

The Good of Small Things

Everything is strange. Things are huge and very small. The stalks of flowers are thick as oak trees. Leaves are high as the domes of vast cathedrals. We are giants, lying here, who can make forests quiver.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *THE WAVES*

Small things are all around us. They surprise us, touch us, even scare us. The summer hallucination Virginia Woolf describes here is heightened and surreal, but it conveys something universal, as well: the momentary disorientation all humans experience in their regular adjustments to differently sized surroundings.

Sometimes, small things gesture to us silently from the past. Perhaps no one captures the uncanny communicative power of small things from another time better than John Updike in this early episode of his long short story “Museums and Women.” Remembering childhood visits with his mother to a local art collection, the narrator singles out certain “strange, small statues” for their disconcerting effects on him—emotional, even neurological:

Each, if it could have been released into life, would have stood about twenty inches high and weighed in my arms as much as a cat. I itched to finger them, to interact with them, to insert myself into their mysterious silent world of strenuous contention—their bulged tendons burnished, their hushed violence detailed down to the fingernails. They were in their smallness like secret thoughts of mine projected into dimension and permanence, and they returned to me as a response that carried strangely into parts of my body. I felt myself a furtive animal sitting in the shadow of my mother. (Updike 1972, 10)

To a small boy these bronze figurines, the size of babies or pets, whose native American and mythical Greek subjects evoke two different cultural origins, seem touchable and imaginatively coextensive with his own body. At the same time, they are oddly unreachable—little forerunners, perhaps, of failed connection in his adult relationships. Immobilized, reduced, and silent as they are, they pose

no obvious threat. Yet they generate almost electric bodily reactions, stir quasi-parental tenderness, empty out and restore fetal interiority. Their hidden reserves of energy give them a special charge for the child who sees them close up but distanced by age, size, and inability to move or speak. The urge they stimulate to touch (“I itched to finger them”) and lunge (“as much as a cat”; “a furtive animal”) corresponds in its arrested potential to the menace concentrated in those tiny, miraculously incised fingernails.¹

Updike brilliantly conveys the complexity of the “object relations” between human beings and small external things—often circular in mechanism (“like secret thoughts”), often conceived in relation to our own feelings and memories of smallness.² Antiquity’s survivors, much older and often much smaller as they are, preserved in material form or embedded in literary texts, emit a charge that is correspondingly intense. If we associate ancient civilizations superficially with large things—monuments, governments, economics, empire-building—in what remains it is often the small things that stand out. The most endearing and most photographed exhibit at the recent “Islanders” show at Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam Museum (2023) was a black copper model of a crawling baby, just a few inches long (figure 2). Its expectant face and chubby bottom made it seem utterly familiar, even though it belonged to another era and miniaturized by many degrees the proportions of a real infant. This tiny sculpture had lain for over three millennia in a cave in Crete, waiting to be cradled again in a human palm.

But this is not a book about “the miniature” or the poetics of the miniature.³ Nor is it about fragments.⁴ Instead I am interested in how and why things dismissed as “minor,” “superfluous,” “undervalued,” “peripheral,” or even “useless”—things that by rights should not take up imaginative space and attention—often end up doing so anyway, and in the process pack a surprising punch, or punch above their weight. There is plenty to learn from the unexpected survival of things that should not matter, as well as from the ancients’ encounters with what they consider small and trivial, onto which they sometimes project themselves—sometimes sentimentally, sometimes uncomfortably. Put more ambitiously: it is often via engagement with the small stuff that an individual or a society’s overarching values, priorities, and sense of proportion and justice are most acutely probed and challenged.

It is easy enough to make the case that most people in antiquity, as now, spent most of their lives “sweating the small stuff,” doing and thinking about minor things.⁵ When Cicero scoffs at an urban official who busies himself making decrees “about trenches, sewers and the most minor disputes about watercourses,” he could have adapted his contempt to many other walks of life.⁶ Classical scholars are no exception, as they pore over minutiae (detached or incomplete relics, like particles, fragments, and potsherds) and engage in minor disputes about dates and textual variants—habits that expose us to scorn in the outside world (perhaps in the rest of academia, too). Like it or not, encounters with smallness and lack are meat and drink to us, as they were to the hoarding encyclopedists of the late



FIGURE 2. Figurine of crawling baby (copper alloy), 1600 BCE–700 BCE, Psychro Cave, Lasithi plateau, East Crete, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN1938.1162. Credit: @Ashmolean Museum.

Roman Empire. Still, they need not make us defeatist. Small things reward the attention we give them, out of all proportion to their size. Fragments even force us to confront the essential incompleteness of antiquity, something that can never be received in a perfect state nor be restored to one. Incidentally, this is a plea that in the humanities we might be allowed to go on being curious in ways that are not necessarily about reconstructing the past, but more about sitting comfortably with its brokenness, its odd and often disputed priorities, and its apparently minor preoccupations.

But how much of a plea do I really need to make, when smallness has been a topic of huge intellectual curiosity for some time now, at least since Gaston Bachelard, Susan Stewart, Alfred Gell, John Mack, and others championed the power of tiny things to fascinate us and answer our physical and psychological needs for privacy, control, play, and intimate contact?⁷ Their close-up inspection of dolls' houses, shells, nests, pocketbooks, amulets, and matchstick models has inspired many contemporary classicists to rethink "little antiquity," combining a myopic vision with ambitions that go beyond traditional philological scrutiny: Michael Squire with miniature tablets, Verity Platt with seal-rings, Fanny Dolansky dolls, Jessica Hughes votives, Victoria Rimell tiny dwellings and tight spaces.⁸ At the

University of California alone, Alex Purves is probing “micro-Sappho” and Mike Chin “tiny alive things” in Christian literature. James Ker has explored the quotidian; Rachel Love has rescued historical epitomes as creative readings, as has Irene Peirano the Appendix Vergiliana. Cat Lambert has discovered in ancient bookworms—those clandestine, indiscriminate word-eaters—a focus for larger anxieties about bad reading practices.⁹ Everyone seems to be drilling away into overlooked spaces and extracting rich fodder. Even the building program of middle-Republican temples has recently been described, by Dan-el Padilla Peralta, as a case of “repetitive smallness.”¹⁰ In many cases, the rhetoric has changed: small things are being justified less as objects of study in their own right (specimens in a catalogue tradition) and more as indirect symptoms of larger phenomena, behavioral habits, even sociopolitical movements.¹¹

THE CALL OF THE SMALL

I am hardly the first, then, to justify looking at antiquity through a “small” lens; indeed, my instincts show me to be squarely a creature of my time.¹² Anthropologist Nicole Boivin is typical in calling for closer attention to “the things that go unnoticed—the pots and pans, the highways and pens, and teacups and computers, fishing hooks, doorways, building blocks, religious relics, conveyer belts, spears, carpets, parks, antennae, pendants, perfumes, appliances, museum objects . . .”¹³ Yet even this recent surge of interest is none too surprising, given that smallness was an enduringly productive concept, theoretical and political, for twentieth-century thinkers such as Freud, Arendt, Adorno, Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida; when “small, ordinary, vulnerable, and incomplete” has been identified as the core aesthetic of modernist poetry (think William Carlos Williams’s plums in the ice box); and when so many alienated citizens of the modern world have sanctified domestic space—insulated from, if usually enabled by, capitalism and industrialization—in a turn that Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* dismissed as “the modern enchantment with ‘small things.’”¹⁴ Small things can hardly claim to be neglected in academic circles when we have histories of dust, shit, pockets, and fungi. Nearly fifty years ago now, James Deetz’s *In Small Things Forgotten* argued for the silent eloquence of humble artefacts from the insular societies of early modern New England: broken crockery; the placing of a single chair; angel images on gravestones, with their minute variations.¹⁵ Around the same time, Georges Perec invented the term “infraordinary” to denote the background details and quotidian nonevents he challenged himself to represent in his experimental writing.¹⁶

