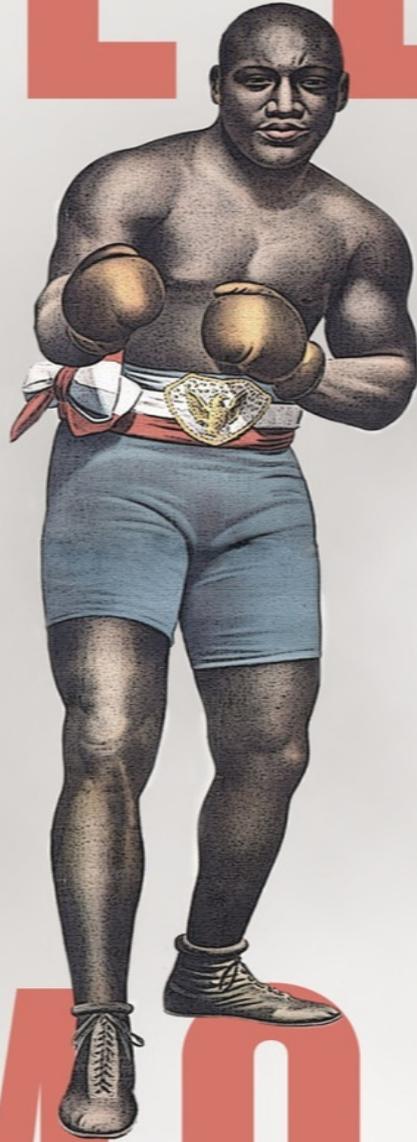


# THE BIG



POEMS



PENGUIN POETS

# SMOKE

ADRIAN MATEJKA

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ALSO BY ADRIAN MATEJKA

Mixology  
The Devil's Garden

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# THE BIG SMOKE

ADRIAN MATEJKA

PENGUIN POETS

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**For my mother, Jo Gustin, and for my father, Robert Matejka**

---

Jack Johnson want to get on board,  
Captain, he says, “I ain’t haulin’ no coal.”  
Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well.

When he heard about that mighty shock,  
might have seen the man trying to Eagle Rock.  
Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well.

—“THE TITANIC,” LEADBELLY

---

# HURT BUSINESS

---

## BATTLE ROYAL

Back then, they'd chain a bear  
in the middle of the bear garden

& let the dogs loose. Iron chains  
around a bear's neck don't slow

him too much. A bear will always  
make short work of a dog. Shakespeare

said Sackerson did it more than  
twenty times to dogs & wildcats

alike. & since most creatures  
are naturally afraid of bears, there

wouldn't always be much of a show  
in the bear garden. So the handlers

sometimes put the bear's eyes out  
or took his teeth to make the fight

more sporting. I believe you need  
eyes more than you need teeth

in a fight, but losing either makes  
a bear a little less mean. Once baiting

was against the law, some smart  
somebody figured coloreds fight

just as hard if hungry enough.  
So they rounded up the skinniest

of us, had us strip to trousers, then  
blindfolded us before the fight.

They turned us in hard circles a few  
times on the ring steps like a motorcar

engine before pushing us between  
the ropes. When the bell rang,

it seemed like I got hit from eight

directions. I didn't know where

---

those punches came from, but I swung  
so hard my shoulder hasn't been right

since because the man said only  
the last darky on his feet gets a meal.

---

## CANNIBALISM

Coloreds were here before these  
United States were even dreamed  
of. We have always been on this  
land. That's why I don't bother  
about what Booker T. Washington  
says. I'm a pure-blooded American  
of the first rate & I don't need  
to cast down a bucket unless there's  
no indoor toilet. After the Great  
Storm hit, the *Times* called us "black  
ghouls," cannibals eating coloreds  
& whites like Sunday chicken.  
They said we left babies in the street  
just so we could take a dead man's  
shoes. They said we sawed off  
fingers at the fat meat for rings.  
I was there, so I know what's true:  
whole families of coloreds shot  
down by whites. "Protecting the dead,"  
the sheriffs said, sending buckshot  
at any colored in sight. Those  
dead people didn't need any more  
protection than the mud & rocks  
covering them. After that storm  
moved through, me & the other  
Galveston boys slept where we could,  
spent our days searching for anybody  
alive. We got paid whiskey & potatoes.  
We found dead mothers & sons,  
dead cats & skulls cracked  
like teacups under the wet wood  
& rock. That's all the storm left.

