The DICTIONARY *of* OBSCURE SORROWS

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CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS BOOK ix

1. BETWEEN LIVING AND DREAMING 1
2. THE INTERIOR WILDERNESS 41
3. MONTAGE OF ATTRACTIONS 81
4. FACES IN A CROWD 119
5. BOATS AGAINST THE CURRENT 157
6. ROLL THE BONES 209

NEOLOGISTICS 253
ON GRATITUDE 261
A WORD OF ADVICE 265
INDEX 267

I read the dictionary.
I thought it was a poem
about everything.

—STEVEN WRIGHT

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows is a compendium of new words for emotions. Its mission is to shine a light on the fundamental strangeness of being a human being—all the aches, demons, vibes, joys, and urges that are humming in the background of everyday life:

kenopsia: the atmosphere of a place that is usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet.

dès vu: the awareness that this moment will become a memory.

nodus tollens: the feeling that the plot of your life doesn't make sense to you anymore.

énouement: the bittersweetness of having arrived here in the future, seeing how things turn out, but unable to tell your past self.

onism: the frustration of being stuck in just one body, that inhabits only one place at a time.

sonder: the realization that each random passerby is the main character of their own story, in which you are just an extra in the background.

It's a calming thing, to learn there's a word for something you've felt all your life but didn't know was shared by anyone else. It's even oddly empowering—to be reminded that you're not alone, you're not crazy, you're just an ordinary human being trying to make your way through a bizarre set of circumstances.

That's how the idea for this book was born, in that jolt of recognition you feel when learning certain words for emotions, especially in languages other than English: *hygge*, *saudade*, *duende*, *ubuntu*, *schadenfreude*. Some of these terms might well be untranslatable, but they still have the power to make the inside of your head feel a little more familiar, at least for a moment or two. It makes you wonder what else might be possible—what other morsels of meaning could've been teased out of the static, if only someone had come along and given them a name.

Of course, we don't usually question why a language has words for some things and not others. We don't really imagine we have much choice in the matter, because the words we use to build our lives were mostly handed to us in the crib or picked up on the playground. They function as a kind of psychological programming that helps shape our relationships, our memory, even our perception of reality.

As Wittgenstein wrote, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world."

But therein lies a problem. Language is so fundamental to our perception, we're unable to perceive the flaws built into language itself. It would be difficult to tell, for example, if our vocabulary had fallen badly out of date, and no longer described the world in which we live. We would feel only a strange hollowness in our conversations, never really sure if we're being understood.

The dictionary evolves over time, of course. New words are coined as needed, emerging one by one from the test lab of our conversations. But that process carries a certain bias, only giving names to concepts that are simple, tangible, communal, and easy to talk about.

Emotions are none of these. As a result, there's a huge blind spot in the language of emotion, vast holes in the lexicon that we don't even know we're missing. We have thousands of words for different types of finches and schooners and historical undergarments, but only a rudimentary vocabulary to capture the delectable subtleties of the human experience.

Words will never do us justice. But we have to try anyway. Luckily, the palette of language is infinitely expandable. If we wanted to, we could build a new linguistic framework to fill in the gaps, this time rooted in our common humanity, our shared vulnerability, and our complexity as individuals—a perspective that simply wasn't there when most of our dictionaries were written. We could catalog even the faintest quirks

of the human condition, even things that were only ever felt by one person—though it is the working hypothesis of this book that none of us is truly alone in how we feel.

In language, all things are possible. Which means that no emotion is untranslatable. No sorrow is too obscure to define. We just have to do it.

This is not a book about sadness—at least, not in the modern sense of the word. The word *sadness* originally meant "fullness," from the same Latin root, *satis*, that also gave us *sated* and *satisfaction*. Not so long ago, to be sad meant you were filled to the brim with some intensity of experience. It wasn't just a malfunction in the joy machine. It was a state of awareness—setting the focus to infinity and taking it all in, joy and grief all at once. When we speak of sadness these days, most of the time what we really mean is despair, which is literally defined as the absence of hope. But true sadness is actually the opposite, an exuberant upwelling that reminds you how fleeting and mysterious and open-ended life can be. That's why you'll find traces of the blues all over this book, but you might find yourself feeling strangely joyful at the end of it. And if you are lucky enough to feel sad, well, savor it while it lasts—if only because it means that you care about something in this world enough to let it under your skin.

This is a dictionary—a poem about everything. It's divided into six chapters, with definitions grouped according to

theme: the outer world, the inner self, the people you know, the people you don't, the passage of time, and the search for meaning. The definitions are arranged in no particular order, which seems fairly true to life, given the way emotions tend to drift through your mind like the weather.

All words in this dictionary are new. Some were rescued from the trash heap and redefined, others were invented from whole cloth, but most were stitched together from fragments of a hundred different languages, both living and dead. These words were not necessarily intended to be used in conversation, but to exist for their own sake. To give some semblance of order to the wilderness inside your head, so you can settle it yourself on your own terms, without feeling too lost—safe in the knowledge that we're all lost.

