

talk  
to  
me!

LET'S TALK EMPOWERMENT. LET'S TALK ENGLISH

# First Flight

## The Ball Poem

### 1. Watch and listen to the poem

Click on the link below to watch a video of the poem being read. Note the pronunciations of the words and read along using the subtitles.

[\(80\) The Ball Poem - YouTube](#)

### 2. Summary

This poem is written by John Berryman (1914-1972), an American poet and scholar, who was a major figure in American poetry in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It talks about losing something that we love – in this case a little boy loses his ball, which bounces down the street and into the water of the harbour. The boy stands looking down at the water, grief-stricken. The poet does not think that buying him another ball will console him or make up for his loss. For the boy, the ball is a symbol of his childhood, and has many memories associated with it. Money can never buy back cherished memories or things that one loves. The boy learns, for the first time, what it means to lose something that he loves; this is a growth experience for him. Most people who lose something or someone dear to them finally have to accept their loss, and find the courage to move ahead.

Please watch this video to listen to a recitation of this poem:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lm5llpJF\\_al](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lm5llpJF_al)

### 3. Detailed Explanation

*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!*

The poet begins the poem by wondering what the little boy will do, now that he has lost his ball. The poet has seen the ball bounce, happily, down the street and over into the water at the end of the street.

*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*

The boy is so sad that it is impossible to console him by saying that there are other balls that he can play with. He stands straight, staring into the harbour, where his ball has gone, shaking with grief. It is as if he is seeing all his young innocent days drowning in the harbour. The poet says that he would not disturb him, offer him money, or another ball as that would not help him deal with his loss. Also, the poet is sensitive to the fact that this is an opportunity for the boy to grow up and mature. He therefore leaves him alone to come to terms with the loss.

*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.*

The boy realises for the first time the responsibility of owning things. People can take those things away, they can break, or they can be lost. Here the poet symbolizes balls as possessions or, as loved ones. He says that money cannot buy back those lost things or the people he loved. Money only works on the outside. It cannot heal the sadness inside.

*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.*

The little boy is feeling hopeless and unhappy, and desperation shows in his eyes. However, behind those eyes, deep within, he is learning what it means to lose something, and how to handle the loss. This is a growth experience for him, learning what most adults also have to learn – to accept the loss, stand up and move on, in spite of the grief.

There is a deeper meaning here too. Nothing that you own, or love, will last forever. One day it will all be gone. Therefore it is important to find peace

and happiness within yourself, rather than letting your happiness be dependent on the outside “world of possessions”

#### 4. Vocabulary

1. **Merrily** – showing happiness of enjoyment  
After school, the children were **merrily** playing in all the puddles and mud in the playground.
2. **Bouncing** – moving up or away after hitting the ground or any other surface  
The basket-ball player was **bouncing** the ball towards the hoop to score a goal.
3. **Ultimate** – final, end goal  
My **ultimate** goal is to go to the United States for higher studies and then get a job.
4. **Grief** – very great sadness, especially at the death or loss of someone  
Her **grief** at her daughter’s death was terrible.
5. **Rigid** – stiff; firm, inflexible  
Ramu’s body went **rigid** with fear when he saw the snake enter his room.  
The school was very **rigid** about attendance and punctuality.
6. **Trembling** – to shake slightly, usually because you are cold, frightened, or very emotional  
I was **trembling** with fear as I entered the interview room.
7. **Harbour** – a place on the coast where ships can be tied up; to keep something or someone safe  
The sailors were looking forward to reaching the **harbour** by noon.  
If you **harbour** a criminal in your house, the police might arrest you too. .
8. **Intrude** – to enter a situation where one is not welcome  
I do not want to **intrude** if you are busy.
9. **Dime** – US coin of 10 cents.  
This shirt is not worth a **dime**!
10. **Worthless** – having no monetary value  
He said that the jewels were **worthless** fakes.

11. **Responsibility** – something that is your job or duty  
It is your **responsibility** to collect all the answer papers after the exam is over.
12. **Possessions** – things that you have or own  
All his worldly **possessions** were stuffed into a small cloth bag.
13. **External** – outer  
She will recover fast from the accident as all her injuries are **external**.
14. **Desperate** – hopeless  
During the lockdown period the migrants were **desperate** to return home.
15. **Epistemology** – that part of philosophy that deals with knowledge, belief, or understanding  
She wishes to be a scholar of **epistemology**.

## 5. Questions

### 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.

## 6. Literary Devices

Following literary devices have been used in this poem:

1. **Rhyming scheme:** There is no rhyming scheme, the poem is in blank verse.
2. **Metaphor:** The ball is a metaphor for everything that is irreplaceable in our lives. The ball is also a metaphor for death, because death is a final ending.
3. **Personification:** The poet says "*ball merrily bouncing*". The ball is given a human characteristic.
4. **Symbolism:** In the poem, poet says, "*balls will be lost always*". Balls here symbolise possessions which we lose. It also refers to a childhood which will never come back.
5. **Apostrophe:** This rhetorical device is used when a poet addresses his or her poem to an absent audience. In this poem, the poet says, "*balls will be lost always, little boy*". The boy is physically not present with the poet.
6. **Repetition:** In the poem, the poet repeats the word 'what' -

*What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,  
What, what is he to do?*

Also, 'merrily' is repeated –

*Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then,  
Merrily over — there it is in the water!*

Balls is repeated –

*Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.*

7. **Alliteration:** This is the repetition of a consonant sound at the start of two or more closely placed words.
  - (i) '*who has lost his ball* – the 'h' sound is repeated.
  - (ii) '*what, what is he to do?* – the 'w' sound is repeated.
  - (iii) '*no one buys a ball back* – the 'b' sound is repeated.

8. **Enjambment:** When the same sentence continues to the next line without the use of any punctuation marks, it is called enjambment.

*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!*

*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.*

*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.*