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The Epistemology of Rescue Nancy Vieira Couto

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THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RESCUE

"A dime, another ball, is worthless."

—John Berryman

This time a girl has lost the ball she was bouncing on the sidewalk. Somewhere between touch-my-knee and under-we-go it glanced off an invisible nubble in the cement and spun into the giant pinball machine of a street, only to ricochet off a sleek front fender and roll insouciantly toward the gutter. Now it's gone forever into the world beneath her world, the subterranean otherworld that holds her losses. What does she know of losses? Little enough, and she is little enough to love such pink, round objects with a love that aches for rescue. Love sends tremolos all the way to the quarter moons on her fingertips, but she doesn't cry. She just stares at her white socks, her red straparound-the-ankle shoes, until the colors spin and stain each other. The neighborhood children whisper among themselves. Soon everyone knows. The lost ball grows to encompass the whole block of tenements, even the whole city. Larger than the planet is her loss, and it keeps on growing.

"It was a humorously perilous business for both of us."—Herman Melville

It is too soon, she is too young for this object lesson in the epistemology of rescue. Why won't her mother take her away, tuck her in with a favorite doll, a cup of chocolate? Instead her father sees the faces in the audience as pink, round subjects in search of predicates. Leaping from the Oldsmobile, he pulls at the storm sewer's stamped, metal cover and drags it across the rough cement. It is a gigantic bus token, she thinks, wondering what sort of transit it will buy. The neighborhood children are shy. They edge toward the hole in the sidewalk, lining their toes along an invisible outer circle that is close enough for danger, far enough for safety. Below them the ball bobs like something organic, tonsils or adenoids in a glass of water. As they hold their breath in a wreath to commemorate the loss, her mother materializes with a strawberry basket, a piece of string tied

at each corner. She lowers the balloonless gondola, maneuvers it under the bobbing ball, and starts to reel it in while the children cheer, clicking the quarter moons on their fingertips. But the ball is heavy, and the basket breaks away.

"Lydia has always had such a beautiful complexion." —Mom

No one thinks to look at the girl, who stands alone against the wall, one knee bent, while the world spins and stains itself. She knows she knows too much. She knows she's lost not just the ball but the losing it. When her father rolls up his sleeve and lies on the sidewalk, when he reaches deep and strains at the shoulder of his conjugation, permanently stuck at the first person singular, her mother thinks of the time Aunt Julia dropped Cousin Lydia down the sewer and a stranger rescued her, a perfect stranger. Only the neighborhood children applaud. They do not feel the twisted cord that pulls and urges and invites and cajoles. It is too soon but she is not too young to learn the facts of loss, to count them by the quarter moons on her fingertips: One, it is larger than the planet. Two, we spin and stain each other. Three, it runs so close beneath the sidewalk that retrieval could almost be a matter of pulling strings. Tomorrow part of me will explore the world beneath my world where my diminutive mother, clinging to the guard rail of a strawberry basket, still goes on about her cousin's complexion as though nothing surprising has happened.