

1987

Poems

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Andrew, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 9(3), 1987.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss3/10>

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Poems

Abstract

LEARNING HOW TO WIN AT TENNIS, WASHING

Andrew Taylor

LEARNING HOW TO WIN AT TENNIS

The tennis court was a harsh arena,
a theatre of shame, a brutal rectangle
brimming with embarrassment and fear
for a boy with a bad serve. Only
my backhand was any good — low, sneaky
and sinister, it skimmed the net
unaccountably finding my enemy's blind spot.

My best returns were verbal — a volley
of bright remarks, with a crafty topspin
of irony that sent them whipping forward
as they touched down. Unfortunately
they didn't contribute to the score, while a batch
of aces from the opposition did.

My own serve was disastrous. The ball
lacked all decorum, but had an erratic
career of its own. What I did best
I soon learnt, was losing, and I practised that
to perfection. In every match, I reasoned,
somebody must lose. On the other hand
nobody *has* to win — so why should it be me?

I swore my own tennis court oath —
to lose with persistence, determination and skill.
That way I sided with the underdog,
assured that my reward, the grand slam
in the face of all tyrannical opponents,
was mine hereafter. I was spared a mantel
of tasteless trophies, a life sentence of weekends
barracking talented offspring, and pre-
tournament nerves. I'd planned it all in advance.

Occasionally my strategy broke down.
A mean little runt who'd never held a racquet
beat me once at my own game.
Another opponent cheated, spraining a wrist.
But mostly it was triumph after triumph.
With nerves of steel and faultless ineptitude
by a single stroke — rearranging the rules —
I'd go down victorious, a snicker on my lips.

WASHING

The garden's afloat with washing
that swims like a school of colourful jellyfish
in shallow becalming sunlight.
Underpants, little dresses, a teeshirt
bearing a heron and another
stamped boldly WANTED, they play
with the flimsiest rumours of breeze
like innocent friends
empty of everything this morning
but morning's fragrance, sunlight.

When I take them inside
the clothes-stand will be an autumn tree,
its smooth limbs empty for a moment
then filled, extravagantly, with midday.