Even so, a debate still simmers in the humanities and social sciences over the pluses and minuses of microanalysis: granular, nuanced, precise, individual, and uncorporate, on the one hand; over-specific, parochial, safe, and underpoliticized, on the other. Digital historian Tim Hitchcock has played devil’s advocate against the big-data approaches that characterize his subject. Along the way, he

salutes the long-term contribution of the *Annales* school to local, small-scale history, Marxist historians to personal and emotional history, and Michel Foucault to the structures of everyday life (not forgetting New Historicism for giving dignity to unheard voices and uncanonical texts). Hitchcock's conclusion is understandably much quoted: "If today we have a public dialogue that gives voice to the traditionally excluded and silenced—women, and minorities of ethnicity, belief and dis/ability—it is in no small part because we now have beautiful histories of small things."¹⁷

If "beautiful histories" have had such far-reaching consequences, then the politics of smallness cannot so easily be separated from its aesthetics.¹⁸ Cultural critic Mark Seltzer has identified the academic trend toward "one-downmanship," as a turn "from large events to small (non)events," a collective response to the pressures of globalization:

with respect to the novel, there is a turn to the study of minor characters; with respect to affect, minor feelings; with respect to political forms, little resistances, infantile subjects, minute, therapeutic adjustments; with respect to perception, the decelerated gaze and a prolonged attentiveness; and so on. (Selzer 2011, 727)

Symptomatic of this "minor" but highly charged approach is *Ordinary Affects* (2006), anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's experimental prose essay on the "jumpiness" inherent in small, mundane events. She presents modern life as a daily barrage of instant shocks and repercussive aftershocks (a blip in air traffic control, heat-induced road rage, a neighbors' spat) that condition in us reflexes of "watching and waiting" which threaten to escalate at any moment. In her words: "The ordinary registers intensities—regularly, intermittently, urgently, or as a slight shudder . . . The ordinary is a circuit that's always tuned in to some little something somewhere."¹⁹

Tapping into a similar vein is Sonya Huber's memoir, *Supremely Tiny Acts* (2021), which follows James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Nicholson Baker (and before them Seneca in his letters) by compressing a lifetime into the action of a single day. Huber's account of her one-off intervention in world events—a court appearance after being arrested at an Extinction Rebellion protest in New York City in November 2019—is interspersed with mundane repetitive actions: using the restroom at Grand Central Station; recording small frustrations in small notebooks; remembering the "thousand little failures" of teaching creative writing. The word *tiny* becomes a leitmotif: tiny plastic bags, tiny nudges, tiny victories, a tiny sadness, a tiny glass egg, a tiny inch-long squiggle of cabbage in a fish taco. Yet the *Supremely* of Huber's title claims a kind of grandeur even for grassroots gestures. If observing microaggressions counts as a valid form of political protest, then her fine-grained logging of daily experience registers as an activist's hyper-vigilance.²⁰

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), whose title I have tweaked for this chapter, set the trend by probing Indian politics, the caste system, global

migration, and other “Big Things” through a small lens, whether that lens is pointed at a moth, a glass bead stuck up a child’s nose, peanuts in a narrow paper cone, or “toy histories of India that rich tourists come to play with.” Stewart, Huber, and Roy all operate with the kind of telescoping mechanism Stephen Greenblatt has termed “foveation”—that is, putting an intense focus on small things and letting the large ones recede into a vaguer penumbra.²¹ This is something we will see in Roman authors, too, when they absorb themselves in what is close at hand, seemingly to the exclusion of all else, but in fact in uneasy or avoidant relation to what Roy calls “the Big Things that lurk unsaid.”²²

In popular culture, too, “smallness” has exploded as a slogan and an attitude—especially since COVID-19—to judge from a slew of titles randomly spotted on planes and bookstands: movies and TV shows like *The Map of Tiny Perfect Things*, *Little Boxes*, and *Tiny Beautiful Things*; nonfiction like *Minor Feelings*, *Small Fires*, *Small Bodies of Water* and *The Joy of Small Things*; novels like *Small Things Like These* and *little scratch* (its title defiantly printed in lower case). Superficially modest, “twee,” or hipster in spirit they may be, but together they raise a shrill chorus of minoritarian and countercultural voices. When dozens of such separate minor outbursts are repeated or combined, their collective impact reveals “where things can go,” as Kathleen Stewart puts it, “taking off in their own little worlds, when something throws itself together.”²³

My own tic of gathering tiny items into lists incidentally suggests further questions. Does collecting small things together enhance their significance or lessen it? Is tension between individual and plural a feature special to small things (after all, it applies to Cyclopes as well as bees)?²⁴ When they are not unique, small things tend to come in undifferentiated swarms, rashes, sprinkles, dust storms, and viral loads. In their plurality lies their disposability—and their power.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANCIENT SMALLNESS

Along with closer attention to small things in literary texts and human histories has come a new attitude to the small material objects of the distant past. These are far less likely to be patronized as mere substitutes for complete, original, or life-sized wholes now that we appreciate how their handleable size invites tactile engagement and manual dexterity and radiates a different kind of charisma. The editors of *The Tiny and the Fragmented: Miniature, Broken or Otherwise Incomplete Objects from the Ancient World* (Martin and Langin-Hooper 2018) argue for the autonomy and versatility of things formerly overlooked as cheap or inadequate replicas of larger artefacts: “These objects have a particular command over the viewer, enticing him or her into personal interactions, demanding specific modes of looking and touching, and encouraging the displacement of personal identity.”²⁵ They rightly add the proviso that size is always relative and has a complicated relationship to power in the ancient world. On the other hand, the editors’ decision

to combine deliberately small things with accidentally broken or fragmented ones has attracted criticism.²⁶ If I am guilty, for my part, of confusing the small with other categories, the material, trivial, oppressed, brief, minor, fragmentary, pointless, and childish—and I will be—then the blame lies partly with the parallel hierarchies of size and value that have so often bound these concepts together.

How much, then, of our current thinking about smallness is determined by, or resists, ancient orthodoxies? The organizers of a 2015 conference in Toulouse on artistic miniatures, “Think ‘Small,’” claimed that the qualities typical of little artefacts—handleability, portability, economy, frugality, preciousness, minute detail, prettiness, and strangeness—have remained essentially stable throughout history.²⁷ To their list we could add familiarity, intimacy, vulnerability, funniness—and why not scariness, too? But the question remains whether the Greeks and Romans looked at small things differently from how we do. Richard Neer, for example, has emphasized wonder, naïve or rational, as a frame for ancient responses.²⁸ Equally intriguing—and hard to get past—is how *we* look at *their* small things: half as any human might, with a combination of sentimentality, fetishism, wonder, affection, closeness, and patronizing contempt, but half as observers from a greater distance.

Susan Stewart once memorably claimed that we imagine childhood, that miniature chapter in all our pasts, “as if it were at the other end of a tunnel, distanced, diminutive, and clearly framed.”²⁹ Supposing we viewed antiquity as another miniature chapter, a kind of shared *cultural* childhood, then do the small things of the past exaggerate those diminishing effects? Does a fragile papyrus or doll (or miniature baby) that has survived thousands of years summon in us greater feelings of tenderness and longing than its contemporary equivalents do? And are these feelings focused on the found things themselves or on the absent humans to whom they once belonged? Does close contact with small things help us feel that we can better possess or grasp antiquity, perhaps lighten its pressure? Or does it make us melancholy, reminding us of what we have lost?

