

Amateur Fighter *for my father*

What's left is the tiny gold glove
hanging from his key chain. But,
before that, he had come to boxing,

as a boy, out of necessity—one more reason
5 to stay away from home, go late
to that cold house and dinner alone

in the dim kitchen. Perhaps he learned
just to box a stepfather, then turned
that anger into a prize at the Halifax gym.

10 Later, in New Orleans, there were the books
he couldn't stop reading. A scholar, his eyes
weakening. Fighting, then, a way to live

dangerously. He'd leave his front tooth out
for pictures so that I might understand
15 living meant suffering, loss. Really living

meant taking risks, so he swallowed
a cockroach in a bar on a dare, dreamt
of being a bullfighter. And at the gym

on Tchoupitoulas Street, he trained
20 his fists to pound into a bag
the fury contained in his gentle hands.

The red headgear, hiding his face,
could make me think he was someone else,
that my father was somewhere else, not here

25 holding his body up to pain.

—*Natasha Trethewey*

The Boxing Lesson

“Keep it light, boys. Keep it light,”
my father would shout from the sidelines,
meaning light on our feet, dancing and circling,
never coming in direct at your opponent,
5 like that time my youngest brother
walked right into my straight-armed left
and knocked himself flat.

It was as if his sons were figures
in a myth whose feet might take root
10 the instant we stopped moving,
a suit of chainmail* bark creeping up
over our thighs and trunks, freezing
us in place so we’d end up reeling
punchdrunk before the fists of any breeze.

15 If, as he taught us to, I look for movement
out of the corner of my eye
 (“The punch you don’t see coming
 is the one you’ve got to watch for”),
 I can glimpse him out there in the blue arena,
 20 dancing and circling, always moving,
 as he boxes Death himself,
 snapping back the hooded head
 with a crisp one-two.

—*Richard Broderick*

* *chainmail* — heavy, weighted armor