ONE

Between Living and Dreaming

SEEING THE WORLD AS IT IS,
AND THE WORLD AS IT COULD BE

Collage by Bruno Baraldi | TAKI

The bright side of the planet moves toward darkness
And the cities are falling asleep, each in its hour,
And for me, now as then, it is too much,
There is too much world.

—CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ, *The Separate Notebooks*

chrysalism

n. the amniotic tranquility of being indoors during a thunderstorm.

Latin *chrysalis*, the pupa of a butterfly. Pronounced "*kris*-uh-liz-uhm."

trumspringa

n. the longing to wander off your career track in pursuit of a simple life—tending a small farm in a forest clearing, keeping a lighthouse on a secluded atoll, or becoming a shepherd in the mountains—which is 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.

German *Stadtzentrum*, "city center" + Pennsylvania German *Rumspringa*, "hopping around." Rumspringa is a putative tradition in which Amish teens dip their toes in modernity for a while before choosing whether to commit to the traditional way of life. Pronounced "*truhm*-spring-guh."

kairosclerosis

n. the moment you look around and 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.

Ancient Greek καιρός (*kairos*), a sublime or opportune moment + σκλήρωσις (*sklērōsis*), hardening. Pronounced "kahy-roh-skluh-*roh*-sis."

scabulous

adj. proud of a certain scar on your body, which is like an autograph signed to you by a world grateful for your continued willingness to play with her, even if it hurts.

From *scab* + *fabulous*.

occhiolism

n. the awareness of how fundamentally limited your senses are—noticing how little of your field of vision is ever in focus, how few colors you're able to see, how few sounds you're able to hear, and how intrusively your brain fills in the blanks with its own cartoonish extrapolations—which makes you wish you could experience the whole of reality instead of only ever catching a tiny glimpse of it, to just once step back from the keyhole and finally open the door.

Italian *occhiolino* ("little eye"), the original name that Galileo gave to the microscope in 1609. Pronounced "*oh*-kyoh-liz-uhm."

VEMÖDALEN

the fear that originality is no longer possible

You are unique. And you are surrounded by billions of other people, just as unique as you. Each of us is different, with some new angle on the world. So what does it mean if the lives we're busy shaping by hand all end up looking the same?

We all spread out, looking around for scraps of frontier—trying to capture something special, something personal. But when you gather all our scattered snapshots side by side, the results are often uncanny. There's the same close-up of an eye, the same raindrops on a window, the same selfie in the side-view mirror. The airplane wingtip, the pair of bare legs stretched out on a beach chair, the loopy rosette of milk in a latte. The same meals are photographed again and again. The same monuments pinched between fingers. The same waterfalls. Sunset after sunset.

It should be a comfort that we're not so different, that our perspectives so neatly align. If nothing else, it's a reminder that we live in the same world. Still, it makes you wonder. How many of your snapshots could easily be replaced by a thousand identical others? Is there any value left in taking yet another photo of the moon, or the Taj Mahal, or the Eiffel Tower? Is a photograph just a kind of souvenir to prove you've been someplace, like a prefabricated piece

of furniture that you happened to have assembled yourself?

It's alright if we tell the same jokes we've all heard before. It's alright if we keep remaking the same movies. It's alright if we keep saying the same phrases to each other as if they had never been said before. Even when you look back to the earliest known work of art in existence, you'll find a handprint stenciled on the wall of a cave—not just one, but hundreds overlapping, each indistinguishable from the other.

To be sure, you and I and billions of others will leave our mark on this world we've inherited, just like the billions who came before us. But if, in the end, we find ourselves with nothing left to say, nothing new to add, idly tracing outlines left by others long ago—it'll be as if we were never here at all.

This too is not an original thought. As the poet once said, "The powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse." What else is there to say? When you get your cue, you say your line.

Swedish *vemod*, tender sadness, pensive melancholy + *Vemdalen*, the name of a Swedish town, which is the kind of thing that IKEA usually borrows to give names to their products. Pronounced "*vey*-moh-dah-len."

looseleft

adj. feeling a sense of loss upon finishing a good book, sensing the weight of the back cover locking away the lives of characters you've gotten to know so well.

From *looseleaf*, a removable sheet of paper + *left*, departed.

jouska

n. a hypothetical conversation that you compulsively play out in your head—a crisp analysis, a devastating comeback, a cathartic heart-to-heart—which serves as a kind of psychological batting cage that feels far more satisfying than the small-ball strategies of everyday life.

French *jusqu'à*, until. In baseball, "small ball" is a cautious offensive strategy devoted to getting on base via walks, bunts, and steals, forgoing the big home run moments that fans tend to enjoy. Pronounced "*zhoos*-ka."

plata rasa

n. the lulling sound of a running dishwasher, whose steady maternal shushing somehow puts you completely at peace with not having circumnavigated anything solo.

