

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.