

Diminishing Returns

Tales of the Diminutive

*Little boxes on the hillside
 Little boxes made of ticky-tacky
 Little boxes on the hillside
 Little boxes all the same*

—MALVINA REYNOLDS, “LITTLE BOXES,” SONG (1962)

Somewhere in any survey of small Roman things a space needs to be set aside for diminutives, those not so little words that are among the most expressive and inventive in the Latin language. We have seen many of them along the way, even if their appearances have been unobtrusive, even surreptitious: Seneca’s split fingernail (*unguiculus*) and irritating little jolts (*punctiunculae*) of nausea; the measured pace of a Ligurian who follows snails and tree in tiny steps (*paulatim . . . paulum*) toward a little fort (*castellum*); Caligula, “Bootikins,” toddler emperor-in-waiting; Cicero’s little stone (*scrupulus*), little eye (*Ocella*), little daughter (*filiola*), and pet villas (*uillulae*). Not to mention the Latin originals of many of the words used to analyze them: “particular,” “encapsulate,” “oracular,” “singular.”

In the very amateur, nontechnical exploration that follows, I follow far greater experts before me in considering what diminutives add to Latin literary texts; at the same time, I reflect on what they tell us about relationships between writers and their imaginative worlds. Diminutive words (nouns and adjectives alike) peg themselves with remarkable ease to other “little” themes we have explored so far: minor feelings and discomforts; small things as portable extensions of the human body; not-yetness and not-quiteness; precise calibration; and striving toward points. The word *punctum*, we have already seen, can signify many things: memorable displays of wit; moments of tension; or zeroing in on fine detail. In this context, it will have a further extension: as the unattainable vanishing point to which all diminutives aspire.

Among those scholars who have collected and analyzed diminutives over the last two centuries, a fundamental assumption has always been that the function

of these often rather long words is not just to convey relatively small size. Most languages that use them also give them an affective force, so that it is rarely just “little” but instead “dear little,” “poor little,” “silly little,” or even “pathetic little.” Edmondo De Amicis once wrote that the diminutive in Italian is like a smile.¹ The problem with this, as Bengt Hasselrot pointed out in his pioneering study of diminutives in modern Romance languages, is that a smile, like a word, can mean many different things.² Not surprisingly, C. J. Fordyce, editor of Catullus, expands the possibilities: for him the diminutive is “the counterpart in speech of a smile or a sigh or a shrug!”³

To reflect these multiple shades of emotion more comprehensively, linguist Daniel Jurafsky has devised an ambitious scheme to cover every possible meaning of diminutives across all cultures and periods of history, based on the proposition that they stem from a core primitive notion of “child.”⁴ This immediately helps explain some of their bafflingly contradictory senses: how diminutive forms can express precision and intensity but also nuance and vagueness; tenderness for things perceived as adorable or helpless, as well as contempt for things perceived as inadequate, pedantic, or silly. Diminutives can be affectionate or sneering; approximate, softening, hedging (“reddish”; “a little pointed”), or intensifying (“in the very heart”; “right now”); they can suggest both intimacy and distance. Sometimes they fall short of an ideal target; sometimes they zone in on it. All this, it is worth noting, gives them interesting affinities with comparatives and superlatives. In many languages that use superlatives, as Roman Jakobson observed (or at least was quoted as observing by Angelica Pabst in David Lodge’s *Small World*), the more intense the degree being expressed, the longer the word.⁵ For diminutives, conversely, the smaller the scale, the longer—usually—the word.

Jurafsky also confirms a long-standing connection between the tendency to use diminutive words and the speaker’s gender (this applies to augmentatives, too).⁶ Again, at the root of this—and most linguists seem to agree—lies the mother-child relationship, which expresses itself cross-culturally in designated language and a distinctive tone of voice that soothes a child’s fears by minimizing external threats (“silly little dog”) while characterizing the child itself as a little thing, inferior and weak next to the parent but also the object of tender affection and pride. To define external things as small, to see the world in small terms, might look like a gesture of (masculine) power. But to use diminutives is often to embrace vulnerability, femininity, and silliness.

In Latin, which seems to be far more inventive than Greek in this area of language, diminutives are frequently associated with womanly, effeminate, even camp speech.⁷ Not only because they tend to reflect the emotions of love and tender appreciation, and so are typical of the language mothers use when talking to children, but also because women were stereotyped as having small outlooks on mostly trivial concerns. As Donatus says of a grumbling mother in Terence’s *Adelphoe*:

For all these [ways of complaining] are feminine when, instead of great hardships, complaints of no importance [*nullius momenti querellae*] are piled up in a kind of heap and itemized. (Don. *ad Ter. Ad.* 291)

“Laundry lists of worries” is Dorota Dutsch’s apt label.⁸ However, given that almost all our surviving Roman writers are male, and diminutives are all over their writing, or at least all over certain kinds of writing, we might more fruitfully ask: what do *men* achieve by using diminutives, and what does it cost them? Does using these words, which register minutiae or minute degrees of difference, allow speakers to display more than just precision: to be weak and sentimental, perhaps, or to forge a special kind of intimacy, or reveal their feminine side? And if so, just how much of a risk is this, when speaking in one’s own voice? Are diminutives always a sign of urbanity, which so often trades conventional masculinity for greater sensibility, or are they meant to be heard as ironic in the mouths of men who want to keep a distance from the senses and sentimentality and maintain their manliness?

Some indirect evidence of the sexual, or at least sensual, charge attached to diminutives can be found—somewhat counterintuitively—in the hypermasculine poetry collection *Priapea*, whose primary scenario involves an ithyphallic god’s crude threats to intruders in his garden. Priapus taunts the unmanly *cinaedi* who haunt his precinct with their secret desire to feel the full force of his punitive weapon. In addition, as Elizabeth Young argues, he teases those equivalent *cinaedi* in his poetic audience who crave the aural sensuality of diminutive words but who, because of his empty threats, are largely denied them.⁹ In one poem, for example, Priapus alludes to the luscious diminutives with which Catullus addresses the *cinaedus* Thallus:

Cinaede Thalle, mollior cuniculi capillo
uel anseris medullula uel imula oricilla. (Cat. 25.1–2)

Cinaedus Thallus, softer than rabbit fur
or the innermost down of a goose or the tip of an earlobe

Only then to ration them for his listeners:

Quidam mollior anseris medulla
furatum uenit huc amore poenae:
furetur licet usque: non uidebo. (*Priap.* 64.1–2)

A certain someone softer than goose down
comes here to steal because he loves the punishment:
go on, let him steal and steal: I won’t see it.

Young points out how grudgingly Priapus strips away most of Catullus’s diminutives, restricting the mellifluous doubled diminutive *medullula* (inmost down) to a single one, *medulla* (down, lit. “marrow”).¹⁰

Indeed, a special respect in which Latin diminutives stand out from their equivalents in many other languages is their common use in connection with body parts—*ocellus* being the standard personalized form of *oculus*, for example.