If small things have been clawing back their rightful significance after centuries of being dismissed and underrated, then it must be conceded from the outset that classical antiquity is not always to blame. In fact, ancient thinkers deserve much of the credit for questioning the low status of smallness right from the beginning. It is to them that we can trace all three of the central threads in the history of the topic that I pull out briefly here: scale and value; presence and contact with the real; and nostalgia and loss.

Taking scale and value first, it is undeniable that antiquity, along with the automatic impulse to downplay small things, also hands us the tools for thinking about large and small in creative and counterintuitive ways. Platonic philosophy is usually charged with confirming the standard hierarchies, for aligning large with important, abstract, ideal, lofty, complete, adult, divine, and powerful, and small with trivial, material, real, humble, fragmented, childish, subhuman, and powerless. Correspondences between size and value remain embedded in Greek and



FIGURE 3. Fragmentary Roman doll, bone, late third century CE, J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Marvin J. Teitelbaum, 79.AI.208. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program.

Latin vocabulary, as in English. Latin *paruus*, for example, translates primarily as “small,” but by extension as “ignorable, worthless, of little account”; *nihil*, “nothing,” literally means “not worth a speck” (*ne-hilum*), *hilum* now being the name for the tiny scar that records where a plant’s seed broke off from its original sac.³⁰

On the other hand, it is the ancients who launch the first, early challenges to these rigid categories, from Homeric similes that reduce warriors to flies on milk (the divine perspective) to the tiny insect of fable that terrifies the larger beast (the subaltern’s perspective) to the thorn in a shoe that causes devastating pain (the human or animal perspective). Small-scale or minor genres such as lyric, epigram, elegy, fable, and satire regularly champion alternative priorities, cemented in Callimachean and neoteric manifestos. Antiquity consistently gives a platform to countercultural value systems that make the greatness of armies, statesmen, and empires evaporate next to the *je ne sais quoi* of a beloved’s face, a whiff of perfume, a pinch of spice, a lock of hair—even the banality of a chamber pot.³¹ Claims to inferiority and weakness, from the elegiac lover, the screwed-over camp follower, or the belated literary successor, may of course only be “passive-aggressive” indicators of superiority (in refinement, virtue, or wisdom) in disguise, ones that indirectly render their targets coarse, bullying, and pompous.³²

Modernist poets are notorious for focusing on the small and the perishable: “William Carlos Williams’s plums, Frank O’Hara’s charms, Lorine Niedecker’s granite pail, George Oppen’s single brick, John Ashbery’s cocoa tins, Bernadette Mayer’s puffed-wheat cereal, Thomas Sayers Ellis’s balloon dog, and Rae Armantrout’s cat, bubble wrap, and ‘rubber band, chapstick, tin- / foil, this pen, things / made for our use’” (in Sianne Ngai’s evocative list).³³ But Latin poetry, centuries before, had made space for long catalogues of equally insubstantial things. The dust, chalk, cobwebs, feathers, seeds, and barely felt insects’ feet traced by Lucretius (not to mention his unruly, giggling atoms), Juvenal’s mantelpiece ornaments, Martial’s party favors and Statius’s shopping list of rubbishy Saturnalian gift ideas—lampwicks, figs, snails, onionskins, wine dregs, and so on, and so on—add up to something and nothing at the same time.³⁴ Indeed, it is when Lucretius grasps at analogies with seeds and fluff to conjure the lightness and mobility of the soul’s constitution that he first splits his all-important nothing (*nihil*) into its component parts (*ne . . . hilum*)—a linguistically opportune “proof” that marks the perverse centrality of insignificant things to the operations of the cosmos: *nec defit ponderis hilum* (“[the soul’s] weight fails not a whit”; *DRN* 3.182).

For all Homer’s generous vision, the polarity between large and small was a central tenet of the first Greek philosophers, the Pre-Socratics.³⁵ Yet even they were refreshingly open to the idea that size is both relative and expandable. There is always something larger than the largest thing, and something smaller than the smallest thing, claimed Anaxagoras, while conceding (centuries before Virginia Woolf) that the same thing could be conceived as both large and small.³⁶ Plato would distinguish more subtly between small-large oppositions and strive to

unravel their apparent contradictions. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates draws a practical real-life conclusion—if Simmias is tall relative to Socrates but short relative to Phaedo, then he must be tall and short at the same time—only to pronounce dogmatically that abstract opposites, as opposed to empirical ones, are truly incompatible: “Greatness itself will never admit the small.”³⁷ Even so, small men like Socrates (and Aesop) who concealed moral greatness in their squat and unremarkable bodies were walking incarnations of this very impossibility.³⁸

Small and large were differently aligned via analogy—another kind of relationship crucial to philosophical and scientific teaching.³⁹ Anaxagoras is credited with the theory of *homoeomeria*, which posited (via the fallacy of division) that the infinitesimal atoms that constitute a puddle are themselves wet, or those that compose a rock are themselves hard.⁴⁰ The *Phaedo* also happens to be the work where Socrates imaginatively cuts the world down to size, comparing the earth to a twelve-faced leather ball and the peoples of the Mediterranean to ants or frogs living around a pond.⁴¹

Nor were small and large ever simply polar opposites as they pivoted around that accepted template for scale, the human body. When Aristotle carves out his aesthetic midpoint between the two in the *Poetics*, he belittles the two extremes equally: large is impossible for the eye to take in; small too fused together to be properly picked out.⁴² Homer was praised by Quintilian for embracing both perspectives at once: “No one surpasses Homer in sublimity where big things are concerned, and in attention to detail where small things are concerned.”⁴³ The first poet’s dream of a totalizing purview is realized by Iris when she warns King Priam about the advancing Greeks by casting immeasurable size in terms of innumerable small things: “Never have I seen such a great army as this; for they cross the plain exactly like leaves or grains of sand.”⁴⁴ Yet a goddess’s comprehensive vision, panoptic and microscopic at the same time, lies beyond mortal reach, such that a poet’s encounter with unthinkable size or unnarratable detail becomes a “selection crisis” that only confirms human limitations.⁴⁵ Kant’s “mathematical sublime” is expressed as much in Homer’s hand-wringing appeals about the uncountability of waves or sand as in descriptions of mountains. Depending on perspective, the Shield of Achilles is a colossus and a miniature at the same time.

Conversely, when the third-century BCE poet Posidippus captures the unexpected sublimity of an epigrammatized pebble, beaming from its miniature frame, he complicates the “small is beautiful” and “less is more” mantras usually associated with Hellenistic aesthetics and pushes epigram’s innate claim to embrace *multum in parvo* to its limits.⁴⁶ As Jim Porter argues, “Small objects are calculated attention-grabbers: they demand to be viewed from up close . . . What was once tiny is now gigantic, even grand. It is a sublime object.”⁴⁷ He echoes Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*: “Values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Platonic dialectics of large and small do not suffice for us to become cognizant of the dynamic virtues of miniature thinking. One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small.”⁴⁸ Such “illogical” relationships between large



FIGURE 4. Unknown (Greek), engraved scarab with lion's head and two mice, cornelian, second quarter of fifth century BCE, J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California, 81.AN.76.29. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program.

and small, we will see, are found throughout Greco-Roman culture. They come in many forms: analogus, fractal, metonymic, concentric, inter-entangled . . .

