

In every place the courts were set apart,  
 hidden behind the armoury or the bike sheds,  
 a good place for a quick grope or a gasper.  
 Empty, they seemed banal as a torturer's cellar:  
 a row of sties that didn't smell quite right.

Blank walls, a toy door, four large lights  
 in metal shades with grilles, shining onto  
 slabbed stone. Along the front, a bar  
 of wood. In autumn, the courts streamed with wet:  
 in winter, the wind drove snow across the thresholds.

In an old biscuit tin, a selection of gloves  
 limp as exhausted fish; Slazengers, the colour  
 of dried blood, Grasshoppers a dull grey.  
 In most, the fingers unstitched, the padding lumpy:  
 in all, an ingrained smell of stale sweat.

Only the ball was intricate. On old ones,  
 like mad surgery, little spiralling lines  
 of red stitches pulled the cover tight  
 around a core of rubber, cotton and cork.  
 Nowadays they just glue the seams into place.

The play's the thing, pure ingenuity –  
 the crack of a service rocketing out from the corner,  
 the ball hammered off the back wall, the sly lob,  
 the boast that ricochets madly off one or both  
 side-walls and dies irretrievably by the bar.

Enter the ghost of Hazlitt, himself a player,  
 who wrote that "poetry puts a spirit of life  
 and motion into the universe" – and knew  
 how much depended on the playful imagination,  
 on keeping warm in the coldest places on earth.

*Lawrence Sail*

This poem was spotted by Jason Lever of UCS Old Boys Club and is reproduced (with permission of the publishers) from Lawrence Sail's collection of verse "*Out of Land*" published by Bloodaxe, 1992. It also appears in "*Not just a Game: an Anthology of Sporting Poems*" published by Five Leaves, 2006.

Lawrence Sail was born in London in 1942, but brought up in Exeter, Devon, before attending St John's College, Oxford where he read French & German. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and has presented Poetry Now on BBC Radio 3 and Time For Verse on BBC Radio 4, as well as producing a number of other collections of his own verse and anthologies.