly, unable to stretch out your arms and vault into the air, having finally shrugged off the ballast of your own weight and ignited the fuel tank of unfulfilled desires you've been storing up since before you were born.

mal de coucou

n. a phenomenon in which you have an active social life but very few close friends—people who you can trust, who you can be yourself with, who can help flush out the weird psychological toxins that tend to accumulate over time—which is a form of acute social malnutrition in which even if you devour an entire buffet of chitchat, you'll still feel pangs of hunger.

Mauerbauertraurigkeit

n. the inexplicable urge to push people away, even close friends who you really like—as if all your social tastebuds suddenly went numb, leaving you unable to distinguish cheap politeness from the taste of genuine affection, unable to recognize its rich and ambiguous flavors, its long and delicate maturation, or the simple fact that each tasting is double-blind.

the McFly effect

n. the phenomenon of observing your parents interact with people they grew up with, which reboots their personalities into youth mode, reverting to a time before the last save point, when they were still dreamers and rascals cooling their heels in the wilderness, waiting terrified and eager to meet you for the first time.

the meantime

n. the moment of realization that your quintessential future self isn't ever going to show up, which forces the role to fall upon the understudy, the gawky kid for whom nothing is easy, who spent years mouthing their lines in the wings before being shoved into the glare of your life, which is already well into its second act.

midding

v. intr. feeling the tranquil pleasure of being near a gathering but not quite in it—hovering on the perimeter of a campfire, chatting outside a party while others dance inside, resting your head in the backseat of a car listening to your friends chatting up front—feeling blissfully invisible yet still fully included, safe in the knowledge that everyone is together and everyone is okay, with all the thrill of being there without the burden of having to be.

midsummer

n. a feast celebrated on the day of your 26th birthday, which marks the point at which your youth finally expires as a valid excuse—when you must begin harvesting your crops, even if they've barely taken root—and the point at which the days will begin to feel shorter as they pass, until even the pollen in the air reminds you of the coming snow.

mimeomia

n. the frustration of knowing how easily you fit into a stereotype, even if you never intended to, even if it's unfair, even if everyone else feels the same way—each of us trick-or-treating for money and respect and attention, wearing a safe and predictable costume because we're tired of answering the question, "What are you supposed to be?"

moledro

n. a feeling of resonant connection with an author or artist you'll never meet, who may have lived centuries ago and thousands of miles away but can still get inside your head and leave behind morsels of their experience, like the little piles of stones left by hikers that mark a hidden path through unfamiliar territory.

monachopsis

n. the subtle but persistent feeling of being out of place, as maladapted to your surroundings as a seal on a beach—lumbering, clumsy, easily distracted, huddled in the company of other misfits, unable to recognize the ambient roar of your intended habitat, in which you'd be fluidly, brilliantly, effortlessly at home.

moriturism

n. the insomnia-borne jolt of awareness that you will die, that these passing years aren't just scenes from a dress rehearsal, rounds of an ongoing game or chapters in a story you'll be telling later, but are footprints being lapped by the steadily gathering tide of an unfathomable abyss, which still wouldn't wash out the aftertaste of all those baskets of Buffalo wings you devoured just before bedtime.

N

nementia

n. the post-distraction effort to recall the reason why you're feeling particularly anxious or angry or excited, in which you retrace your sequence of thoughts like a kid wandering across the neighborhood gathering the string of a downed kite, which was likely lost in a romantic storm or devoured by that huge carnivorous tree that is Things Your Parents Have Said.

nighthawk

n. a recurring thought that only seems to strike you late at night—an overdue task, a nagging guilt, a looming and shapeless future—that circles high overhead during the day, that pecks at the back of your mind while you try to sleep, that you can successfully ignore for weeks, only to feel its presence hovering outside the window, waiting for you to finish your coffee, passing the time by quietly building a nest.

nodus tollens

n. the realization that the plot of your life doesn't make sense to you anymore—that although you thought you were following the arc of the story, you keep finding yourself immersed in passages you don't understand, that don't even seem to belong in the same genre—which requires you to go back and reread the chapters you had originally skimmed to get to the good parts, only to learn that all along you were supposed to choose your own adventure.

O

occhiolism

n. the awareness of the smallness of your perspective, by which you couldn't possibly draw any meaningful conclusions at all, about the world or the past or the complexities of culture, because although your life is an epic and unrepeatably anecdote, it still only has a sample size of one, and may end up being the control for a much wilder experiment happening in the next room.

onism

n. the frustration of being stuck in just one body, that inhabits only one place at a time, which is like standing in front of the departures screen at an airport, flickering over with strange place names like other people's passwords, each representing one more thing you'll never get to see before you die—and all because, as the arrow on the map helpfully points out, you are here.

opia

n. the ambiguous intensity of looking someone in the eye, which can feel simultaneously invasive and vulnerable—their pupils glittering, bottomless and opaque—as if you were peering through a hole in the door of a house, able to tell that there's someone standing there, but unable to tell if you're looking in or looking out.

P

pâro

n. the feeling that no matter what you do is always somehow wrong—that any attempt to make your way comfortably through the world will only end up crossing some invisible taboo—as if there's some obvious way forward that everybody else can see but you, each of them leaning back in their chair and calling out helpfully, colder, colder, colder.