Small and large could, for instance, operate as a continuum. The childhood of the gods presented an attractive subject to Hellenistic poets not simply because of its innate sweetness but also because its miniature proportions contained all the promise of a divinity's future growth.⁴⁹ Just so, the *nescioquid magnum* (something big) that is the *Iliad* is already furled up inside the *Achilleid*, Statius's prequel to the Iliadic Achilles.⁵⁰ Poets extrapolate backward to imagine epic poets' youthful productions, tracing Virgil's final scene of anger back to the ferocious buzz and sting of a tiny mosquito (*Culex*) in his made-up juvenilia or finding the germ of Homeric wars in the miniature battles of frogs and mice.⁵¹ The small could also be embraced concentrically (and peaceably) *inside* the large: pastoral subsumed by epic; the smallholding or secluded valley protected by empire; a herb-specked cheese (pseudo-Virgil's *Moretum*) replicating the stirred-up cosmos of which it is the tiniest part.⁵² So, too, in the contemporary world—as Sianne Ngai has shown

in her work on cuteness—fluffy animal toys are the soft, sentimental center of the hard global industry that mass-produces them.⁵³

Another type of paradoxical relationship—large compressed *into* small—characterizes the textual phenomenon known as “epitome,” the abridgment of a predecessor’s longer narrative. The best surviving example, Trajanic author Florus’s miniature of Livy’s monumental history, relinquishes none of the original’s ambition, instead forcing all its characters and events to fall in line with its abbreviating mission, so Jared Hudson has argued.⁵⁴ Florus’s topographical short cuts (*compendia*) are matched by textual ones: swift execution on the ground complements skilful précis in his script; anecdotes and pointed statements sum up larger actions; individual performances stand for multitudes. Capturing a complete panorama in one imperialist sweep, his minimizing survey takes on a grandeur of its own:

Therefore, if anything else is, this too is worth the effort to know [*hoc quoque operae pretium sit cognoscere*]; and yet, since its very magnitude stands in its way, and the variety of its subject matter breaks the sharpness of concentration [*magnitudo rerumque diuersitas aciem intentionis abrumpit*], I shall imitate those who depict the lie of the land: I shall encompass its entire representation in, as it were, a small portrait [*in breui quasi tabella totam eius imaginem amplectar*], thus, I hope, contributing something to the admiration of this leading people, if I succeed in displaying altogether and all at once their entire magnitude [*insemel uniuersam magnitudinem*]. (Florus *Epit.* 1 *praef.* 3)

As Hudson puts it, “Celebrating and comprehending *magnitudo* becomes, paradoxically, a matter of cutting massiveness down to size.”⁵⁵ And, we might add, of preserving a sharp focus (*aciem intentionis*).

Do small things always need to work harder to defend their prestige and impact? Flaubert’s aphorism, “The story of a louse can be as beautiful as the story of Alexander the Great,” comes with the caution, “Everything in art depends on the execution.”⁵⁶ Writers like Lucian who wrote elegant paradoxical encomia to such challenging subjects as flies and gnats would have agreed: workmanship was paramount.⁵⁷ But it did not always have to involve intricacy. The ancients prized minimalism and ordinary realism, too, to judge from two kinds of artwork mentioned by Pliny the Elder: the ever-thinner lines drawn by Apelles and Protogenes on an otherwise blank canvas, passing for nothing at all (*inani similem*) among the masterpieces in Augustus’s palace but apparently far more “seductive” (*allicientem*) than more prestigious paintings; and the lowly barbers’ shops, cobblers’ stalls, donkeys, and food scenes of Peiraicos the “painter of trash” (*rhypparographos*), which gave “greater pleasure” and commanded higher prices than “larger pictures.”⁵⁸

It is when conventional correspondences between size and importance or value do not line up that things become interesting, and Roman authors express dissent or outrage on this theme surprisingly often. To start late with a more conventional or even fundamentalist response, here is Tertullian directing his spluttering

indignation and rhetorical glee at the paradoxical alignment of small scale and market value, in this case the eye-watering cost of women's jewelry:

From the smallest boxes [*de breuissimis loculis*] is produced an ample inheritance [*patrimonium grande*]. On a single thread is suspended a million sesterces. One delicate neck carries around it forests and islands. Slender earlobes exhaust a fortune; and the left hand sports several purses on every finger. Such is the strength of ambition—equal to bearing on one small body, and a woman's at that [*uno et muliebri corpusculo*], the product of such copious wealth. (Tert. *De Cultu Feminarum* 1.9.2)

Pliny the Elder appears far more liberal when it comes to including insects in his simulacrum of the world, the *Natural History*, a work of superhuman ambition that demands a focus simultaneously macroscopic and microscopic.⁵⁹ His apologies for “sterile” subject matter that nevertheless contains all life (*sterilis materia, rerum natura, hoc est uita, narratur*) are disingenuous enough.⁶⁰ But Pliny also plays with different perspectives in his lengthy preface to the first book. At his most finicky, he approaches the emperor with a deliberate misquotation from Catullus's opening poem, itself a high-stakes challenge to conventional hierarchies of value:

namque tu solebas
nugas esse aliquid meas putare

For you used to think my trifles were worth something . . . (Cat. 1.3–4)

As Pliny reminds his readers, what Catullus actually wrote was *meas esse aliquid putare nugas*: “for he, as you know, by interchanging the first syllables made himself a trifle harsher [*duriusculum*] than he wished to be considered by his ‘darling Veraniuses and Fabulluses.’” By improving so infinitesimally on Catullus's original, he drives it home that minute attention to detail, in a project this capacious, must always be on a par with comprehensiveness.

Pliny introduces his insects cautiously, as a conscious supplement to a catalogue of larger animals. Book 10 ends with these words: “For these remain to be covered” (*haec namque restant*).⁶¹ Book 11 heralds a topic of “enormous intricacy” (*immensae subtilitatis*), one that matches the complexities of insect bodies themselves:

In these minute creatures, so close to nothing, how exceptional the intelligence, how vast the resources, and how ineffable the perfection [*in his tam paruis atque tam nullis quae ratio, quanta uis, quam inextricabilis perfectio*]. Where has she compressed so many senses as in the gnat—not to mention even smaller creatures [*et sunt alia dictu minora*]? (Plin. *HN* 11.1.1)

Then, drawing in his audience, Pliny bows to the same old prejudices:

I must beg my readers, for all the contempt they feel for many of these objects, not to feel a similar disdain [*fastidio*] for the relevant information I am about to give, seeing that, in the study of nature, none of her works can seem superfluous [*superuacuum*]. (Plin. *HN* 11.1.2)

Insects hover between being minimal but welcome components of his cosmic inventory and supplementary *parerga* on the margins of consideration. And the ones “too small even to mention” (*dictu minora*) remain on the margins.

The idea of superfluity also inflects Seneca’s *De brevitae vitae* (*On the Shortness of Life*), a treatise that is predictably self-conscious about its economy in relation to its subject—all the way from its little mottoes (*uita breuis ars longa*, “Life is short, art is long,” and *exigua pars est uitae qua uiuimus*, “It is a tiny part of life that we actually live”) to its broader existential claim that a backward glance from the moment of death shrinks even millennia into the narrowest of spans. All the while, Seneca is redefining the concept of a life well lived, spent not in joining the rat race with the other frenzied *occupati*, embroiled in “focused concentration on useless work” (*in superuacuis laboribus operosa sedulitas*), but in mindfully contemplating the eventual day of reckoning.⁶²

This is a shortish work—how could it not be?—but oddly permeable to superfluities of its own. One sentence starts misleadingly, “It would be superfluous to mention” (6.3 *superuacuum est*), before proceeding to mention, at least as a nameless group, all the other people who repent too feebly and too late of having spent all their time working and underestimate their life’s span as *superuacuum* in another sense (“baggy” or “capacious”), in that they assume it will keep on giving: “but you allow it to disappear like something that is negligible and replenishable” (6.4 *superuacuum ac reparabilem*). Seneca makes himself an exception to the pre-occupied masses, permitting himself to concertina his text and his thoughts at will. Similarly, intellectual distance gives Pliny the Younger a broader perspective on the triviality of his daily urban routine: “The things you do every day seem necessary, but when you reflect that you do them every day, they seem pointless [*inania*], the more so when you are away from them” (*Ep.* 1.9.3).