Latin *plata*, plate + *rasa*, blank or scraped clean. Pronounced "*pla*-tuh *rah*-suh."

slipfast

adj. longing to disappear completely; to melt into a crowd and become invisible, so you can take in the world without having to take part in it—free to wander through conversations without ever leaving footprints, free to dive deep into things without worrying about making a splash.

From *slip*, to move or fly away in secret + *fast*, fortified against attack.

elsewise

adj. struck by the poignant strangeness of other people's homes, which smell and feel so different than your own—seeing the details of their private living space, noticing their little daily rituals, the way they've arranged their things, the framed photos of people you'll never know.

From *else*, other + *wise*, with reference to.

the Til

n. the reservoir of all possible opportunities still available to you at this point in your life—all the countries you still have the energy to explore, the careers you still have the courage to pursue, the skills you still have time to develop, the relationships you still have the heart to make—like a pail of water you carry around in your head, which starts off feeling like an overwhelming burden but steadily draws down as you get older, splashing gallons over the side every time you take a step.

From *the till*, a shopkeeper's register filled with unspent change + *until*.

ASTROPHE

the feeling of being stuck on Earth

It's hard not to look at the ground as you walk. To set your sights low, and keep the world spinning, just trying to stay present wherever you are. But every so often you remember to look up at the stars, and imagine what's out there. Before long, you find yourself grounded once again—grounded in the sense of being housebound, stuck on the planet Earth.

The more you look to the sky, the more you find yourself back on Earth, confronting certain possibilities. It's possible there are other names for our planet that we will never know. That there are constellations that feature our sun, from an angle we'll never get to see. That there are many other civilizations hidden beyond the veil of time, too far away for their light to ever reach us.

We dream of other worlds and name them after old discarded gods, and they seem almost as distant—too far to be seen with the naked eye. Too far even to be seen with our sharpest telescopes, leaning out over the far edge of our atmosphere. They exist only in probabilistic blips in the data, hinting that something must be blocking the starlight at certain intervals. Somehow that's enough to extrapolate entire worlds out there, as if they were ripe for the taking, but many of these distant galaxies and exoplanets will only ever exist

in artists' renditions, with the colors tweaked to add a bit of flair.

Even our own solar system is eerily sparse. In textbooks, we tend to print all the planets nested tightly together, because if we tried to draw them to scale, they'd be so small and far apart, they wouldn't even fit in the same room. Even our own moon, which seems to hang so close to Earth, is so far away that all the other planets could fit in the empty space between them. And of all the billions of people on Earth, only twelve of them have ever pushed free and set foot on alien soil.

It's possible that our spacesuits won't need treaded boots ever again. That one day soon we'll tire of exploring and move back home for good. And we'll get used to watching our feet as we walk, occasionally stopping to hurl a single probe into the abyss, like a message in a bottle.

Maybe it shouldn't matter if anyone ever finds it. If nobody's there to know we once lived here on Earth. Maybe it should be like skipping a stone across the surface of a lake. It doesn't matter where it ends up. All that matters is that we're here on the shore—trying to have fun and pass the time, and see how far it goes.

Ancient Greek ἄστρον (*ástron*), star + ἀτροφία (*atrophía*), a wasting away due to lack of use. Pronounced "*as*-truh-fee."

ameneurosis

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

From *amen*, "so be it" + *neurosis*, an anxious state + *amanuensis*, an assistant who helps transcribe newly composed music. A train whistle is the sound of air being forced across a gap, which serves as a poignant reminder of all the gaps in your life. Pronounced "ah-men-nyoo-*roh*-sis."

volander

n. the ethereal feeling of looking down at the world through an airplane window, able to catch a glimpse of far-flung places you'd never see in person, free to let your mind wander, trying to imagine what they must feel like down on the ground—the closest you'll ever get to an objective point of view.

Latin *volare*, to fly + *solander*, a book-shaped box for storing maps. Pronounced "voh-*land*-uhr."

licotic

adj. anxiously excited to introduce a friend to something you think is amazing—a classic album, a favorite restaurant, a TV show they're lucky enough to watch for the very first time—which prompts you to continually poll their face waiting for the inevitable rush of awe, only to cringe when you discover all the work's flaws shining through for the very first time.

Old English *licode*, it pleased [you] + *psychotic*. Pronounced "lahy-*kot*-ic."

fitzcarraldo

n. a random image that 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 around in your head, itching for a chance to leap headlong into reality.

From the title character of the 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, directed by Werner Herzog, about a man who is overcome by the thought of hearing Caruso's operatic tenor echoing through the Peruvian jungle; to fund this effort he hires local people to pull a steamship over a mountain, a feat that was done for real for the film's production. Pronounced "fits-kuh-*rawl*-doh."