

## FOREWORD

Luckily for me, it wasn't until well after I finished my term at UC Berkeley that I spotted the following dreadful words in Sterling Dow's history of the first fifty years of Sather lectures:

The Sathers . . . began with emphasis not only on importance, but on grandeur . . . Subsequent lecturers have hardly deviated. Admittedly not all the subjects treated have been equally important . . . certainly none treats a trivial subject . . . or treats its subject in a trivial manner . . . Thus even the comparatively few volumes that verge on being humdrum are worth reading, and provoke thoughts in us. That is the virtue of treating large and important subjects. (Dow 1965, 11–12)

Dow (Sather Professor himself in 1964) continues mercilessly:

The invitation to deliver the Sather Lectures has a strong effect . . . In many instances, probably, it is the most compelling challenge the scholar ever received . . . Some scholars resolve to . . . write “the great book” they’ve always intended to write. (Dow 1965, 12)

I was at least as cowed as any of my Sather predecessors, so what made me “deviate” toward “small and unimportant subjects”? A different kind of panicked response to the same pressure? A sense of not fitting into a seat occupied by some very great men and women before me, always conflated in my mind with the geriatric-looking armchair that greeted me in the Sather Professor's office? The timing of my appointment—when COVID-19 had held sway for two years—gave me, I figured, a certain leeway. I even convinced myself that my small topic was wildly appropriate for an era marked (in the least bad scenario) by experiences of shortchanging, half measures, frustration, tiny joys, short-term views into

the future, and limited academic resources. But I underestimated what an affront it was to the grand Sather tradition.

As things have turned out, I am privileged to have been able to turn an extraordinary invitation into a book that comes from the heart. In many ways, this is a return to beginnings. As a typical product of late twentieth-century humanist academia, I always had a soft spot for small and marginal things, in my case those at the lower end of the Latin literary canon. When I was a student, this enthusiasm was nurtured by two legendary Cambridge teachers, Neil Hopkinson and John Henderson—not forgetting Roger Dawe, who taught me all I know about those littlest of words, the Greek particles. Unlike other books I have written, this one has been produced at relative speed. It puts out feelers, forages in (for me) unusual places, and taps into what has felt increasingly like a live vein. This has made it both a pleasure to write and a good excuse for avoiding other tasks. As Callimachus tells us in his *Hymn to Zeus*, even Ptolemy Philadelphus (a pro at time management) preferred to get the small things on his to-do list done right away and leave the big things till the evening.

More generally, the topic of smallness felt timely and predictable—a manageable, even comforting theme with which to hunker down in the face of global disaster and late capitalist fatigue. In 2020, shortly after deciding on my subject, I came across a blog that Nandini Pandey (now of Johns Hopkins) had compiled for the Society for Classical Studies.<sup>1</sup> She based her call for contributions on two recent Radiolab podcasts. One was on Cold War doomsday scenarios, those government-sponsored lists of objects slated for preservation in the case of nuclear war, from the Declaration of Independence to the log of the USS *Monitor* and Lincoln’s autopsy report. The other recalled physicist Richard Feynman’s challenge to his students in 1961, to say which key piece of wisdom in the shortest number of words they would choose to pass on, in the event of a similar cataclysm where all other scientific knowledge was destroyed. In her turn, Pandey asked a number of current classicists to say what “cataclysm sentence” or thing for each of them best encapsulated what they had learned from classical antiquity, what they hoped to give their students, and what they would choose to leave to posterity.

The choices her interviewees made were quite revealing. Never the obvious monumental remains—the Parthenon, Plato’s *Republic*, the *Aeneid*, the Colosseum. Instead, everything lay at the smaller end of the scale. Amy Richlin, for example, chose the “Pietrabbondante rooftile,” a piece of miraculously preserved clay in which two enslaved women once squarely plonked their feet, leaving behind a record, in Oscan and Latin, of the job and their names for all time. Samuel Ortencio Flores chose a tenth-century BCE ceramic toy horse on wheels—a token, he says, of our shared humanity, in that we can never know if it belonged to a king’s child or a slave’s (figure 1). The same spirit emerged from short *sayings* chosen by other contributors. Alice Mandell picked the female tavern-keeper’s invitation to Gilgamesh, stopping on his quest, to submit to immediate pleasures like dancing,



FIGURE 1. Toy horse on wheels, tenth century BCE, Kerameikos Archaeological Museum, Athens. Photo: Sharon Mollerus; Wikimedia Commons.

hot baths, a child's hand, and a wife's embrace. Dan-el Padilla Peralta democratized the Lucretian tag, "Even good King Ancus closed his eyes to the light," by adding, "But why did George Floyd have to die? Ahmaud Arbery? Breonna Taylor?"