By default marginal or supplementary, small things usually help to absorb and defuse the threats posed by larger bodies or images.⁶³ But this does not mean that they cannot sometimes be the focus of intense centripetal force—as if miniaturization entailed concentration, the decoction of bland large-scale ingredients into a denser brew.⁶⁴ Seizing a loftier metaphysical vantage-point in the *Natural Questions*, Seneca goes further in minimizing human ambition by reducing the physical terrain we occupy to a mere speck compared with the infinite realm of the mind:

It is a pinhead [*punctum*] on which you sail, on which you wage war, on which you arrange tiny kingdoms: they are the smallest things even when the ocean meets them on either side. (*QNat.* 1 *praef.* 11)

He is recalling the *Dream of Scipio*, as imagined by Cicero in his *Republic*: “Now the earth itself seemed to me so small that I felt ashamed of our empire, with which we touch as it were only a pinprick [*quasi punctum*] on the earth’s surface.”⁶⁵

No sooner is the *punctum* mentioned than it galvanizes a change of perspective. Far from maintaining a cosmic viewpoint that shrinks armies to swarms of

ants and stares out at tsunamis and earthquakes, Seneca starts to pull back and undermine himself. How wrong-headed, he says, to dread huge threats like these when danger and disaster lurk closer to home, in the tiny things found within our immediate surroundings:

The man who fears lightning bolts, earthquakes, and gaping cracks in the ground esteems himself highly. But is he willing to be aware of his own frailty and to fear a cold in the head? That, to be sure, is how we were born, having been allotted such excellent limbs, having grown to this stature! And for this reason we are not able to die unless sections of the world are moved, unless the sky thunders, unless the earth settles! The pain of a fingernail, and not even of the whole nail but just a split on one side of it, finishes us off! [*unguiculi nos et ne totius quidem dolor sed aliqua ab latere eius scissura conficit!*] Also, should I fear an earth tremor because a thick catarrh chokes me? Am I to fear the sea moved from its place and the tide with a greater rush than usual, pulling more water and drowning me when a drink has strangled some people as it slipped down the throat the wrong way? How foolish to fear the sea when you know you can die from a drop of water! (Sen. *QNat.* 6.2.4–5; Loeb, trans. Gummere, adapted)

He has a point, when many of us have recently been more terrified of droplets than tsunamis. Note how the fingernail pokes its way in again, a tiny homunculus with the potential to produce excruciating pain. Or rather, not even the whole fingernail, this time (*unguiculi . . . et ne totius quidem*), but the fingernail's miniature: the side-tear, the smallest site of human sensitivity.⁶⁶

Contradictions of scale come to a head in *Epistle* 89, where Seneca twists Aristotelian polarities into a paradoxical loop: "I shall do what you demand and divide philosophy into parts but not into scraps [*non in frusta*] . . . Just as it is hard to take in what is indefinitely large, so it is hard to take in what is indefinitely small . . . Whatever has grown larger is more easily identified if it is broken up into parts; but the parts . . . must not be innumerable and diminutive in size" (*innumerabiles . . . et paruulas*).⁶⁷ For overanalysis (says Seneca, overanalyzing) is faulty in just the same way as no analysis at all; "whatever you cut so fine that it becomes dust is as good as blended into a mass again" (*simile confuso est, quidquid usque in puluerem sectum est*).⁶⁸ Infinitesimal change and asymptotic progress had long been the stuff of Greek philosophical paradoxes—Sorites's heap and Achilles and the tortoise.

In another letter, Seneca restages the notion that human life is compressed into a minute span: "Our life is a moment, or even less than a moment" (*punctum est quod uiuimus et adhuc puncto minus*).⁶⁹ All the more vital for it to have a purpose (or point); life is far too short to spend reading trash (*superuacua*).⁷⁰ Here, the *punctum* stands for the tiniest unit of time, rather than space—though in both cases it could be defined as the minimum surface area or interval consistent with the maximum impact and concentration of energy. When Seneca advocates vein opening as the most efficient method of suicide, he notes that the prick of a small scalpel offers the most reliable way out (*puncto securitas constat*), suggesting, as

James Ker puts it, “an aesthetics of the *punctum* that matches the already minuscule temporal and spatial dimensions of human life.”⁷¹ Livy repeats a well-known saying about warfare: “A single instant [*punctum temporis*] is often the turning-point of a great event [*maximarum rerum momenta uerti*].”⁷² If there is a single word that binds together all my forays into smallness in this book, it is this. Whether it is an insect’s sting, a sharp point, or a shaft of wit, the *punctum* marks the spot where the apparently pointless becomes pointful.

REALITY EFFECTS

Small details also stand out in larger literary texts thanks to their remarkable ability to create convincing reality effects.⁷³ Like small material objects from the past, they evoke an unsettling sense of familiarity that bridges the gap between the ancient world and our own. But does this always come at the cost of their larger symbolic significance? Not according to Erich Auerbach, who isolated minor details as the open sesame to many canonical works in *Mimesis* (1946), a book that, like Homer’s epics and Pliny’s encyclopedia, sweeps enviably between micro- and macro-perspectives.⁷⁴ Auerbach subtly identifies different relationships between details and wholes, especially in connection with narrative time. His readings span the Western canon from Homer to Virginia Woolf, all the way from the “luminous” primeval clarity and surface coherence of the nurse Eurycleia’s discovery of Odysseus’s scar to the woolly mismatch between Mrs Ramsay’s brief exchange with her son about a too-short brown sock, and the long intervening sadness that the sorry item generates, expressed in the overspill of her deepest thoughts.⁷⁵

Not by chance, details in visual art—traditionally subordinate, or the rarefied preserve of connoisseurs—were being reevaluated around the same time, driven by developments in photography, film and psychoanalysis.⁷⁶ In his *Essai sur la connaissance approchée* (1927), Bachelard isolated the cognitive dilemma involved as the eye moves between details and whole: while details stimulate close sensory engagement, wholes inspire more abstract overarching generalizations. Art historians have since made their own sense of such aporetic or schizophrenic viewpoints. Georges Didi-Huberman explains an anomalous splash of paint on a Vermeer canvas as a disruptive, unexplainable “symptom” of painting itself, while Daniel Arasse sees details not as translatable from some agreed language of symbols so much as arresting entities in their own right, “sending a shiver down the spine in a moment of transhistorical contact,” as one of his readers puts it (the phrase itself suggesting a minute stabbing or shivering sensation).⁷⁷ Such phenomena call for radically new kinds of interpretation.⁷⁸