The sense here may above all be euphemistic—"my own humble little eye" (the one I presume to mention). But there are other possibilities, too: intensified interiority (*auricula*, as opposed to *auris*, means "inner ear";¹¹ *medulla* means "soft middle part [of the marrow]"); phoniness (*lacrimula* is not just a "little tear" but a "crocodile tear"); and—something touched on earlier—the sense that body parts are miniatures or extensions of the whole individual (*capillus*, hair, for example, comes from *caput*, head; *unguiculus* is the very edge of the nail, as well as a slice of nail). As we will see, this often applies in the case of external diminutive things, as well. In short, diminutives cannot help but express relationships, especially those that span the thin membrane between self and world.

Where genre is concerned, it is no surprise to learn that diminutives feature far more frequently in playful, intimate, small-scale writing; more in comedy than in tragedy; more in satire and the novel than in epic. Everyone knows the famous "scandal" of the only genuine diminutive in the *Aeneid*, one that happens to embody the very notion of tininess, expressed in the abandoned Dido's wish that her lover had left her with a *paruulus Aeneas*. Not just a "little Aeneas," an extension or replica of the original (Dido's dildo?), but "a little baby Aeneas," a formula that combines maternity with affection and longing.¹² It is no coincidence that this word appears in the most feminine and most feminizing book of the *Aeneid*, one unusually focused on a female perspective and female needs.¹³ Dido's *paruulus* will duly be picked up in the *Appendix Vergiliana* as a size-appropriate fake signature of Virgil's recessive literary tininess: once in the *Moretum* and the *Ciris*, and twice in the self-consciously miniaturizing *Culex*.

VANISHING POINTS

Otherwise, I will have little to add here about the metapoetic aspects of diminutives and their relationship to small poetic forms, beyond briefly noting the correlation often implied between small people—women, slaves, children, silly lovers—and the supposed vision of the world that their use of diminutive speech suggests: a pointilliste one of miniature coinages that flower into joyful "contagions" of diminutives and rebloom in the rhyming verse of later antique and medieval Latin. A well-known example is Emperor Hadrian's lovely little poem about his soul:

Animula, uagula, blandula
hospes comesque corporis
quae nunc abibis in loca
pallidula, rigida, nudula,
nec, ut soles, dabis iocos. (Hadrian, fr. 3)

Dear fleeting sweetening little soul,
My body's comrade and its guest,
What region now must be its goal,
Poor little wan, numb, naked soul,
Unable, as of old, to jest? (Loeb, trans. Duff and Duff)

To which Ronsard's gorgeous translation does more than justice:¹⁴

Amelette Ronsardelette,
Mignonnette doucelette,
Tres chere hostesse de mon corps,
Tu descens là bas foiblelette,
Pasle, maigrelette, seulette,
Dans le froid Royaume des mors:
Toutefois simple, sans remors
De meurtre, poison, ou rancune,
Mesprisant faveurs et tresors
Tant enviez par la commune.
Passant, j'ay dit, suy ta fortune
Ne trouble mon repos, je dors. (Pierre de Ronsard, *Derniers Vers*)

Another poem, from *Carmina Burana*, explores the inevitable consequences of putting two young people of opposite gender into a confined space:

Si puer cum puellula
moraretur in cellula,
felix coniunctio.
Amore succrescente,
pariter e medio
propulso procul taedio,
fit ludus ineffabilis
membris, lacertis, labiis. (*Carmina Burana* 19)

If a boy spends time with a girlie in a little room, a happy union results. As Love increases, and for both boredom goes out of the window, an indescribable game takes place with bodies, arms, lips.

Ultimately, this over-the-top late-antique “contagion” of erotic diminutives is an archaizing device, a legacy of earlier Latin—as in this spectacular example from two hundred years before, a seductive passage in Plautus, supposedly written by a woman in a letter to her lover:

Ps. teneris labellis molles morsiunculae,
nostr[or]um orgiorum <osculat>iunculae]
papillarum horridularum oppressiunculae. (Plaut. *Pseud.* 67–68)

soft little smooches of tender little lips, the little kisses of our secret rites,
little pushy squeezes of stubby little nipples.

The pileup here is fantasy on more than one level. It even amounts to a kind of verbal “fondling” of experience, so squeamishly sensitive to small differences of texture that it is uncomfortable and cloying to read—both tender and lubricious at once. In a somewhat different vein, satirist Lucilius imitates the “smooth and agglutinated” style of the orator Albucius:¹⁵

Quam lepide lexis conpostae ut tesserulae omnes
arte pauimento atque emblemate uermiculato! (Lucil. 84–86W)

How charmingly are ses dits put together—artfully like all the little stone dice of mosaic in a paved floor or in an inlay of wriggly wormlike pattern! (Loeb, trans. Warmington)

Once the poet has finished breaking his subject's style down via diminutives (*tesserulae*, *uermiculato*), it has decomposed into a pixelated design far closer to his own satirical worldview, which is above all fragmented and granular.

What interests me more than metapoetics here, though, is the expressive power of diminutives in themselves. How do these “little words” convey nuance and uninhibited emotion, reveal and shape identity, and indicate relationships to body and world? In a comprehensive survey of every diminutive noun and adjective in Catullus, Samuel B. Platner set himself the task of deciding in each case whether a diminutive has significant semantic value or is simply interchangeable with its basic form.¹⁶ In the case of adjectives, for example, Platner judged that in fifteen cases (*albulus*, *aureolus* [in one of two instances], *frigidulus*, *languidulus*, *misellus*, *molliculus*, *pallidulus*, *paruolus*, *pusillus*, *turgidulus*, *uetulus*, *aridulus*, *imulus*, *lasulus*, *perlucidulus*), the diminutive form is insignificant; in two cases (*lacteolus*, *tenellulus*), it is intensifying; in three cases (*turpiculus*, *eruditulus*, *mollicellus*), it expresses contempt; in one (*uuidulus*), it conveys the idea of wretchedness. In the remaining three cases (*bimulus*, *integellus*, *floridulus*), he concludes that there is no strong evidence either way. What surely matters, though, far more than these gradations is Catullus's overall openness to diminutives as an expressive feature of his poetic worldview: satirical, mocking, intimate, and self-diminishing all at once.

Nor is it hard to see a more than metrical point to using these words. To take just one of Platner's cut-and-dried “insignificant” diminutives—*turgidulus* (a little bit swollen)—from the last line of Catullus 3, describing Lesbia's teary eyes after the death of her pet sparrow:

tua nunc opera meae puellae
flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli. (Cat. 3.17–18)

It's your doing now [sparrow] that my girlfriend's sweet eyes are red
and a little bit swollen with crying.