---

## HURT BUSINESS

Willie Morris was much larger  
than me & struck me in the jaw  
for no apparent reason. Grandmother

Gilmore saw the whole thing  
& said, *Arthur, if you do not  
whip Willie, I shall whip you.*

It's always better to whip than  
to be whipped, so I took the fight  
straight to the bigger boy. Not long

after, fighting became a way  
to make money: on the Galveston  
docks, the fresh smell of fish

& stevedores sweating out lunchtime  
booze. Thirteen & I was already strong  
enough to toss a cotton bale out

of the way like it was a bad idea  
& I could jump five feet backward  
from flat feet. My fists weren't good

then & those men gave me the kind  
of beatings that made me want  
to go back to the schoolhouse.

They laughed while they put it on  
me & seagulls circled us thinking  
there must be fish in the middle

of such a fracas. Those lunchtime  
brawls taught me to mix it up outside  
the gentleman's rules—quick

punches to the manhood, stomped  
toes when cornered, eye gouges  
to get out of a headlock. Of course,

I always abide by the rules inside  
of the ring. Those dock fights were  
more about survival than winning.



---

## THE MANLY ART OF SELF-DEFENSE

Chrysanthemum Joe visited Galveston to “instruct” in the art of self-defense since prize fighting was against the law in Texas back then. Joe was a dandy dressed up as a prize fighter. A sport with blond waves, a little too comfortable in his bright red costume. Joe looked small, but I heard he hit Jim Jeffries so hard the bigger man’s teeth came out through his lip. Jeffries once kept a grizzly as a pet, so what does that say about Joe’s disposition? It didn’t matter that Joe’s hair stayed fixed in place like he used macassar oil or that he looked like he would rather be at a poetry recitation. Our meeting was the shortest fight of my career. The man pursued me like it was personal & I went down in the third thanks to a hard left to my eye. His fists were so fast I’m still looking for them. I was up quick, but the rangers stampeded the ring, six-shooters gleaming in the lights. Joe & I ended the evening in the crossbar hotel. Lucky for us, Sheriff Thomas enjoyed the fistic science & “suggested” we spar to pass the time. No ring, no gloves—just an abundance of split lips & name-calling. Joe instructed me during those long, gloveless brawls. Right-hand leads, snake-strike lefts—all while working to duck the other man’s fists. He told me, *A man that can move like you should never take a punch.*

---

## THE SHADOW KNOWS

*From day one, we aspire  
to be more than the average*

*Negro. None of that yassah,  
boss & watermelon rind*

*smile for us. We want quail  
cooked in butter. We want*

*gold where that gap tooth  
should be. Clarity for Negro*

*caricature. We want high-  
styling clothing, gold rings*

*on our fingers like Greek  
architecture, & gold pocket*

*watches in our vest coats.  
More women than coats.*

*White women in our architecture.  
We want peculiar & instinctual*

*satisfactions. We want to be  
prize fighting's main attraction:*

*the Heavyweight Champion  
of the World. When we rise up,*

*the whole Negro race rises up  
with us. When we get to the top,*

*it's just us. No use for Negroes  
then, not even ourselves.*

---

## BLUES HIS SWEETIE GIVES TO ME

I was out-of-doors, eating snowballs  
for dinner & sleeping by Lake Michigan.  
Nights so cold even the Chicago police

weren't up for rousting me. The soles  
of my shoes so thin I could step on a dime  
& tell whether it was heads or tails. If I

had a dime. Sparring with Frank Childs  
was my first bit of Chicago luck. They  
called Frank "The Crafty Texan,"

but I have yet to meet a colored Texan  
who isn't crafty. In the ring, Frank followed  
me like I was the one who ran off with

his wife. He'd grab my shoulder with his left,  
then hook my ribs with his right until his corner-  
man pulled him off. I was smaller then

& couldn't defense like I can now, & Frank  
was a big man—grappling gloves & red eyes.  
But when somebody told him I needed

a place to stay, he let me sleep on his floor.  
I had to leave when his no-good wife decided  
to come back. In the middle of the night,

the snow coming down so furiously even  
the bricks in the buildings wanted shelter.  
I spent that night seething underneath a statue

of General John A. Logan. It was so cold,  
it seemed as if the bronze horse the general  
sat on turned his head away from the wind.

