

# The Ball Poem

*A boy loses a ball. He is very upset. A ball doesn't cost much, nor is it difficult to buy another ball. Why then is the boy so upset? Read the poem to see what the poet thinks has been lost, and what the boy has to learn from the experience of losing something.*

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,  
What, what is he to do? I saw it go  
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then  
Merrily over — there it is in the water!  
No use to say 'O there are other balls':  
An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy  
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down  
All his young days into the harbour where  
His ball went. I would not intrude on him;  
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now  
He senses first responsibility  
In a world of possessions. People will take  
Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.  
And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.  
He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,  
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up  
Knowing what every man must one day know  
And most know many days, how to stand up.

JOHN BERRYMAN

## Glossary

**O there are other balls:** The words suggest that the loss is not important enough to worry about

**shaking grief:** sadness which greatly affects the boy

**rigid:** stiff

**(to) intrude on:** here, to enter a situation where one is not welcome

**a dime:** ten cents (U.S.)

**desperate:** hopeless

**epistemology of loss:** understanding the nature of loss — what it means to lose something

**epistemology:** The Greek word *episteme* means ‘knowledge’ (it comes from a word meaning ‘to understand, to know’). Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge itself.

### Thinking about the Poem

In pairs, attempt the following questions.

1. Why does the poet say, “I would not intrude on him”? Why doesn’t he offer him money to buy another ball?
2. “... staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went ...” Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?
3. What does “in the world of possessions” mean?
4. Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.
5. What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words.
6. Have you ever lost something you liked very much? Write a paragraph describing how you felt then, and saying whether — and how — you got over your loss.

