

Toy Mouse, Discovered at Vindolanda Roman Fort, May 2020

A strip of leather, rodent-sized, with whiskers,
curved tail, ears, soft incisions for fur,
unearthed near a temple, hunched and attentive;

unexpected, like sunlight, and mischievous:
he chooses to make his reappearance
now, as the dark cities stir with fever;

a subversive reminder that Pliny the Elder
suggested kissing a mouse on the mouth
as an ideal cure. Or else it's no more

than the wishful thinking of an archaeologist
to sift through a thousand leather cuttings
and distinguish this: an atonement, a gift

from the god Apollo, the Lord of Mice,
who sent a plague on silver arrows
in a fit of anger; and now, as healer,

sending this, a playful semblance, a trace
of the real disease. A little vaccine.
As sunset falls behind Hadrian's Wall

we dream up auguries for ourselves
from secret hoards, fine-combing the earth
for the fortunes it holds. How Apollo was born

clutching a sword, and the cities turned gold.