The diminutives sprout here: *puellae* generates *turgiduli*, followed by the rhyming *ocelli* (*oculis* earlier in the poem).¹⁷ But there is more going on than meets the eye. As Ellen Oliensis has argued in *Freud's Rome*, the choice Catullus makes between *turgidi* and *turgiduli* is far from insignificant.¹⁸ While cossetting nursery language makes the swelling in question superficially guileless—“innocently” transferred to a little girl's sweet little eyes by her tender lover, along with the blush conveyed by *rubent* (or is that another kind of redness?)—it never quite exorcises the phallic

phantom that has haunted the poem from its first readers to the present day; indeed, it is what summons it up. Thus, *turgiduli* spares our blushes and provokes them at the same time. In addition to intensifying and falling short, diminutives can drop hints, push limits, and maintain suspense.

A diminutive noun performs a similar function in Catullus 10, a poem we have explored before. In this case, Platner fudges about the word in question, *scortillum* (“a bit of a slut”), used by the poet to convey his first impressions of Varus’s female companion: “Here one may suppose that there is a true dim. signification, or one of contempt, or one of endearment. It is impossible to say with certainty.” Uncertainty, again, may be the whole point. *Scortillum* is a diminutive of *scortum* (prostitute—literally, “hide” or “skin”—a crude neuter word for something conceived as a marketable, replaceable human commodity). But does this nuance hold for the diminutive as well? This is how William Fitzgerald translates the word in its surrounding passage:¹⁹

scortillum, ut mihi tum repente uisum est,
non sane illepidum neque inuenustum. (Cat. 10.3–4)

a little whore, as I noticed on the spot,
but not without charm or beauty.

Looked at closely, the lines do not actually include any Latin word for *but* (unless it is the emphatic *sane*: “even so” or “definitely”). Strictly, then, the litotes “not without charm and beauty” (or, more likely, “sex appeal”) should be compatible with the sense of the diminutive that comes before it. A possible alternative, then, is to translate *scortillum* more leniently as “a bit slutty”—that is, approvingly or forgivably or indefinably so—nothing so raw as “little whore.” There is leeway and curiosity here, despite the snap appraisal, and no hint at this point, given the patronizing tone, that the girl has more autonomy than Catullus gives her credit for. J. N. Adams has it right when he cites *scortillum* as typical of the mixture of “affection and contempt” in the general use that Latin and Greek make of diminutives for prostitutes (and, we might add, in their use of the neuter for the physical “package” they represent).²⁰ One could compare the blanket plural *amores*, or the innuendo of British English “bit of skirt.” None of this implies, though, that Varus’s girlfriend is a prostitute, only that she has something of a prostitute’s availability (and, it turns out, grasping tendency) about her. Catullus sits with his first impressions before finding out that he has grossly underestimated the girl’s substance and intelligence. Even so, these first impressions hold after their exchange insofar as he identifies a familiarly transactional flavor to her social interactions.

Along with the diminutive and the double negatives, the poem also includes a striking comparative, *cinaediorum* (technically, “rather like a passive homosexual”; colloquially, “like the little tart she was”)—a harsher-seeming judgment:

hic illa, ut decuit cinaediorum,
 "quaeso" inquit "mihi, mi Catulle, paulum
 istos commoda: nam uolo ad Serapim
 deferri." (Cat. 10.24–27)

At which she said, like the little tart she was,
 "Please, darling Catullus, lend them to me for a bit:
 I need a ride to the temple of Serapis."

Once again, the word allows Catullus to fall short of open abuse (and accountability for it), hard though it is to bring out either the comparative or the implied queerness in an English translation. As we have seen, he is compromised by the term himself. After all, he has been exposed, however tongue in cheek, as another shameless opportunist, as well as the complicit victim of a "screwing over" by his provincial governor (*irrumator*).²¹ Again, there *is* something "cinaedic" in the way the girl softens her request to him with an overfamiliar "darling Catullus" (*mi Catulle*) and another disarming diminutive, "for just a little while" (*paulum*), an example of what Adams elsewhere calls a "polite modifier" typical of feminine speech.²² Just so, Thetis in Statius's *Achilleid* coaxes Achilles into wearing a dress "for just a little while" (*paulum*).²³ In Catullus 10, all three words—the diminutive *scortillum*, the comparative *cinaediorum*, and the adverb *paulum*—are provisional. They create a lack of definition, an opening of possibility, and a space for flirtation and negotiation (with words as well as with a person).

Some Latin diminutives, of course, are genuinely "lexicalized" in that they have acquired a separate technical identity (for example, *testiculus*, testicle, from *testis*, witness; *musculus*, sea mussel or bodily muscle, from *mus*, mouse; *libellus*, pamphlet, petition, or lampoon, from *liber* book), and so cost their users nothing in loss of masculine dignity. Diminutives often lodged themselves in domestic settings, displacing "larger" words. Pet words, for example, like *porcellus*, piggywig, and *agnellus*, lambkin, came to colonize (and euphemize) the butcher's vocabulary in modern Romance languages. Even so, poets like "shameless" Catullus and "modest" Horace tend to use *libellus* as a genuine diminutive for their urbane little *libri*, thereby seeming to disparage their own productions.

In any case, one could argue that diminutiveness remains a live quality in all these contexts, given the handleable size of all the objects just mentioned. But Latin goes further still. In common with some modern languages, it has free rein to double or multiply its diminutives by reduplicating their syllables, creating in the process a kind of stuttering effect that suggests a failure of precise and complete expression. The distinction in each additional suffix is one of emotional intensification or approximation, not just progressively diminutive size (compare English "small" > "tiny" > "teeny"; or "dear" > "darling" > "little darling" or "darlingest"). Just so, in contemporary Mexican Spanish, the delaying device *ahora*

(in a minute) can be whittled (or wheedled?) down into *ahorita*, *ahoritita*, and even *ahorititita*. Russian, like Italian, boasts many shades of diminutive suffixes, from affectionate to disparaging, and is fond of multiple diminutives: the classic example пирог (*pirog*, pie) can become пирожок (*pirozhek*, small pie, sweetie pie) and пирожочек (*pirozhocek*, very small pie, or little sweetie pie). In the case of Latin, it has been claimed that while it “generally stops creating diminutives at double or triple diminutives [e.g., *rubellulus*, *agellulus*], there is theoretically no upper limit to the number of diminutive bases that can be added to diminutives to create even more diminutives.”²⁴ For example, *puella* might generate *puellula*, *puellella*, *puellilla*—and even, hypothetically, *puellulula*, *puellellula*, and *puellillula*.

This all seems rather absurd, and indeed most of these forms are never found in classical Latin. Even so, the notion of a limit is thought-provoking. Should “no upper limit” perhaps be no *lower* limit? Or should one be thinking of limits at all? The potential to create ever-more focused diminutives suggests a kind of asymptotic striving toward an imagined vanishing point or unattainable goal of smallness (as in “itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka dot bikini”). It is as though the holy grail were to return to some mystical *punctum* (the word we have seen so often in connection with small things)—here, the concentration of the most intense linguistic precision in the smallest space—or else to recover the tiniest embryonic prototype of a small form (the ultimate diminutive that lies at the other end of the linguistic scale from the basic form, known as its “primitive,” *puer*, already turned feminine and diminutive into *puella*).

