

College of the Holy Cross

CrossWorks

Montserrat Annual Writing Prize

Montserrat (First-Year Program)

4-12-2022

A Roman Diary

Sarah Yebin Park

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/mont_prize



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Park, Sarah Yebin, "A Roman Diary" (2022). *Montserrat Annual Writing Prize*. 8.
https://crossworks.holycross.edu/mont_prize/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Montserrat (First-Year Program) at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Montserrat Annual Writing Prize by an authorized administrator of CrossWorks.

Entry #1

Ante diem IX Idus Martias XV B.C.

This is the best papyrus. Though, to be honest, I couldn't tell the difference. The nib of my pen always snagged onto bumps on the surface of every papyrus we tried. The ink always smudged no matter what and papyrus always crumbled away sooner or later. But something must have satisfied my father with this one. Or maybe it was just something in the trader's manner that told him that it would be good to be the trader's ride to Rome. As soon as I finished writing random Greek sentences, my father turned around to begin haggling with the trader in a mix of broken Egyptian and Greek. Only then was I able to squat down in the shade and finally take a look around.

It was only the third hour but canopied stalls already dotted all the sides of the streets. The distinct muskiness of sweat hung in the air as the sunlight mercilessly beat down upon the dusty roads. Little children darted between the legs of mules, merely laughing at their scolding mothers. Carts filled the streets until they stood rail to rail. Slaves doubled over under loads and the beating sun rays. Heavily accented Greek intermixed in the air as traders hawked their goods. Olive oil in large amphora jars from Cyprus, papyrus from Egypt, odd talismans of foreign gods, fish, meat, spices, they were all there. It was a world within our small city of Ostia. Only a few months ago, I would have taken my time walking through the streets, taking in all I could. But I had just finished learning how to read and write from my father. I had to accompany him to Rome...To think that this was only Ostia. How would Rome be any larger?

A swift kick made me jolt, nearly tripping over my toga as I stood up. None of the two seemed to notice but I knew my father too well. It was a purposeful warning. I hid my bruised arm behind me and rubbed it in silence. The two men continued talking.

“You are a hard dealer, Lucius,” chuckled the Egyptian trader. Though it sounded friendly, his eyes were cautiously watching my father. He was a young one, talented, judging by the ease with which he haggled. “Two dupondii.”

“Three dupondii. Last price or try your luck in finding another bargeman.” My father pointed at the port. People were scrambling for boats, shouting over each other's prices, and clawing at each other for room for their goods. Chaos, but an everyday one. To the Egyptian trader who just came in from across the sea, it must have looked like Taratus.

“Fine. Three dupondii. Instead unload my goods first.”

“Deal.” I watched the scars on my father's arms whiten as he shook hands with the trader. I heard he used to be a slave, dragged all the way from Raetia during the Emperor's campaign. But I could never picture him not being here, at the mouth of the Tigris, attending to his barge and ferrying people from all over into the heart of the Roman Empire.

“Felix! Stop daydreaming and watch the slaves load the crates!”

"Yes, *pater!*" I scrambled over in a hurry. I didn't want to get a beating later on.

By the time we arrived, the Appian Way was filled with carts. Mules lowed and the stench of piling excrement filled the nostrils of waiting merchants. It was already the twelfth hour. The gates to Rome were merely a speck in the distance, only visible because its bars glinted in the last rays of the setting sun.

It was too late. Tomorrow was the second festival of Vediovis. If it were ideal, we should have come here yesterday and gone in through the gates just in time to book an inn. But the Egyptian trader we were with was inexperienced and unused to the customs around here. If I were a trader...

I flinched, remembering the alcohol upon my father's breath and the incessant pounding..

“No son of mine will ever, EVER, become an unrespectable trader!”

Entry #2

Ante diem VIII Idus Martias XV B.C.

