

## The Circle

*Why do they call it a ring when it is really a square?*

- Frederick C. Mofatt, *Linament and Leather*

There's a fight and you're invited, but you don't know where.  
Beneath a ring of peach-coloured streetlights,  
you pull your collar up and smooth your hair.

The card you pocketed is white and printed with a date,  
lost currency: *3 bob for 10 rounds. Doors - midnight*  
*on the dot.* You only stumble on the road by getting lost

and pausing for the solemn town hall clock,  
the first clear note of twelve cutting a window in the dark  
ahead, the size of a breezeblock, a silver trapdoor, angled,

opening, saying *come on if you really must.* You lower yourself in  
and through the smoke and dust, the whole room turns to look at you,  
your size, your face like an untold joke.

It's cellar-black down here and cupboard-small, but men  
keep crowding in from places you can't see, and this is not  
the Durham Drill Hall or the ring at Backworth Colliery,

not the Percy Cottage or The Blood Tub, Hartlepool,  
not even Ginnetts with its circus air and damp straw scent.  
You shoulder a way through, your arms glued to your sides

and scan the faces, eyes unblinking, not unkind.  
Fireman Dixon, Stoker Allan, Lancaster from Spennymore.  
Kid Carpenter, Ginger Roberts, George Kilts the Featherweight.

Micky Kelly, Nicky Kelly, Rollins rolling on the floor.  
Harry Caster, Benny Sharkey, head like a half-broken plate.  
Jack Doyle, the singing boxer, still holding his single note.

You're sweating, shrugging off your winter coat, looking  
for Tommy Landells with his telltale, maimed right hand,  
each finger gone from it. You're shoved now,

it's so packed the men can hardly stand and the place  
smells of age, gyms before gyms, places like the bloodkit,  
foothandicaps, their mud and warm boots, it stinks

of pickled skin, of mutton and stale beer, sweat and linament  
and in the gathering chant, you realise with a lurch it's you  
they're waiting for, your out-of-town name beading on their lips.

You try to raise a hand for silence. Looking down, you gape  
to see the gaps that used to be your fingertips  
and feel the skin on your bare knuckles hardening,

the room around you shifting, sharpening, as someone  
nudges you into the centre of it all and holds your wrists

and makes you face your own relentless blows  
until you're reeling, nowhere, dancing on your toes  
then flailing, falling, knocking yourself out  
your mouth warped in a shout you'll swear

you never uttered afterwards when you wake up  
on the pavement by The Metro platform, alone  
save for the locked-up pubs, with ash and sawdust

on your shoes, your fists still clenched  
and that high, thin moon  
like a blade you can't use.