Put another way, the diminutive form can be conceived as nostalgic, in the sense that approximation or hopeless yearning toward an ideal endpoint entails a kind of loss. In that case, it seems natural that diminutives in Swahili, according to one of Daniel Jurafsky’s linguistic maps, include among “handleable little things” a special subcategory for “pointed things/parts.”²⁵ Latin makes a similar connection between diminutives and concentrated pointedness. In Apuleius’s *Cupid and Psyche*, for example, Psyche, pregnant but still naïve, marvels that from a tiny pinprick (*de breui punctulo*—the sexual act minimized in proportion to her childish sensations) such a swelling growth from her fertile womb (*tantum incrementum locupletis uteri*) could grow.²⁶ Conversely, Seneca, as we saw earlier, piles up the most wincingly refined of diminutives to isolate the effects of seasickness on bodily extremities: “the slightest little movement [*levis . . . motiuncula*] disorients you . . . your feet ache, [the ends of] your limbs feel tiny prickings [*punctiunculas*].”²⁷

LITTLE BOXES

A different but related concept or instinct behind the use of diminutives is that of enclosure.²⁸ In the first chapter, we saw Tertullian exaggerate the tininess of jewel boxes in his invective against female adornment: “From the smallest boxes [*de breuissimis loculis*] is produced an ample inheritance [*patrimonium grande*].” In



FIGURE 21. Roman basket, Metropolitan Museum, New York, AN 20.2.19.

De lingua latina, Varro preserves a rare example of a complete set of multiple diminutives, for different sizes of caskets or baskets:

magnitudinis uocabula cum possint esse terna, ut cista cistula cistella . . .
(Varro, *Ling.* 8.49)

Whereas there can be a set of three words to indicate size, like cista, cistula, cistella . . .

If this is a random choice, it is a very nice one. The tender inward folding of human hands around a felt object suggested by a diminutive is perfectly conveyed by this group of larger containers enfolding smaller ones, nested on the page like matryoshka dolls. Plautus's play named after a little casket, *Cistellaria*, is one of several titles that combine a diminutive object with *-aria* (either an abstract collective neuter plural noun or a feminine adjective qualifying *fabula*, play), as if putting a question mark over the cumulative worth of huddled plurality and smallness combined. Other such titles include *Aulularia* (*The Pot Comedy*), from the diminutive of *olla*, pot; *Mostellaria* (*The Haunted House*), from *mostellum* (little

monster or ghost); the lost *Frivolaria* (The One about the Trifles); and the lost and so far unexplained *Nervolaria*, still the subject of a tense standoff between fans of little phalluses and fans of slaves' fetters.²⁹

To designate its central object, *Cistellaria* goes one better than Varro by including *cistula*, *cistella*, and *cistellula* among its variants.³⁰ Mario Telò embraces the charisma and vibrancy of these diminutive containers when he tracks *Cistellaria*'s confusion of its lost heroine Selenium with the frequently mislaid casket that contains the tokens of her birth: "The transference of vitality from person to thing, from *puella* to *cistella*, exposes the characters to affective experiences seen onstage or called forth from the past."³¹ He also notes that the girl's lover, once she is in his possession, seems to want to box her up:

Now that I have this girl, it is my intention not to let her go; for indeed I have decided to glue her entirely onto me. Where are you, slaves? Lock the house with bolts and door-bars [*pessulis, repagulis*] immediately. I will bring this girl inside the threshold. (*Cist.* 647–50)

A similar argument for the inseparability of material containers (for books and other things) from the imaginative concept of containership is made by Lucy Razzall in *Boxes and Books in Early Modern England*. She cites the familiar claim of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson that containment is one of the main "metaphors we live by."³² Human beings, they explain, as bounded containers in themselves, tend to "project their own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces."³³ Hence Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's focus on the materiality as well as the *Epistemology of the Closet*, in the context of sexual in-out orientation.³⁴ Latin diminutives standard for "boxy" spaces, such as *lecticulus*, little couch, and *cubiculum*, little chamber, contain similar notions of cozy (or too cozy) interiority. Andrew Riggsby has identified the Roman *cubiculum* as not a bedchamber so much as a "room for secret activity," from sex to plotting to murder, while Victoria Rimell has shown how interior space can be dangerously *unheimlich*, as well as homey.³⁵

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard had already dreamed up Razzall's book: "An anthology devoted to small boxes, such as chests and caskets, would constitute an important chapter in psychology."³⁶ He has penetrating remarks of his own to make about the psychology of boxes. When a box is opened:

The outside has no more meaning . . . even cubic dimensions have no more meaning, for the reason that a new dimension—the dimension of intimacy—has just opened up. (Bachelard 1994, 85)

This state of affairs amounts to a kind of infinite regression, he adds, quoting Jean-Pierre Richard on Edgar Allen Poe's *The Gold Bug*: "We shall never reach the bottom of the casket."³⁷ The affinity Bachelard perceives between recessive interiors and unsatisfied longing helps clarify the psychological as well as linguistic links

I hinted at earlier between the perfectly tiny version of the diminutive and the extreme form of the superlative. As Bachelard claims, this area of study had itself long been off-limits: “The hidden in men and the hidden in things belong in the same topo-analysis, as soon as we enter into this strange region of the *superlative*, which is a region that has hardly been touched by psychology.”³⁸

Sometimes a diminutive container word can even set the template for an entire work (and here I do regress briefly to metapoetics). Varro, again, provides an excellent example of “lexicalized” Latin diminutives—that is, words with specific meanings independent of their original noun, when, toward the end of *De re rustica*, he uses this curious analogy to suggest the shape of fishponds divided into fresh and saltwater areas:

Nam ut Pausias et ceteri pictores eiusdem generis loculatas magnas habent arculas, ubi discolores sint cerae, sic hi loculatas habent piscinas, ubi dispares disclusos habent pisces. (*Rust.* 3.17.4)

For just as Pausias and the other painters of the same school have large boxes with compartments for keeping their pigments of different colours, so these people have ponds with compartments for keeping the varieties of fish separate.

The phrase *loculatas magnas . . . arculas* translates literally as “large compartmentalized drawers,” the adjective “large” (*magnas*) qualifying the two diminutives on either side. Not only is the “interiority” and miniature size implied by *arculae* (“drawers”—from *arca*, “chest”) preserved even when the drawers are out-size (that is, they do not automatically turn into *arcae* but stay “large little containers”), but the idea of subdivision is still conveyed by the participle *loculatus* (made into little places). The word *loculatus* derives from *loculus*, another lexicalized diminutive, from *locus* (place)—a holdall for any number of subdivided or lidded objects: coffins, cells in a beehive, niches of a *columbarium*, library shelves, dogs’ kennels, boxes for dried figs, and even school backpacks.³⁹ In Plautus’s *Stichus*, for example, the parasite Gelasimus begs for the tiniest nook (*tantillum loculi*) in his host’s house, just big enough for a puppy (*catellus*) to lie in, and expresses very well the hyperbolic connotations of the superdiminutive—in this case, squirming, subhuman compression into an unreasonably narrow space:

Epignomus: If you can curl up very tightly.