R

reverse shibboleth

n. the practice of answering a cellphone with a generic "Hello?" as if you didn't already know exactly who was calling—which is a little like the egg requirement that marketers added to early cake mixes in the 1950s, an antiquated extra step that's only there to reassure you that it's an authentic homecooked meal, just like grandma used to make.

rigor samsa

n. a kind of psychological exoskeleton that can protect you from pain and contain your anxieties, but always ends up cracking under pressure or hollowed out by time—and will keep growing back again and again, until you develop a more sophisticated emotional structure, held up by a strong and flexible spine, built less like a fortress than a cluster of treehouses.

rollover reaction

n. when your dream about someone you know skews how you feel about them all the next day, an emotion you are unable—and unwilling—to shake.

rubatosis

n. the unsettling awareness of your own heartbeat, whose tenuous muscular throbbing feels less like a metronome than a nervous ditty your heart is tapping to itself, the kind that people compulsively hum or sing while walking in complete darkness, as if to casually remind the outside world, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.

Rückkehrunruhe

n. the feeling of returning home after an immersive trip only to find it fading rapidly from your awareness—to the extent you have to keep reminding yourself that it happened at all, even though it felt so vivid just days ago—which makes you wish you could smoothly cross-dissolve back into everyday life, or just hold the shutter open indefinitely and let one scene become superimposed on the next, so all your days would run together and you'd never have to call cut.

S

scabulous

adj. proud of a scar on your body, which is an autograph signed to you by a world grateful for your continued willingness to play with her, even when you don't feel like it.

semaphorism

n. a conversational hint that you have something personal to say on the subject but don't go any further—an emphatic nod, a half-told anecdote, an enigmatic 'I know the feeling'—which you place into conversations like those little flags that warn diggers of something buried underground: maybe a cable that secretly powers your house, maybe a fiberoptic link to some foreign country.

silience

n. the kind of unnoticed excellence that carries on around you every day, unremarkably—the hidden talents of friends and coworkers, the fleeting solos of subway buskers, the slapdash eloquence of anonymous users, the unseen portfolios of aspiring artists—which would be renowned as masterpieces if only they'd been appraised by the cartel of popular taste, who assume that brilliance is a rare and precious quality, accidentally overlooking buried jewels that may not be flawless but are still somehow perfect.

slipcast

n. the default expression that your face automatically reverts to when idle—amused, melancholic, pissed off—which occurs when a strong emotion gets buried and forgotten in the psychological laundry of everyday life, leaving you wearing an unintentional vibe of pink or blue or gray, or in rare cases, a tie-dye of sheer madness.

sonder

n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.

swish fulfillment

n. the feeling of delicate luck after casually tossing something across the room and hitting your target so crisply and perfectly that you feel no desire to even attempt another shot, which is a more compelling argument for the concept of monogamous love than anything sung to a guitar.

T

the **tilt shift**

n. a phenomenon in which your lived experience seems oddly inconsequential once you put it down on paper, which turns an epic tragicomedy into a sequence of figures on a model train set, assembled in their tiny classrooms and workplaces, wandering along their own cautious and well-trodden paths—peaceable, generic and out of focus.

trumspringa

n. the temptation to step off your career track and become a shepherd in the mountains, following your flock between pastures with a sheepdog and a rifle, watching storms at dusk from the doorway of a small cabin, just the kind of hypnotic diversion that allows your thoughts to make a break for it and wander back to their cubicles in the city.

V

vellichor

n. the strange wistfulness of used bookstores, which are somehow infused with the passage of time—filled with thousands of old books you'll never have time to read, each of which is itself locked in its own era, bound and dated and papered over like an old room the author abandoned years ago, a hidden annex littered with thoughts left just as they were on the day they were captured.

vemödalen

n. the frustration of photographing something amazing when thousands of identical photos already exist—the same sunset, the same waterfall, the same curve of a hip, the same closeup of an eye—which can turn a unique subject into something hollow and pulpy and cheap, like a mass-produced piece of furniture you happen to have assembled yourself.

W

waldosia

n. [Brit. wallisia] a condition characterized by scanning faces in a crowd looking for a specific person who would have no reason to be there, which is your brain's way of checking to see whether they're still in your life, subconsciously patting its emotional pockets before it leaves for the day.

wytai

n. a feature of modern society that suddenly strikes you as absurd and grotesque—from zoos and milk-drinking to organ transplants, life insurance, and fiction—part of the faint background noise of absurdity that reverberates from the moment our ancestors first crawled out of the slime but could not for the life of them remember what they got up to do.

X

xeno

n. the smallest measurable unit of human connection, typically exchanged between passing strangers—a flirtatious glance, a sympathetic nod, a shared laugh about some odd coincidence—moments that are fleeting and random but still contain powerful emotional nutrients that can alleviate the symptoms of feeling alone.

Z

Zielschmerz

n. the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream, which requires you to put your true abilities out there to be tested on the open savannah, no longer protected inside the terrarium of hopes and delusions that you created in kindergarten and kept sealed as long as you could, only to break in case of emergency.