The Death of a Bohemian Poet
A Brief, Fictionalized Account of Martial’s Life

Martial sits down at his desk and begins to write.¹ He’s an old man now and has lived for many years in this old house in the Spanish countryside that his last patron, a lovely woman, had purchased for him. He has begun writing his memoirs, but he fears that he will not have time to finish the work. Manuscript pages are piled up next to him and lie scattered on the floor. He reflects on his life in Rome, the many emperors he served under. He thinks about his friends, many of them well known poets of the time, such as Juvenal; he also thinks of his many lovers, both male and female, and of his patrons.

He knew he was not a precocious child. His parents were afraid that he would amount to nothing. When he was in his early teens he started to go to the bathhouses and began to stay out late. It was common for him to arrive home early the next morning, at the crack of dawn. Neither his mother’s tears nor his

¹ Marcus Valerius Martialis (38–41–102–104 CE) was a Roman poet from Hispania (modern Spain) best known for his series of Epigrams; they were published in Rome between 86 and 103, during the reigns of the emperors Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan. All the dialogue and translations are my own.
father’s rage could change his generally lazy behavior and indifference when it came to working a normal job. After his first year at the university he discovered poetry and literature, and instead of reading the required books he read the epic poets of the past. He eventually rejected epic poetry for being too pompous and old-fashioned and was drawn, instead, to the cynics and satirical poets and soon began reading more contemporary poetry. He was fond of Pliny the younger, Juvenal, and Catullus. He also read Quintilian and the poets Silius and Valerius Flaccus. He hated Statius’s Thebaid, and the feeling was mutual.

In 64 CE, he moved to Rome to become a poet. He was in his early twenties. Life in Rome was hard in those days. In the beginning, he had a difficult time adjusting to city life, and he often had to obtain favor with a patron in order to eat or even clothe himself. The times had changed. The old relationship between a free man and his patron, such as Virgil and Horace enjoyed under Maecenas, whereby a poet could return the favor with his verses, was no longer possible under Augustus and Domitian. But as his fame grew, he began to enter the literary circles in Rome. There, he befriended Juvenal and Pliny the Younger. He found the fashionable parties rather dull, except for the fact that he met Pliny the Younger at one of these. He found the aristocratic women intolerable and resented having to smile at their insipid and ridiculous jokes, and the men were even worse, with their endless chattering about how they had fought bravely in one war or other. The vanity of these personages was on full display at these events. He admits to himself, though, that he never knew them otherwise.

He was glad that his parents did not live to witness his difficult life in Rome, where he spent thirty-five years, but he knew that they would have been proud of him for winning so many awards and becoming famous throughout the world. He thinks of how much simpler the world seemed then. Now, that world seemed unreal to him. He looks at his many books on the shelf and then turns to the page before him and begins to write, “I am famous now, but in a certain sense, I am still that young man,
arriving in Rome with just a handbag and a few books, so many years ago. The world seems as strange to me now as it was then to that young man. I came to Rome wanting to be a poet, and I became one against all odds.” He turns the pages of his *Collected Epigrams* to book fourteen, and the 165th epigram. He reads, “This lyre helped Orpheus retrieve Eurydice from the underworld, / but he was too anxious to see her, / and such was his love that he lacked all self-control, / and so he lost her, forever.” He thinks of all the men and women he loved. Then he stands up and looks outside the window. The sun is sinking on the horizon. He stares at it for a moment and then returns to his desk. Soon the night will come. He closes the book, rests his head upon it, and falls asleep. He did not wake up the next morning.

His final book appeared in 102 CE, shortly before his death.

When Pliny received news of Martial’s death he wrote, “I am saddened by the passing of Martial. He was a brilliant man, a genius, with a quick wit and piercing intelligence, who was always fair in his assessment of the social scenes in Rome. It is thought that his writings will not last. Perhaps they will not, but it must be said, that Martial believed they would.”

And thankfully for us, his readers, they have survived.