Gelasimus: Even between two iron wedges, a teeny little slot where a puppy could sleep [*tantillum loculi, ubi catellus cubet*], that’s enough space for me. (Plaut. *Stich.* 4.2)

But Varro’s divided paintboxes, with their two “lexicalized” diminutives, are more than just miniature versions of the fishponds. They are also building blocks for the larger “places” and containers of *De re rustica*, which make the farm a small-scale analogue for the author’s panoramic system for organizing knowledge. At the start of book 3, Varro, like Julius Caesar, breaks down his subject matter to get it

under control, distinguishing first between town and country—topographically separate departments (*loco discretae*)—then dividing (*diuiserunt*) country into farmers and herdsmen (“This matter of herding has a twofold division, though no writer has made the distinction clearly, as the feeding around the steading is one thing, and that on the land is another”), then further dividing farming into three subcategories, arable, dairy and pastoral (“three divisions of rural economy which are instituted for gainful ends—one of agriculture, a second of animal husbandry, and a third of the husbandry of the farmstead”).⁴⁰ This gives a ground map for a final book peppered with other significant *loculi*: the purse or moneybox into which one puts one’s meager savings; and the ballot box, symbol of the elections taking place in the city, elections that at one point threaten to interrupt the peace of the dialogue.⁴¹

It is predictable, then, that Martial, poet par excellence of smallness, has no qualms about reducing *loculus* further still to a double diminutive, *locellus*, in the little epigram where he offers as a party gift some small wooden boxes with nothing inside—apart from a bottom:⁴²

LOCULI LIGNEI

Si quid adhuc superest in nostri faece locelli,
munus erit. nihil est: ipse locellus erit. (Mart. 14.12 (13))

WOODEN BOXES

If there’s anything left in the bottom of my little box you can keep it.
There’s nothing? Well, you can keep the little box.

Curiosity, disappointment, dubious consolation—all in two lines. W. R. Johnson mused on the modernist, even nihilist affinities of this epigram: “Without indulging in a game of faux zen,” he wrote, “one could say that the box and its emptiness (a bare, almost abstract object-poem that refuses significance) are about nothing but beauty and the box-poem itself, its own bare beauty: A material object (together with the poem, the mental object which now represents it) is transformed into an aesthetic experience that in turn transforms the experiencer (briefly) into a pure perceiver (of a small and pure beauty).”⁴³ We are back with the plums in the icebox, which have already vanished but which keep, refrigerated, in poetry, or with Wendy Cope’s charming riposte to a neglectful suitor: “But, look, the flowers you nearly brought / Have lasted all this while.”⁴⁴ In Martial, the subtle turn from plural *loculi* in the title to singular *locellus* in the poem only adds to the impression of a forlorn but endearing emptiness, precariously preserved.

Poets who identify with nothingness and having nothing to offer are especially partial to such diminutive container words, because they function as portable extensions of (some minimal version of) themselves. Repositories of emotions, secrets, and poetry alike, these containers stand in for the compromising intimacy their human owners abundantly promise but ultimately withhold. Catullus



FIGURE 22. Mosaic of doves stealing pearls from a box, House of the Faun, Pompeii, Museo Archeologico, Naples. Photo: Julian Money-Kyrle; Alamy Stock Image.

is relatively uninhibited about delving intimately into his own body or other bodies, whether to invite seduction or tease us with the prospect of deep penetration into the softest interior places, or at least into the narrow passages that lead there: rectum, inner ear, inmost marrow. Diminutives, especially those with liquid sounds, play a large part in forging this intrusive intimacy. As we have seen, Poem 25 starts:

Thallus you cinaedus softer than rabbit's fur [*mollior cuniculi capillo*] or the plushiest down of a goose or the innermost hollow of an earhole [*uel anseris medullula uel imula oricilla*] (Cat. 25.1–2)

This is language that makes the reader's own inmost earholes tingle.

A good example of such a substitute in portable form is the purse in Catullus 13, where Catullus (one diminutive individual: “puppy”) invites Fabullus (another: “little bean”) to dinner. The joke is that he has precious little to offer:

You shall have a good dinner [*bonam atque magnam cenam*] at my house, Fabullus, in a few days, please the gods, if you bring with you a good dinner and plenty of it, not forgetting a pretty girl and wine and wit and all kinds of laughter. If, I say, you bring all this, my charming friend, you shall have a good dinner; for the purse of your Catullus is full of cobwebs [*nam tui Catulli | plenus sacculus est aranearum*]. But

on the other hand you shall have from me love's very essence, or what is sweeter or more delicious than love, if sweeter there be; for I will give you some perfume which the Venuses and Loves gave to my lady; and when you snuff its fragrance, you will pray the gods to make you, Fabullus, nothing but nose [*totum . . . nasum*]. (Cat. 13; Loeb, trans. Gould)

The speaker pleads that he cannot afford his own provisions because his purse, *sacculus* (diminutive of *saccus*), is "full of spiders." Not only does Platner rule out the diminutive specificity of *sacculus* here—"This dim. is not uncommon, and other writers seem to use *saccus*, *sacculus* and *sacellus* oftentimes as synonymous"—he also thinks it a less than ideal choice: "It would seem here—at least from one point of view—that there should be no dim. idea, for the larger the purse, the greater its load of emptiness, and the more forcible the figure. Probably therefore *sacculus* = *saccus*."⁴⁵

Platner's logic is somewhat hard to follow. He seems deaf to the blend of surprise ("my little purse is full . . . of spiders"), possessiveness, and humble brag all wrapped up in the notion of a small purse full of emptiness, not to mention the fact that a great many cobwebs can still be packed into it, which is all part of the joke; even at the best of times, the entertainment would not have been lavish. More than that, though, the diminutive suggests an analogy with body parts conceived as miniature extensions of an individual. The *sacculus*, in short, can be understood as a surrogate for little Catullus (minor player in the world of social and material exchange), a teasing offering of in-out self-orientation that promises satisfaction but never fully delivers it.

By the end of the poem, another body part is in full view, not detachable so much as consuming its owner. When he smells the one thing Catullus has to offer, his mistress's scent (*unguentum*, whatever that means), he guarantees that Fabullus will dream of becoming "all nose" (*totum nasum*). A modern-day context where such an identification, unusually, is possible is the case of those samplers known in the perfume industry as "noses," whose transformation, Bruno Latour has argued, is more than simply figurative. "It is not by accident," he writes, "that the person is called 'a nose' as if, through practice, she had *acquired* an organ that defined her ability to detect chemical and other differences . . . a nose that allowed her to inhabit a (richly differentiated odoriferous) world."⁴⁶ In French, the sample kit with which a trainee parfumeur learns to differentiate between scents has a diminutive name: *mallette à odeurs* (from *malle*, a large trunk). This modern-day equivalent of Varro's compartmentalized paintbox presents a miniature version of the "richly differentiated" external world, offering small possibilities for affective responses to it.