Literary critics have long faced similar dilemmas. Is the textual detail a quirk, an unassimilable *parergon* or supplement, or a microcosmic building block that serves the construction of the whole? Is its meaning available on the surface or a symptom of something buried? Does it signify materiality for its own sake or is it

tied to some broader symbolic purpose? Via intertextuality or intratextuality?⁷⁹ I remember a panicked experience as an undergraduate once, having to construct an entire exam answer about Terence and his Greek models from a single piece of memorized information: that in his *Andria* Terence had omitted Menander's original prescription for a tonic containing four egg yolks. Menander's fragmented script runs as follows: "Give her a bath at once . . . and after that, my dear, the yolks of four eggs." Terence bleaches this into "Afterwards give her what I said to drink, in the quantity I specified."⁸⁰ Hard though it would be to argue, Auerbach-style, that eggs are metonymically central to Menander's plot, their absence from Terence speaks volumes about his taste for purging detail and his neoclassical boundaries for what is admissible.⁸¹ Later, gastronome-cum-encyclopedist Athenaeus would catch many such small comic delicacies in his capacious net. An unexpectedly modern perspective on reality effects is taken by Seneca the Elder, when he singles out an eccentric orator for including "sordid" things like vinegar, flea-mint, lanterns, and sponges in his speeches. Not only was Albucius reluctant to look pretentious, he says, but his "sordid" things actually created a kind of extraneous background noise (*superuacuis strepitus*), which worked as backing (*patrocinium*) for his other arguments.⁸²

Do textual details commit us, then, to making an exclusive choice between salience and background noise? Serendipitously, an egg appears in one of my favourite passages in Latin literature, which happens to illustrate how compatibly the low-level hum of Greco-Roman reality (what Georges Perec would one day call the "infraordinary") can coexist with the throbbing salience of individual small things.⁸³ Book 7 of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (the book about "the human animal") includes a wonderfully inconsequential list that celebrates the randomness of life—or, rather, the randomness of sudden death, something Pliny calls "life's greatest happiness."⁸⁴ Starting with Sophocles and Dionysius of Sicily, who both died of joy on receiving prizes for their tragedies, Pliny moves from a mother who expired happily on seeing her son back alive after he had been reported dead at the Battle of Cannae to a grammarian who died of shame on being unable to answer a senior philosopher's question (every academic's nightmare). Then to two Caesars (father and uncle of Julius) who died early in the morning when putting on their sandals. Next comes a group of men who died coming out of their houses: Q. Fabius Maximus on the very last day of his consulship (equivalent to our December 31, a neat and a random death, at once); C. Volcatius Gurgus while setting off for a walk; Q. Aemilius Lepidus after leaving his bedroom and stubbing his big toe on the doorstep; C. Aufidius tripping on the floor of the Comitium; Cn. Baebius Tamphilus while asking his slave the time; Mn. Juventius Thalna while offering a sacrifice; C. Servelius Pansa while standing by a shop in the forum, leaning on his brother's shoulder; a judge while granting an extension of bail; M. Terentius Corax when writing on tablets in the forum; a knight while whispering in the ear of an ex-consul in front of the

ivory statue of Apollo in the Forum of Augustus. The surgeon C. Julius died dragging a probe through his eye while applying ointment; several men died at dinner, either reaching for a cake, or drinking mead, or coming out of the bathhouse drinking mead and sucking an egg at the same time; two men died in flagrante, two knights died inside the same male pantomime actor. And finally comes the crowning glory in the shape of a beautiful pileup of happy ingredients, “the painstakingly contrived serenity” (*operosissima securitas*) of the appropriately named comic actor and playwright M. Ofilius Hilarus, who staged a feast on his birthday, asked for a hot drink, and, after putting on his mask again and his garland on top of it, lolled there in sheer contentment. And no one noticed that he had grown stiff until his neighbour leaned over to tell him that his drink was getting cold.

This magical assemblage of casual but decisive events was so loved by Montaigne that he updated it in his *Essais*, adding that his own brother had died of apoplexy five hours after being hit by a tennis ball.⁸⁵ In a short space, Pliny’s account covers a broad range of ancient experience, along with some central polarities in Greco-Roman thought: tragedy/comedy, sorrow/joy, real merit and staged victory (Sophocles and Dionysius), surgery/self-harm, the heat of life/the chill of death, sex/death, banquet/death, survival/death, victory/death, birthday/deathday, randomness/appropriate closure, momentary time/calendrical time, comic mask/death mask, reality/mimesis, knights/consuls, senators/people . . .

At the same time, the special vitality and appeal of this passage surely derive from the insignificant material details that interlard it. The simplest explanation for their presence is that they provide circumstantial evidence and a basis in empirical reality. Things that seem far too innocuous to be fatal instruments flick a critical switch between life and death, measured timewise as the “twinkling of an eye.”⁸⁶ There are a few specific local resonances (deaths on leaving the house, for example, are ominous because that is where a Roman funeral procession would start; men who die tripping up or stubbing their toes perform the symbolic links Roman divination made between falling and dying). But most of the details feel arbitrary and mundane at a more universal level. They stand in close physical relationship to the deceased individuals: food and drink, incompletely absorbed (egg, cake, wine); body parts or synecdochic stand-ins for the body (sandals, shoulder, ear, toe, mask); or points of near contact with the outside (eye probe, threshold). Props from the immediate environment, they anchor or dislodge the human agents; they are not obviously metaphors for anything else.

For modern readers, though, these props have an extra vibrancy independent of any authenticating or symbolic function. They pop up like punctuation marks or little shocks, producing bumps and frissons of disconcerting familiarity—not unlike a toe-stubbing, a cracked eggshell, a nudged shoulder or a probe grazing the eye. Not only do they evoke Daniel Arasse’s shivers of transhistorical contact: they also recall the effect of arresting details in photos, to which Roland Barthes long ago gave the Latinate name *punctum*, the very word Seneca used for the pinhead

limit of worldly experience. Barthes translates it variously as a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice,” adding, “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”⁸⁷ As he notes, it is not always the most obvious aspect of a picture that produces such frissons. In Duane Michals’s celebrated photograph of Andy Warhol covering his face, “the *punctum*,” Barthes says, “is not the gesture but the slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails, at once soft and hard-edged.”⁸⁸ Once again, the fingernail steals the attention: piercing the membrane between image and viewer; not just feeling but generating feelings, too.

Pliny’s history is all about physical matter, which means that details like these get easily lost in the middle of a kaleidoscopic encyclopedia. But what happens when small details stand out in a more abstract narrative? Take the notorious example of Aristophanes’s attack of hiccups, recorded in Plato’s postmortem account of a banquet, the *Symposium*. This bodily eruption, all too appropriate for the off-schedule events of a philosophical drinking party, is the more conspicuous in a dialogue that, as Plutarch observed, is festive but still relatively purged of material detail.⁸⁹ The hiccups turn out to be a plot derailer with huge consequences for the set order of speeches about love, whose schedule plays out differently depending on whether Aristophanes speaks as planned or whether he is displaced (as he is, thanks to the hiccups) by the doctor Eryximachus, whose practical attempts to cure his companion act as backing for a speech that conceives love as a physiological process. But what is truly remarkable is that Plato mentions the path not taken at all, actually bothers to superimpose real and shadow versions of what happened.⁹⁰

The hiccups have provoked a wide range of responses, from Guthrie, who writes that the change in sequence caused by something so trivial serves “to warn the reader that the order of the speeches is not significant but accidental,” to Plochmann, who concludes: “I like to think that these hiccups are one of the surest indications in the *Symposium* that nothing is really casual . . . Plato . . . is composing a work of incredible, if often unappreciated, tidiness.”⁹¹ These polarized statements of course come at the same truth from different slants. No literary selection of material is ever entirely casual, but the *Symposium* gives special (and contrived) prominence to the casual element in the way things turn out right from the start: characters run into each other, the guest-list is tweaked, Socrates is late, and so on. The immediate build-up to the hiccups contains the maximum concentration of accidental events:⁹²