The god of Mercury must have blessed my father. After leaving the disgruntled Egyptian trader with his goods in a far corner stall, we immediately dived through the roads. Dust densely covered the air, kicked up by the masses criss crossing each other. Not a single sign could be seen and even the entrances to the temples were covered with the masses. Whatever roads were beneath our feet was covered with dust and thousands of feet shuffled over them constantly. Just trying to see a single cobblestone was like trying to spot a floating seaweed in the midst of a storm. But my father’s feet never faltered and seemed to know where to go. But what should I expect? He had lived here as a slave for over twenty years now.

We made it to the servants’ entrance of a large villa. Inscribed on the stone plaque was the family name of my father’s former master, the father of his current patron: Cato Acisculus. The lines were crisp where the chisel had dug into the grey-veined marble. Ivy clung to the outer walls and further in, I could glimpse well-carved columns and a group of what looked like new slaves pooling into the outer courtyard. Before I could crane my neck to see more, a guard barred my sight.

"State your business." The slave mark stood out on his neck as he barked out his words. It had been long since it had been branded on him. Several layers of new skin had webbed over the wound and the white scarring that would have been there darkened into a lighter olive than the rest of his skin.

"I am here to see my *patronus*," my father straightened his back and sternly glared at the guard.

"The dominus isn't here," the guard replied, undaunted by my father. It was odd. I had always seen my father as strong and inexorable. But in front of this fierce slave he seemed more tired. An old soul who has lived through more than he cared to.

Suddenly, another slave ran up to to the guard and grasped him by the shoulder. I heard him frantically whisper into the guard's ear before they both stepped back and bowed. I barely had the chance to see the narrow purple stripe before my father shoved down my head toward the ground.

"How fortunate, Lucius, I was just about to see my father. Come in." The man turned around with a trail of slaves and libertus like my father following him. From behind, the man didn't seem like much. Dark hair, small stature, sickly-pale skin...but there was an unmistakable air of authority in his voice.

"Remember, Felix," my father cautioned while the Egyptian and snored next to us the other night. "The son may look normal but he is an elite Roman. He was born to hunt and prey like a wolf. There is a reason why they say that the founder of Rome was raised by wolves."

Entry #3

Ante diem VII Idus Martius XV B.C.

What happened? I sat up with a splitting headache, barely steadying myself against the wall. My father was slumped next to me, his face slightly reddened in the rays of the setting sun. Or was it the rising sun? I slowly stood up, stumbling upon the mushy dirt road in front of Rome.

There was a long line of carts as there always was in front of Rome. The gravestones cast shadows upon the wet grass that grew sparsely upon the mounds. A cold wind whirled around my toga as I tried to get my bearings.

We were in the villa. We greeted the past dominus of my father, offered the dead a fine pouch of wine that my father bought off a Grecian trader, and ...Oh. The ground lurched as I bent over to throw up onto the grass. When I finally stood up, acid burnt my throat. We drank with the slaves below the villa until the sun went down.

The mourning period had ended for the deceased and the funeral games had begun. Though my father had known the deceased for twenty years, it was nothing in front of status. My father saw another Raetian man he apparently came to Rome with. I tried to stop my father. My younger brother, his *son*, was waiting at home but he ignored me and grabbed a flask. At least I tried to stay sober. That is, until I overheard them talking.

“---, how is your son?” The man spoke in a thick, garbled tongue which I assumed was my father’s Raetian name as he poured my father another glass of wine. It was odd. I was on the other side of the room, greeting some of my old friends but that one question rose out of the thundering conversations and stuck in my ear.

“He is a disappointment. He just daydreams, and barely speaks up. Barely a man, much less a Roman. I should have thrown him to the wolves.”

“Well, Lucius, I have a daughter...”

I left. I must have taken a couple wine pouches with me because all I remember after that was being thrown out of the gates of Rome. The sky swirled as if a maelstrom had ascended upon Nyx’s domain. The smell of wine clogged my nose even when I slumped near a pile of something hazily brown.