For Catullus, by contrast, Fabullus's blown-up nose remains a hypothetical organ that offers neither contact nor possession but only suggestion and frustration, just as his prosthetic *sacculus* fails to deliver even on its limited capacity. Catullus allows interiority without penetration: you can smell but you can't



FIGURE 23. Calliope and Homer with a *capsa* (scrollbox); detail of Roman floor mosaic from Vichten, 240 CE, Musée National d'histoire et de l'art, Luxembourg. Photo: TimeTravel-Rome; Wikimedia Commons.

touch. When fourth-century CE poet Ausonius lewdly invites his friend Axius Paulus to inspect some intimate private musings—in this case a tiny set of poems (*Bissula*) about a favorite adopted former slave (*uirguncula*)—he provides no fewer than three prefaces (one in prose, two in verse) to introduce her charms. But for all the layers of packaging, the German-born *Bissula*—a name he concedes might seem “hick” (*rusticulum*) and “icky” (*horridulum*) to others but is sexy enough (*uenustum*) to him—remains a mystery: so much wrapping paper, so little inside the box.

Another little container makes its way into Catullus 68, that difficult poem that Denis Feeney has observed is jam-packed with comparisons—another form of conceptual yearning that, like its author, leans toward perfect identifications but always stops shy of them.⁴⁷ The poem thanks its addressee for supplying Catullus with a love nest in Rome, but even so is drawn back to analogies with tragically

separated mythical couple Protesilaus and Laodamia and to continued grief for the brother lost at Troy. Catullus apologizes for his literary inadequacy by pleading that he is a displaced person living out of a suitcase, or rather out of a single book box (a *capsula*, usually cylinder-shaped for holding scrolls):

For as for my not having plenty of authors at hand, that is because I live at Rome: that is my home, that is my abode, there my life is spent; when I come here only one small box out of many [*una ex multis capsula*] attends me. (Cat. 68.33–36)

Not only is this box a lexicalized smaller entity (than *capsa*, scrollbox): it shows up only to represent scarcity and loss (*una ex multis*). Even so, there is something fond and consoling about the image of the little container as faithful retainer, when neither Catullus nor Laodamia succeeded in following their loved ones to Troy. As Jaś Elsner writes of a prestigious box that has survived from Roman Britain: “We may say ultimately that the Muse Casket evokes an embodied subjectivity in the elite owner—one whose desire is both to see inside the box and to access its tangible contents—who is inevitably directed to a pattern (we may say a materially constituted narrative) of opening and unpacking, of closure and putting away.”⁴⁸

A box whose inside contains only a section of an entire poetic corpus fits well among a cluster of images that William Fitzgerald has traced through Catullus 68 and the preceding poems, conveying above all the promise, often deceptive, of “expressing” or “shaking out” things from mysterious interiors.⁴⁹ A thread runs from the fruit rolling from a girl’s disappearing lap in 65 (a poem that is the “covering letter” to 66 and figures a poet’s retentive mind as storehouse and womb) to 68, a poem that is “layered” or “stratified,” where Herculean tunnels drilled through the “inmost marrow” of mountains (*fodisse medullis*) are conflated with a mysterious bottomless pit (*barathrum*) and with Lesbia’s progress from her husband’s lap (*gremium*) to Catullus’s.⁵⁰ The little *capsula* joins these interiors as another proxy that half serves the futile desires of its abandoned owner for perfect (re)union. This was a versatile word, used of many possible neat containers. It is equivalent to our “bandbox”—for example, in Seneca’s *Letters*, where natty (*comptulos*) young men emerge *de capsula*; it is also the name given to the cookie tin placed at the foot of the Flamen Dialis’s bed.⁵¹ In late antiquity, *capsula* took on a further specific meaning, as a reliquary for a saint’s body parts:⁵²

ac deinde Germanus plenus Spiritu Sancto inuocat Trinitatem et protinus adhaerentem lateri suo capsulam cum sanctorum reliquiis collo auulsam manibus comprehendit. (Constantius, *Vita Germani* 15.5–7)

And then Germanus, filled with the Holy Spirit, invokes the Trinity and immediately he removes from his neck a small box of saintly relics he kept close to his body and grasps it in his hands.

It is in this context, a saint’s sacred biography, that the diminutive’s potential to express intimate forms of contact between object and custodian is mostly clearly

on show. First, the locket “clings” to Germanus’s body; then it is removed from his neck and cradled in his hand. Not only is it a detachable prosthesis in itself: it is even a container of other saints’ small, desiccated body parts.

DILATING PUPILS

An unusual word choice for a body part in another Catullan poem has been similarly underappreciated.⁵³ In Catullus 63, Attis, formerly a Greek youth, awakens from a trance in the wilds of Phrygia to discover that she has castrated herself under the influence of the goddess Cybele. In a long speech, she mourns the loss of her masculine Greek future and the conventional rites of passage from ephebehood to manhood that she will never experience. It has long been noted that many of the words Attis uses express grammatical paradoxes of gender, above all in the line where she addresses her fatherland, *patria*, a feminine noun with a masculine-sounding root that attracts feminine, maternal adjectives:

patria o mei creatrix, patria o mea genetrix (Cat. 63.50)

O fatherland that mothered me, o fatherland that bore me

But there is reason to keep these queer combinations in our minds six lines later, when Attis says that her gaze (formerly her “weeping eyes,” *lacrimantibus oculis*) is still drawn toward her fatherland. Instead of saying “eye,” she now says “pupil,” *pupula*:

cupit ipsa pupula ad te sibi derigere aciem (Cat. 63.56)

My very own eye desires to direct its gaze toward you.

We have seen how Latin tends to use diminutives to refer to one’s own or others’ body parts, and in a poem already packed full of them (*lassulae, latibula, labellis, corollis*), twin body parts abound: lips, eyes, ears.⁵⁴ Still, there is something uncanny about the substituted word here: the singular synecdoche *pupula*. In Latin, as in its English derivative, this word embraced the twin concepts of “eye pupil,” and “school pupil.” It is well known how one became the other. “Little doll” or “little girl” (from *pupa*, “doll”) translates a similar concept in Greek: *kor(e)*, the “maiden” in the eye—that is, the little dolly or manikin, the tiny image of ourselves, which, as external viewers, we see reflected in another person’s iris. The locus classicus for this is Plato’s *Alcibiades* 1, later expanded by Cicero, who uses the Latin word *pupula* (rather than *pupilla*), stressing that the iris is deliberately small, so that the organ of viewing will not be easily harmed:⁵⁵

aciesque ipsa qua cernimus, quae pupula uocatur, ita parua est ut ea quae nocere possint facile uitet. (Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.142)

The actual organ of vision, called the pupil or “little doll,” is so small as easily to avoid objects that might injure it.

