
In the Arena:
Epigrams from Martial's *De Spectaculis*

SUSAN MCLEAN

6.

Believe Pasiphaë and the Cretan bull
mated: we've seen it, and the old tale's true.
Don't let past times seem wondrous, Caesar: all
Fame sings of, the arena shows for you.

Iunctam Pasiphaen Dictaeo credite tauro:
uidimus, accepit fabula prisca fidem.
Nec se miretur, Caesar, longaeua uetustas:
quidquid fama canit, praestat harena tibi.



In the hall the old, sad men stare at her hungrily,
 a broad jealous queen, some fine lady of ancient blood,
 a good ride. Classical hair, classical eyes,
 smooth and cold and pupil-less, swallowing you whole
 and squirming with an aching calm, with a quiet nod
 to the passage of time. Compassionate but disengaged:
 she is sorry she cannot love you, when you are gone
 she will miss you slowly and fruitfully,
 she will spend decades on it, remembering
 and remembering until she, too, is dust.

SHAPESHIFTER

Do you know what it is like to have no skin?
 It is an awful and aching thing. I sit in darkness and spill
 into the world, I leak, I languish. I once stole the skin
 of a wild bull with sweet, sad eyes: how lovely to be soft
 as velvet and admired by curious maidens, to seize
 and love them and their skins like slippery silk. I slid
 into the skin of rain and streamed and gleamed
 with golden light into a woman's womb, I was a swan
 with a swan's grace and a swan's violence, I held
 her close with wings of steel and bit deep. It is hard
 to be made of time and fire, I cannot bear it,
 I am a cloud, a quail, a cuckoo, skins I use until
 they shrink and shrivel. I was a man once,
 callous-hands and crooked teeth and Semele loved me
 before I burned her all to ash.