It wasn't hard to spot a common focus: on the intimate, childish, feminine, everyday, random, subaltern, domestic, bodily, individual, mutable, and perishable. On conventionally slight things that have survived and become disproportionately meaningful: short tags about randomness, transience, or small concrete stuff, and objects made by or for ordinary people. True, the choices reflect pressing concerns in the field—about diversity, equality, rehabilitating the oppressed and the overlooked, and appreciating the messiness and the varied perspectives of antiquity. They also bear witness to a time when life seemed more than usually random and derailed, when the focus had to be on what was in front of us and what really mattered. Small things do matter now, far more than we might have predicted: from the inhabitants of tiny islands speaking out at the forefront of the climate crisis,

to the young girl who heads a global environmental movement, to the infinitesimally tiny mutating virus—at the time of the lectures, omicron, “little o”—that has wreaked havoc across the world. In Alice Mandell’s words: “It is . . . therapeutic to think through what we assign lasting value and why.”

Berkeley was still a ghost town while I was there, but at street level its charms were never masked: an allotment where one could buy a handful of herbs for a few cents; little free libraries; a bijou coffee shop. I sampled sweaty salsa, hot tubs, goat yoga, and, further afield, Palm Springs bungalows and the Mojave Desert. I enjoyed the company of Kristina Chew, Mark Griffith, Erich Gruen, Leslie Kurke, Kathleen McCarthy, Carlos Noreña, Nelly Oliensis, John Shoptaw, and Dylan Sailor, chair of the Department of Ancient Greek and Roman Studies, who wrote a wonderfully tongue-in-cheek letter to persuade the US Embassy in London that my visit was in the national interest. A phenomenal group of graduate students inspired me to think harder about Statius. Among them, my Sather assistants Tommaso Bernardini and Lauren Nguyen always went the extra mile to produce beautiful handouts and slides. Alex Purves and Kathryn Morgan invited me to UCLA; Dorota Dutsch and Helen Morales invited me to UC Santa Barbara. Subsequent audiences in Beer Sheva, Cape Town, Cambridge, Nottingham, Santa Cruz, and Basel kindly listened to and improved some of my chapters. Two people above all changed my thinking entirely, fed me new theoretical frameworks, and boosted my morale at every dress rehearsal: Mario Telò and Anna Uhlig. I could not have written this book without them.

Away from the office, Ann and Aldo Arnold provided a delightful haven and excellent pizza. Anne Marxer rented me the perfect garden cottage, a yellow feathered Baba Yaga hut with lemons for the reaching. All around me, delicious vegetation proved that new starts were possible. For her short saying, incidentally, Hannah Čulík-Baird picked Praxilla’s hymn to dead Adonis, revealing that what he misses most from life is not just the sun, moon, and stars but also ripe cucumbers, apples, and pears. As a sun, fruit, and vegetable lover, I have always preferred to read this as being about leaving California.

One day, while jogging along Berkeley’s flowery streets, I was stopped in my tracks by a garden fence on McKinley Avenue, apparently sprouting with poems. They had been pinned there, it turned out, by local poet Gary Turchin, and one of them had almost the same title as one of my lectures:

A THOUSAND LITTLE IRRITANTS

The way mail piles up  
the way we argue  
the way we fail  
and keep failing  
the way we age  
and carry grudges

the way we hurt ourselves  
and each other  
the way we smell  
or others smell  
the way we have to wait  
the way we have to hurry  
the way no one cares  
the way we don't care  
the way our government doesn't understand  
the way our understanding doesn't matter  
the way we live  
or don't live  
the way we die  
or will die  
  
and tomorrow  
the Sun  
like a giant ball of wonder  
will bounce up happy and yellow  
inventing each day  
like it's the only thing that matters

I was tickled to find my theme already endorsed at the grass roots. But Turchin's words also remind us that, however much we may sweat the small stuff, we do well to keep things in perspective. I only hope that this book, limited and exploratory though it is, will encourage its readers to keep pondering what matters, in antiquity as in the present.



## TEXTS AND ABBREVIATIONS

For classical journals, I have used, where available, the abbreviations used in *L'Année Philologique*. For titles of ancient texts, I have followed, where available, the abbreviations used in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd ed.). Translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated. I have used standard editions of ancient texts: Oxford Classical Texts or recent volumes of the Loeb Classical Library.

### Other abbreviations:

Cornell	<i>The Fragments of the Roman Historians</i> . Edited by Timothy Cornell. 3 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
Courtney	<i>The Fragmentary Latin Poets</i> . Edited by Edward Courtney. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
Fotheringham	<i>Eusebii Pamphili Chronici Canones</i> . Edited by John Fotheringham. London: Humphrey Milford, 1923.
K-T	<i>Menandri quae supersunt</i> . Edited by Alfred Koethe and Andreas Thierfelder. 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1957–59.
Klotz-Schoell	<i>M. Tulli Ciceronia scripta quae manserunt</i> . Edited by Alfred Klotz and Fritz Schoell. 8 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1923.
Laks-Most	<i>Early Greek Philosophy</i> . Edited by André Laks and Glenn Most. 9 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.
OLD	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> . Edited by P. Glare. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1982. Rev. ed., 2012.

- Perry                      *Aesopica*. Vol. 1, *Greek and Latin Texts*. Edited by Ben E. Perry. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952.
- RRC                      *Roman Republican Coinage*. Edited by Michael Crawford. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- W                          *Remains of Old Latin*. Edited by E. H. Warmington. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936.