Pliny the Elder adds further clarification and a gruesome detail:

The pupil [*pupilla*] has become the window for the horny center of the eye, whose narrowness [*angustiae*] does not allow the vision to wander, uncertain [*non sinunt uagari incertam aciem*], but directs it as though through a channel. So complete a mirror, too, does the eye form [*adeoque his absoluta uis speculi*] that the pupil, small as it is [*tam parua illa pupilla*], is able to reflect the entire image [*totam imaginem*] of a person. This is the reason why most birds, when held in the hand of a person, will peck specifically at his eyes; for seeing their own likeness reflected in the pupils, they are attracted to it by what seem to be the objects of their natural affection [*cognita desideria*]. (Plin. HN 11.55.148)

Here, *angustiae* (“narrow straits”), *acies* (“vision,” but originally “sharpness”), and *absoluta uis* (“consummate ability”) all drive home the idea of a tiny focal point, further illustrating the connection I have claimed between the use of the diminutive and the ideals of precision and perfect accuracy. Cicero normally prefers the form *pupilla* (of course he does: in his sixties, he married his own “little dolly,” his fifteen-year-old ward Publilia).

In a poem whose central concern is gender change, the choice of a feminine, diminutive word activates a further possibility. If *pupula* is the name for the diminutive image of our reflected core identity (no pun intended), is Catullus implying that femininity is already innate in all of us, at least when we are looked at by another consciousness? Taken together, the singular noun *pupula*, the verb *cupere*, and the emphatic *ipsa* suggest Attis’s psychic loneliness and longing (compare Pliny’s *cognita desideria*). If this is how our inner soul always looks to ourselves and other people, perhaps it is not only Attis who can say, “Am I a woman?” (*ego mulier?*) or “Will I be a part of myself?” (*ego mei pars . . . ero?*). Her ability to see herself in the reflections of others recalls, in particular, the response of the slave Sosia in Plautus’s *Amphitryo* on first seeing his lost twin:

By Pollux, surely when I look at him, I recognize my own appearance, in the same way that I am (for I’ve often seen myself in the mirror); he is even overly similar to me. (*Amph.* 441–42)

As he later explains:

there is no milk more like milk than that I over there [*ille ego*] is just like me. (*Amph.* 601)

In Maurizio Bettini’s words: “When referring to his double, Sosia has no choice but to call him *ego*: ‘that I over there,’ he says: *ille ego*. Faced with this duplicated image of himself, Sosia still calls him *I*.”⁵⁶ Or could we say “eye,” substituting another doublet?⁵⁷

A rare word in Latin, *pupula* attracts puns in its other appearances, too. A fragment from Calvus's *Io* runs: *cum grauis urgenti coniuere pupula somno* ("when the heavy pupil dipped in urgent sleep").⁵⁸ According to Edward Courtney, the pupil refers to either Io's weariness or to her guardian Argus's multiple eyes.⁵⁹ But the ambiguity holds in any case because *Io* is Argus's *pupula* in the sense of his "charge" or "ward." The double meaning is differently exploited in Ovid's *Amores*, where the lover spies on an old woman instructing his beloved in the art of love for women:

oculis quoque pupula duplex
fulminat, et gemino lumen ab orbe uenit. (*Am.* 1.7.15–16)

From her eyes, too, double pupils dart their lightnings, with rays that issue
from twin orbs

A witch with a giveaway double pupil educates her female pupil in erotic duplicity.⁶⁰ In the case of Catullus's *Attis*, *pupula* also signals her new status as wandering devotee of the Magna Mater, permanently fixed in pupillage, or, as she puts it, a handmaiden for the rest of her days (*semper omne uitae spatium famula*), unable to transition from that state.

END POINT?

So far, we have seen the diminutive used mostly sentimentally or personally. But it can also be used scathingly. Cicero is a master of the invention and acute deployment of diminutives, from the emotionally confiding to the coruscatingly satirical.⁶¹ As Louis Laurand notes, diminutives are unevenly spread across his works, found, not surprisingly, more often in the correspondence and the more conversational speeches than in the more elevated ones. As usual, these words express not just smallness but a range of emotions from tenderness and sympathy to contempt, not to mention "the most delicate forms of Ciceronian irony."⁶² We have already seen how Cicero likes to coin words starting with *per-* and *sub-* to add nuance, either to intensify or to downplay—which offers another clue to the quasi-comparative and superlative functions that diminutives perform. He also likes to combine prefixes with diminutive suffixes, overegging the idea of smallness: *perparuolus*, for example.⁶³ Another group of hybrid adjectives and adverbs is invented by joining comparatives onto diminutive endings: *putidiusculus* (just a little more revolting), *maiusculus* (just a little bigger), *meliuscule* (just a little better).⁶⁴

Such exquisite precision might pass as the height of squeamish but urbane discrimination, as when Cicero claims to rate a "tiny stroll" (*ambulatiuncula*) and a chat with Caelius in Rome worth the entire profits of a province abroad (also the message of Catullus 10), or when *contractiuncula quaedam animi* (a little bit of a downer) registers the slightest dip in mood.⁶⁵ Yet the sheer finickyness of the constructions must make them at least partly self-ironizing. J. E. G. Zetzel, who makes

a collection of these words, reads Cicero's criticism in *Pro Archia* of an epigram offered to Sulla by a bad Greek poet, *alternis uersiculis longiusculis* (with every other verse just a little too long), as exaggeratedly philistine, since the phrase is "a perfectly accurate, if satirical, description of the elegiac couplet in which an epigram would be written."⁶⁶

Nowhere does Cicero make more colorful use of diminutives than when disparaging Greek philosophy, with its pernicky, overintricate arguments. Gloriously sardonic phrases are used of Zeno's "terse and pointed little syllogisms" (*Zenonisque brevis et acutulas conclusiones*) and of the Stoics' "hair-splitting minutiae" (*interrogatiunculae angustae*), their "fussy syllogisms" (*ratiunculae*), and even "string of involved and pettifogging little syllogisms" (*contortulae quaedam ac minutae conclusiunculae*).⁶⁷ Still less mercy is granted to Antony's petits bons mots (*sententias*), which are so much less supersharp (*peracutas*) than he thinks they are.⁶⁸ Note, again, how the idea of a point recurs in these examples—*acutulas*, *angustae*, *peracutas*—enhanced by the diminutives themselves, all straining toward a pinhead or *punctum* of absurd precision while mimicking the overanalytic urges of those satirized: angels dancing on the head of a pin?