Aristodemus said that Aristophanes should [*dein*] have spoken next, but by chance [*tuchein*], either because he was full or for some other reason [*ē hupo plēsmonēs ē hupo tinos allou*], he was afflicted [lit. they fell upon him, *epipeptōkuian*] by hiccups, which prevented him from speaking. (Pl. *Symp.* 185c)

For all that, most interpretations focus far more on the consequences, narrative or symbolic, ricocheting from Aristophanes’s pulsing diaphragm, than on the

incident itself. The hiccups have been made to stand for the exuberance of Aristophanic humor and for Plato's revenge on Aristophanes for mocking Socrates in the *Clouds*. They have been blamed for the exclusion from the speakers of Aristodemus, Socrates's current admirer, a little man (*smikros*), who might just be the unnoticed absent presence of Eros in the drinkers' midst.⁹³ Aristophanes's speech is thought to prick the pompous certainty of the first run of speeches retrospectively; relocated with Agathon's and Socrates's, it helps to confirm Eros as a fullness or an emptiness (of which hiccups are the bodily instantiation).⁹⁴

Yet there is a simpler interpretation, one far more in keeping with the overall spontaneity of the text: this ruffle or stutter is no more and no less than an uninterpretable tease, a blip with repercussions, the butterfly's wingbeat that unsettles (and *stands for*) the dynamic nonlinear process that is a drinking party, or any of its possible narratives. One of the doctor's remedies is to tickle Aristophanes's nose, which brings to mind psychoanalyst Adam Phillips's thoughts on tickling: "To tickle," he writes, "is to seduce, often by amusement. Does it not highlight, this delightful game, the impossibility of satisfaction and of reunion, with its continual reenactment of the irresistible attraction and the inevitable repulsion of the object, in which the final satisfaction is frustration?"⁹⁵

These words get to the heart of the hiccups, too. All foreplay and no climax, their eruption captures the quintessence of Eros that cannot be pinned down, while readers who were never there are tantalized all the more with the question of how much meaning a small accidental interruption, deliberately included, can be made to contain. Reviewing two books by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault once wrote: "To pervert Platonism is to search out the smallest details, to descend (with the natural gravitation of humor) as far as its crop of hair or the dirt under its fingernails [nails, again!]
—those things that were never hallowed by an idea."⁹⁶ Deleuze, he says, successfully "points out its interruptions, its gaps, those small things of little value that were neglected by philosophical discourse." Foucault notes that Plato himself was the first to undermine Platonism in the *Sophist*, but he does not recognize that he had already done so in the *Symposium*.

The teasing hiccups are of a piece with the larger readerly frustrations with Greek literature that Richard Hunter has discussed in his essay, "The Morning After":⁹⁷

The characters of the *Symposium* are recreated for us through a veil of hearsay and second-hand reports, which seems to dramatize both our own frantic efforts to discover "what actually happened" in the Athenian past and the impossibility of ever being sure . . . The *Symposium* feeds both our sense of insecurity about the past and our indomitable hopefulness that, despite everything, we are in touch with it. (Hunter 2004, 114)

In touch, almost more than metaphorically? Do small things give us that extra handle, an even stronger illusion of "being in touch" with the past?⁹⁸ Brooke Holmes has called for an approach to antiquity "that . . . confront[s] more vividly

the paradox of things that are at once buried in layers of time and right here in our hands, animals whose blood can be warmed.”⁹⁹ She is echoed in a political key by Sonya Huber, who offers her life-in-a-day project *Supremely Tiny Acts* as a serious attempt to cling to what remains reliably present and authentic: “I think we have to get to the real, to catch the facts we have, to hold on to what we see . . . in this time where lies are currency.”

NOSTALGIA AND LOSS

At the same time, Hunter reminds us that small things prompt feelings of nostalgia and loss as often as they foster closeness. According to Bachelard and Stewart, this has everything to do with their connections with toys, childhood, and childish scale.¹⁰⁰ We might at this point reflect that the whole idea of taking something small from the burning house of antiquity (Nandini Pandey’s brief for her sample of classicists) had been seared into Roman mythical tradition ever since Aeneas snatched up the Penates, the household gods, on fleeing Troy. Once established in Rome, these portable gods continued to embody presence and loss at the same time. They conjured up the Romans’ collective past and identity as a migrant people even when permanently installed in the *penetral* (inmost quarters) or *penus* (storeroom, of a house or temple), according to various etymologies of their name. Seemingly without batting an eyelid, Virgil in the *Aeneid* can describe the Penates at one moment as “little Penates” (*paruus . . . penatis*), when Aeneas is worshipping on the move at Evander’s house, then at another as “great Penates” (*magnos . . . penatis*), when Ascanius swears in their name.¹⁰¹ The easy swing in adjectives from small to large says everything about how compatible small things are with outsize, magnetic power.

There is another legend about Aeneas: that, along with the Penates, he brought another statue, the Palladium (“little Minerva”) to Rome.¹⁰² Cicero clearly has this image in mind when he recalls heroically snatching up his personal mascot of the goddess in 58 BCE and dedicating it to Capitoline Jupiter before Clodius could burn down his house: “I, who did not allow the guardian of our city to be polluted by impious hands during the universal ruin of my house and property, and carried her safely from my home to the home of Jupiter the father himself.”¹⁰³ The act of protecting a miniature goddess allows this self-appointed guardian of the city to devolve his own need for divine safekeeping and make his helpless passivity into something active and heroic.

Normally, Cicero has a firmer sense of the hierarchies of scale. In *De natura deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*), he extrapolates from animal warrens to human domestic buildings to the cosmos, claiming stubbornly, “Just as we would never think a human house could be built by mice or weasels, so we must believe in a divine creator of something as complex as the universe.”¹⁰⁴ In their own godlike capacity, the Romans built plenty of miniature houses on mouse or



FIGURE 5. Fragment of the panel of the Ara Pacis Augustae in Rome with the scene depicting Aeneas's sacrifice to the Penates. Photo: Anderson; Alinari Archives, Florence.

weasel scale, from the pet-sized structures that housed their favourite deities to parrots' cages (Stattius describes a deluxe example) to transparent beehives, like the one Pliny tells us was constructed by a retired consul who wanted to inspect its interior workings.¹⁰⁵ Roman domestic shrines were populated by statuettes



FIGURE 6. Dale Copeland, “Lares et Penates,” 2016, assemblage of found objects. By kind permission of the artist.

of mini-deities—“divine menageries,” as John Bodel has called them.¹⁰⁶ Roman emperors’ collections of statuettes of holy men and heroes in their *cubicula* (private rooms) or personal *sacraria* have given biographers from antiquity onward penetrating glimpses into their intimate affections and allegiances.¹⁰⁷

Miniature houses continue to guard their ancient secrets. A Roman moneybox depicts a helmeted Mercury standing in the doorway of a *mise en abyme* house, inside an imitation tholos tomb whose terracotta walls would have to be smashed to get the coins out (figure 7).¹⁰⁸ Tiny silver-lead temples like those found on a ship sunk near Comacchio were mass-produced across the empire as *ex-votos* or devotional objects, complete with little cult-figures and rings for hanging.¹⁰⁹ Nostalgic relics of childhood, family and home, souvenirs of personal and spiritual formation, these keepsakes even have something in common with a modern secular photo corner, or the “little free libraries” visible on the streets of Berkeley and



FIGURE 7. Roman moneybox, terracotta, Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum, Baltimore, AN 395. Image courtesy of the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum, photography by James T. VanRensselaer.

other civilized neighborhoods—tiny model homes whose cultural treasures can be swapped and shared.