---

## SHADOW BOXING

Shadow, hard work  
is the only way I'll  
get to the heavyweight

championship. That's  
why I'm the one  
fighter in Philadelphia

doing roadwork on  
Saturday night. I'm  
the only one chasing

these chickens & doing  
calisthenics in the gas-  
light. I could be on

the town, a pretty lady  
in my lap & my arm  
around another. Instead,

I'm sparring with you  
while other fighters  
are out two-stepping.

*Ring the bell, Mr. Might-  
Be Negro Champion.  
I got this dance.*

---

## PRIZE FIGHTER

I love horses because they will outrun  
the fastest man. They are majestic,

as stately as a Saturday woman  
before a party. Horses smell like what

it means to be fast: sweat & gravel  
kicked up on early morning runs.

The in & out of breath like gravel  
in tired lungs. I groomed & raced

horses from Texas to Philadelphia until  
one broke my leg bone with a back

kick. Thanks to that break, I can't ride  
anymore. Even if I could, we've got

these automobiles now that can carry  
us a mile in a minute & I'm buying

the fastest one I can find once  
I get my money together. I'm like

an automobile in the ring. My fists  
work like cranked-up engines. I've got

the kind of elasticity other fighters  
dream about after I put them to sleep

on the canvas. When I clinch a man,  
it's like being swaddled in forgiveness.

When I hook a man, it's like being hit  
by frustration. I can't tell if horses

are happy or confounded by the new  
means of locomotion, but I can say

with certainty my prize fighting cohorts  
are decidedly dissatisfied by my presence.

---

## FISTICUFFS

Some reporters say I fight yellow,  
but I don't need to use the dirty tricks.

I don't rabbit-punch a man's manhood  
like Mexican Pete or gouge an eye

like Klondike. Their kind of fighting  
isn't boxing at all. It's like trying to sell

a toothless man a gum shield. I wait  
for the punch instead, move to one side,

then punch back: a left hook straight  
to the temple. I named the punch

after the first woman I loved: Clara.  
No man met my Clara & was still standing

to talk about it. The woman quit me,  
took my jewels & my roll with her.

I took a train all the way to St. Louis  
to get her back, just so she could take

the rest of my money & leave again.  
Clara is the reason I don't deal with

colored women anymore. I never had  
a colored girl that didn't two-time me.

---

# WEIGH-IN

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## SPORTING LIFE

People are always talking about *if*  
& *suppose* like those words are worth  
more than money, more than the crease  
a silk stocking makes on a woman's  
thigh. More than the grumble of a Thomas  
Flyer engine. So I take the side of my  
pleasures. Two small words, *if* & *suppose*,  
& nobody can explain them. We get  
in this world what we're going to get.  
After all, one man can roll out of bed  
& be killed, while another man falls  
from a scaffold & lives. A man can get  
a bullet in the brain & keep his life,  
while some other poor sap dies  
from a shot in the leg. It's all luck  
& perspective: pleasure is both to me.

---

## COURTSHIP

Hattie, you are  
as delectable & powdered  
as a beignet. Your

skin is white enough  
to catch a bit of sun  
in its own sugar.

Your sweat glints  
like the jewels I'll  
buy for you. Don't you

hear me talking,  
pretty lady?  
I can play my viol

for you if it  
will make you feel  
right. We can bathe

in champagne, dry  
ourselves with hundred-  
dollar bills like those

Rockefellers do.  
I'll take you out  
of the sporting house

& into the royal  
court. Keep watching  
my exhibitions. Keep

hiding that smile:  
your gloved hand looks  
like a dove's wing

when you whisper  
to your friends.  
Did you tell them

the snappy left  
that closed Kid's  
eye like a bank on

Saturday was for you?

Did you whisper

---

that the gut hook dropping

the man to his knees

like a sinner meeting

with Death was for you?

---

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