Cicero, "chickpea" that his name suggests, has a vested interest in making the Greeks themselves look small and conflating their heroic stature with their minute obsessions. Thus Epicurus is *forticulus* ("little tough man) and Zeno *acriculus senex* ("clever little old man"); the genius Archimedes is a *humilis homunculus*, "humble little human."⁶⁹ Tobias Reinhardt has argued that the word *corpusculum*, "little body," which Cicero uses of Epicurus's atoms, must be pejorative in tone because its roots lie in satire, where it is used to belittle the frail and insignificant *human* body.⁷⁰ For comparison, he cites Juvenal reducing the *corpusculum* of Alexander the Great to size (*quantula sint hominum corpuscula*, "how small are little human bodies") and Lucilius calling our mortal remains *folliculum* (husk or pod).⁷¹ Cicero must, he argues, be specifically implying "feeble little body," not just "little body," thereby suggesting the absurdity of a world made up of feeble little bodies.⁷²

Such newly minted Latin diminutives as these rise admirably to the challenge of dispelling the combined ghosts of Greek celebrity and pedantic distinction while delineating a view of the contemporary world that is both variegated and domestic. This suggests that there is almost a psychological element of self-consolation underpinning their use. Diminutives essentially enable Cicero to break down all human ambition and all potential external threats, including the Greeks, to manageable size. For example, he consistently, patronizingly miniaturizes women, as if reducing them to a known quantity—*aniculae*, *mulierculae*, *mimulae*, *nutriculae*—an attitude that comes back to haunt him when Sulpicius Rufus writes, not without compassion, that it is time for Cicero to man up and snap out of grief for a single daughter: *unius mulierculae animula* ("the frail soul of one dear little [mortal] woman").⁷³

We have already seen Cicero pointing out that the Romans have more words for sensibility than the Greeks; we have also seen how the performance of verbal

and emotional feebleness is essential to his own construction of an urbane but fragile literary self. A classic example of underplaying with a diminutive is the following coinage in a letter to Atticus, where Cicero bites the bullet and confesses to morally compromising capitulation to Caesar and Pompey, referring to his “palinode” (unspecified, but probably his recent speech *De provinciis consularibus*). To downplay this lapse from principled behavior, he comes up with a novel double diminutive, a “cute” face-saver: *subturpicula*, “just the tiniest bit naughty.”⁷⁴ As often, his preamble sensitizes us to the nuances of the coinage: “I have spent a long time ‘nibbling around’ [*iam dudum circumrodo*] at what needs to be swallowed whole [*quod deutorandum est*].” Using the diminutive to indicate a venial sin or peccadillo, straying somewhere shy of gross moral turpitude, sounds almost like an imaginary inner parent petting an inner naughty child; Cicero wants his best friend to witness his weaker self being forgiven by his stronger one. But the sense of evasion or shortcoming is spatialized in advance by *circumrodo*, which prepares us for the way in which the *sub-* prefix, plus the diminutive suffix *-icula*, also beats around the bush of something potentially more serious.

A verb like “gnaw about” suggests little animals—rodents, specifically—which returns us to Cicero’s remarks in *De natura deorum* about little houses being built by mice and weasels.⁷⁵ It is intriguing to watch him use other engagements with mice to manage and minimize his responses to external pressures.⁷⁶ In *Att.* 14.9, for example, looking at problems philosophically as mouse-sized helps him make light of his current misfortunes as a landlord:

Two of my shops have collapsed and the others are showing cracks, so that even the mice have moved elsewhere, to say nothing of the tenants [*non solum inquilini sed mures etiam migrauerunt*]. Other people call this a disaster [*calamitatem*], I don’t call it even a nuisance [*ne incommodum quidem*]. Ah Socrates, Socratics, I can never repay you! Heavens above, how utterly trivial such things appear to me! [*quam mihi ista pro nihilo*].⁷⁷ (*Att.* 14.9.1; Loeb, trans. Shackleton Bailey)

In *De divinatione*, similarly, Cicero downplays the gnawing of mice, which some people see as a portent or symptom of something catastrophic, as a purely random or quotidian phenomenon:⁷⁸

But are we simple and thoughtless enough to think it a portent [*monstrum*] for mice to gnaw something, when gnawing is their one business in life? “But,” you say, “the fact that just before the Marsian War mice gnawed the shields at Lanuvium was pronounced by the soothsayers to be a very direful portent [*maximum . . . portentum*].” As if it mattered whether mice, which are always gnawing something day and night, gnawed shields or sieves! By the same token, the fact that, at my house, mice recently gnawed my Plato’s *Republic* ought to fill me with alarm for the Roman republic; or if they had gnawed my Epicurus *On Pleasure* I should have expected a rise in the market price of grain! (*Div.* 2.27.59; Loeb, trans. Falconer)

This joking response is a far cry from Virgil’s farm pests in *Georgics* 1, initially staged as a minicomedy of little scroungers and parasites—with weevils, moles,



FIGURE 24. Roman leather (toy?) mouse, 12 cm long, Vindolanda Museum. Credit: @Vindolanda Trust.

toads, and an *exiguus mus* (little mouse) among them—but suddenly transformed into a parade of “monsters” (*monstra*, rather than *mostella*, “little monsters”), since they represent, after all, a potentially devastating threat to human livelihoods.⁷⁹ Virgil takes small things seriously and humorously at the same time because he is alert to their complexity, in this case to the pests’ hard-to-assess identity as companions or competition for human farmers.

If Cicero lightens politics and religion by looking down on mice, and in his more xenophobic or anti-intellectual moods reduces the Greeks to “little people,” seeing them, in Susan Stewart’s words, “as if it were at the other end of a tunnel, distanced, diminutive, and clearly framed,” this brings us back to questions posed at the start of this book.⁸⁰ Did the Romans tend to miniaturize their ancestors, genetic or intellectual? Did they make their *maiores* into *minores*, putting them into tiny boxes to make it easier to contain them or cope with them? And if we choose to access the Romans and their lives through small daily things, is that choice fueled by a kind of nostalgia that diminishes the past, or does it sharpen our eyes to what seems beneath our notice but is unquestionably, illuminatingly, still there—and still here? In the end, does it all come down to perspective—to shrinking the world, or the past, returning to the language and surroundings of babyhood, in order to manage things and feel safe and in control? Thanks to modern technology, we can look down on a planet reduced to a pinprick (*punctum*) and its populations to ants, just like Seneca in *Natural Questions* or Scipio in his dream: “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 [*punctum*] on the earth’s surface.”⁸¹

Coming out of a pandemic, we have learned to embrace smallness, to focus on handling, looking at—and fearing—what lies immediately in front of us. With the loss of the agency, mobility, and sociability we once knew, we even started to blend in with the objects surrounding us. This latest encounter with small things has been one with our own triviality, frailty, animality and mortality (recall Hadrian on his *animula uagula blandula*, or the other Crispus reducing an audience to “not even a fly”). Remember the fly that gained notoriety when it clung so mesmerizingly to

Mike Pence's head during a 2020 vice-presidential debate that it stole his thunder, undermined his authority, and reduced him to an inviting expanse of hair and flesh?⁸² Small things cut *us* down to size. But remember, too, the Ukrainian spokesman who proudly declared at the start of a new war: "We are a huge amount of ants." Singly or *en masse*, small things can be an inspiration.