Domestic deities, moneyboxes, and miniature temples are just a few examples of small objects that surrounded the Romans in their everyday lives, conjuring up the past, evoking the wider world, holding secrets, and fostering personal connections with the divine as larger-scale ones could not. For dolls, a different fate lay in store. Dedicated to Venus or the Lares on a girl's marriage, they miniaturized, then ossified a cast-off stage of life.¹¹⁰ The best-known surviving Roman doll, made of ivory, with its own tiny jewel-box, combs, mirrors, and key, was found in the premature burial of a Roman teenager, Crepereia Tryphaena (figure 8). Maurizio Bettini sees it as a forlorn, scaled-down simulacrum of Crepereia's girlish self—"of a time (or of a person) that had vanished over the farthest horizon—the one remaining piece of evidence from a world made up of tiny tables and household goods reproduced



FIGURE 8. Ivory doll from Creperia Tryphaena's grave goods, second century CE, Museo Centrale Montemartini, Rome. Photo: Stefano Ravera; Alamy Stock Images.

and reduced as if by a pantograph, tiny clothes that can be put on and taken off, hair that is styled with elaborate care or tousled impatience." He adds: "The doll abandoned in the temple stood for the rigid equivalent of a lost age (physical and cultural) that could never return. It is an object full of the past (because we know, of course, that the past is still with us, hidden away somewhere)."¹¹¹

No matter that Fanny Dolansky has recently reinterpreted dolls not as simulacra or relics of past lives but as aspirational, future-oriented objects: princesses and Barbies for Roman girls.¹¹² Bettini's response shows just how instinctive it is to look at small past things with a sentimental tug, almost as if they were vulnerable

orphans (as the doll *was*, in a sense, thanks to her owner's early death). If the Romans saw little inner shrines as cherished composites of family and individual histories, and little things as receding into the distance, *exuviae* of their former selves, do we also tend to grasp at the small relics of antiquity and superimpose on them small lost pasts, both theirs and our own?

A clue can be found in the Romans' own reactions to stumbling on the experience of their ancestors, their *maiores*: literally "bigger people," but often in habits and stature smaller than their descendants. Suetonius, for example, is struck by the doll's house size of the future Emperor Augustus's rural nursery: "A very small room like a pantry" (*locus . . . permodicus et cellae penuariae instar*).¹¹³ At the same time, this humble room contained the seeds of its occupant's future augustness (the name *Augustus* may come from *augere*, to grow bigger), and even gave off a magnetic aura; the story goes that after spending the night there, the new owner of the birthplace was found inexplicably prostrate on the floor the next day. Seneca is equally in awe of the tiny bathhouse in Scipio's ruined villa: "It was a great pleasure [*magna uoluptas*] for me to contrast Scipio's ways with our own. Think, in this little nook [*in hoc angulo*], the 'terror of Carthage' . . . used to bathe a body wearied with work in the fields!"¹¹⁴ Cicero, likewise, stresses the small size of the villa where he was born and where his grandfather lived "in the old manner, like Curius on his Sabine farm."¹¹⁵ Cato the Elder, too, was inspired to live more thriftily by contrasting the tininess and meanness of Curius's villa (*parua . . . uilla*) with his future greatness.¹¹⁶

Nowhere is the conceptual analogy between childhood, smallness, and the distant past more clearly outlined than in the preface to Florus's epitome of Livy's history, which tells the city's life story in human metaphors: the regal period was its infancy, the early Republic its youth, the late Republic up to the reign of Augustus its manhood or "robust maturity," and the imperial period its feeble old age (except, predictably, for a brief rejuvenation under Florus's own emperor, Trajan).¹¹⁷ This classification is "yet another way to grasp in intimate, 'human' scale something immense and extensive," in a work that, as we have seen, repeatedly emphasizes its brevity along with its panoptic vision.¹¹⁸ In a study of votives, Jessica Hughes has suggested that the switch in antiquity from tiny anatomical images to larger ones (at least according to the surviving evidence) enabled Greeks and Romans to make similar links between miniaturization, nostalgia, and archaism.¹¹⁹ Usually, however, such neat progress from small to large belongs in the realm of the imagination. Historically, expansions and shrinkages followed a wider variety of sequences. I have already mentioned, for example, the claim that the temples of the Middle Republic in Rome represented a turn towards smaller-scale, repetitive building; this, it turns out, was relative both to the grandeur of the earlier Capitoline temple and to later imperial monuments.¹²⁰

Morally speaking, though, the small-scale past often trumped the expanded present. One of the friends with whom Cicero reminisces in *De finibus* about places

that evoke history offers a curiously paradoxical take on this theme. In the mind's eye, Piso claims, the recently extended Curia Hostilia, haunted as it is by dead culture heroes Scipio, Cato, Laelius, and his own grandfather L. Piso Frugi, actually looks smaller in its current enlarged state than it ever did in its humbler but more glorious past incarnation.¹²¹ In Piso's palimpsestic vision of the past, small and large coexist, and even switch roles. The paradox "small but impressive" was entrenched enough for Plutarch to single out a crushing joke that Antony made at the expense of the Megarians. He called their senate-house "Small but—shabby."¹²²

PREAMBLE

Cute apologies for modest or trivial subject matter are not hard to find in Latin literature. I could follow Columella ("little column"), who heralds his supplementary hexameter poem on gardening (*superest ergo cultus hortorum*), following nine prose books on agriculture, as "material that is very meager and almost devoid of substance" (*tenuem admodum et paene uiduatam corpore materiam*) and "so inconsiderable" (*tam exilis*) as to be only "a tiny fraction" (*particula*) of the whole work.¹²³ His imagined version of the horticultural section that Virgil had lacked time and space to add to *Georgics* 4 is presented as a "tiny remaining instalment" (*reliquam pensiunculam*) of the tithe Columella owes his patron. Broken into its component parts, gardening is conceived as a fractal miniature of the larger topic of agriculture:

For, although there are many branches [*quasi membra*] of the subject, so to speak, about which we can find something to say, they are, nevertheless, as unimportant as the imperceptible grains of sand out of which, according to the Greek saying, it is impossible to make a rope [*tamen eadem exigua sunt, quod aiunt Graeci, ut ex incomprehensibili paruitate harenae funis effici non possit*]. (*Rust.* 10 *praef.* 4)

We are back with Homer's Iris, scanning innumerable sand armies from above.

More upbeat is the note struck by Aulus Gellius, that obsessive collector of trivia, in the preface to his *Attic Nights*:

My readers . . . should ask themselves whether these observations, slight and trifling though they are [*minutae istae admonitiones et paucillulae*], do not after all have the power to inspire study, or are too dull to amuse and stimulate the mind; whether on the contrary they do not contain the germs and the quality to make men's minds grow more vigorous, their memory more trustworthy, their eloquence more effective, their diction purer, and the pleasures of their hours of leisure and recreation more refined. (*NA* 1 *praef.* 16; Loeb, trans. Rolfe, adapted)

I cannot claim such improving effects as Gellius does for the baggy holdall that is this book, but I am less defeatist than Columella. Like him, I have chosen variety over depth in my short and incomplete forays into smallness. In chapter 2,

I return to textual details via an inconspicuous element of Sallust's *Jugurtha* and, by contrast with Aristophanes's hiccups, build on it a huge edifice of overinterpretation that takes in microhistory and creeping temporality. In chapter 3, I consider a very brief Suetonian life in relation to the humor and politics of not-yet-ness and the durability of punchlines. Chapter 4 is about minor emotions, microaggressions, tiny irritants, and their special uses, mostly in Cicero. My final chapter is on the uses of useless-seeming diminutive words in Latin prose and poetry. Grains of sand, all of them, but together they might begin to make something of a rope.