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Wes Berry

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## *Throw Down*

Wes Berry



I pulled into the driveway yesterday afternoon and there's my boy, Bojak, playing doll in the sandbox again. I jumped out and hollered, "Get yer ass outta that sandbox." My boy just looked at me, a naked Barbie dangling from his fingers. Two little neighbor girls prim in the sandbox cranked up the tears -- regular boo-hoo factories, knowing at five that a man can be brought down by a little moisture.

"Shut up," I said, and jerked Bojak up by the collar. Sand poured out his britches. The girls tossed their heads back and burnt my ears with screeching. I stooped and gathered up a handful of Barbies and started ripping limbs. A blond-haired head popped off and I threw it into the street. I ripped legs and arms and more heads. Had Barbie parts all over the place, on my truck hood, in the driveway. Scattered in the road like funky art, plastic titties without a head on top of skidded tire tread. Barbie! B-a-a-b-b-bie! Wahh, wahh! Even Bojak was snorting around, like he cared for some dolls. I slapped my hand onto his neck, gripped it hard, and walked him toward the house.

The squeal of tires caused my stomach to flip. Pictures of smushed girl rocketed through my head.



But she wasn't, thank god. One was squatting there in the street, screaming and picking up what's left of her dolls. The car missed her by a foot, its bumper just inches away from slamming her ripe noggin.

"I bout hit er!" the driver said. He was a fortyish man in an old Impala. "Whatsamatter with you," he yelled. "Cantcha keep yer kids outta the street?"

"She's not my kid," I said, and didn't have to explain any more, because the mother of the girl was then in my face making a real bitch of herself. Then my wife, having been waked from her soaps, was screeching in my ear, and my boy's crying and the girls' screaming.

I just turned and walked inside the house.

"You don't go tearing up little girls' Barbies." Cornelia lectured me while I sopped up pinto bean juice with cornbread.

"What's your problem?" I bet she said that ten times.

"You're too rough, you know that?" she said. "Just look at Bojak too scared to come out of his room."

"He may be crying now, but he'll thank me later," I told her. "A dick in the mouth is a nasty thing, and my boy won't suffer that," I said, and again fell into the old story.

His name was Tim, but the boys called him Timberly. His step was slight and springy, his speech high dainty. He was a favorite of Miss McInnis, the music teacher--had a fine pair of pipes

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on him, a clear singing voice that didn't crack like other boys' did.

He'd been better off if he'd stuck to singing.

Timberly's daddy, tough little nut--a real sports freak--insisted that the boy play football. Me and the other guys liked Timberly's dad a good bit. He came to all the games and joined us in the locker room afterward, handing out ice-crusted Cokes from a big cooler. He'd come up to me, eyes bugging out of his liquor-flushed face, and slap a cold drink into my hand. He'd grab my other hand and shake it and tell me how much he liked my touchdown run or how he heard the bones crunch when I slammed the opposing team's tailback into the wooden bleachers by the sidelines. The violence got him riled up more than anything. He really got off when I sent Knob Lick's quarterback away on a stretcher, with broken ribs. And when the ref threw me out for tackling a ball carrier on the blacktop beyond the sidelines, he rejoiced.

"Took his freakin head off! Skint him up good! His arms was bleedin like you knocked him through a glass winder." He ribbed me, patted my back, gave me affectionate shoulder punches.

\* \* \*

"Are you going on with that again?" Cornelia broke in. "I'm not even listening to you. Is this a story about your heroics? You going to tell me how girls hung on you like drapery? Or are you talking about that miserable boy . . ."

"Shhh, I'm not there yet," I told her. She passed cornbread. Sorghum and margarine melted

on my tongue. "You can't just jump into a story like that, you got to build," I said. She rolled those big ping-pong ball eyes of hers, sexy impatient harpy. I gave her a wink and kept on talking.

The team was a tough bunch to begin with. Most of us tossed bales of alfalfa and spiked stalks of tobacco all day in hundred-plus humidity. We didn't plop our asses in air-conditioned rooms and get soft like city boys. All our starters went both ways on the field, even on special teams. Only time I ever took a breather was on extra point kicks. We had gravel in our craws and hair on our chests. A few scrawny boys warmed the bench. Then there was Timberly, who wallowed on the ground and who, we suspicioned, went both ways too off the field.

Timberly wanted to quit three weeks into the season, but his old man wouldn't let him. We heard Timberly in Coach's office before practice, trying to whine himself off the team.

"Yer daddy called me and said you'd stick this thing out," Coach said. "World hates a quitter, Tim. Suck it up and go."

We couldn't understand where Timberly got his ways. One guy said maybe he'd been adopted, but I pointed out how Timberly looked just like his old man in the face, only pudgier. He was a blob of baby fat, soft as biscuit dough. I know because I felt the fat. And that was the worse thing.

Coach had a rule: everybody on the field by 3:00 or extra running for all. We had ten puny minutes after third bell to get out of our street clothes and into our gear. When Timberly refused to

put his pads on, we did the only thing we could do. We dressed him ourselves.

He cried like a wet baby. I held him up from the back, the crook of my elbows hooked under his moist pits, my hands pressed into the flab underneath his titties. Sunlight filtered in through tall windows and onto the bleachers where we dressed. Our struggling broke the strange afterschool quiet of the gym.

"Stop," Timberly blubbered over and over between heaves and shortness of breath. His face was red with white splotches.

"Huh eeeshh huh eeeshh huh eeeshh!" A long moan slid from Timberly's throat and bounced around the gym. Drool dripped from his bottom lip onto my forearm. Jolly and Golden had him by the waist. Jolly fumbled with Timberly's belt buckle, his hands shaking so bad he couldn't get it loosened. Golden's fingers grasped the top of the jeans above the belt loops, ready to peel them away from Timberly's body.

"Hurryup, he's getting heavy," I said. My back strained under Timberly's bulk, while Jolly jerked with the buckle.

"Holdjer horses," he said.

Jolly finally got the buckle undone. Golden pulled the jeans to Timberly's ankles. The team cheered us on as we raced the clock.

"What time ya got?" Jolly asked. My watch was covered with Timberly's slobber.

"Five minutes!" someone yelled. I tightened my hold and lifted Timberly to where his feet were dangling. His body was a limp dishrag. His bare ass

brushed against my jeans. The eggheads above us made sweetheart jokes.

"Get those pants on em, hurryup!" I said. Shrill whistles and catcalls bounced off the gym walls. Jolly fumbled with a jock strap.

"Fuck the jock and get those pants on em," I said.

"Watch your language--the kids," my wife broke in.

"They hear it enough on that goddam television," I said. She started to get up from the table.

"Alright, I'll tone it down," I said. I swear a man can't even tell a story anymore without someone telling him how to tell it.

They got the padded pants on him, and I loosened my grip. Timberly's body fell and seemed to sink into that pile of clothing on the bleachers. He started wailing.

"I hate you," he burst out, twisting his body, while I pushed down on his shoulders and Golden wrestled cleats onto his feet.

The gym was quiet now, except for Timberly's moaning. The other players were dressed and gone to the field. Only three more minutes and we'd be late and have to run extra. Coach had no patience for pussying around. He'd been a Marine. He was the spittin image of Abe Lincoln in those black and whites, especially when fed up. If you jerked around in history, Coach stared deep and hard over his desk. His thick, black eyebrows slanted inward and his

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head ballooned down on you and he'd say, "Join me outside, Mr. So-and-So," and some silly fool had to bend over in front of the doorway for all to watch, while Coach tattooed his ass. Coach drilled holes in his paddle to cut down on wind resistance. He'd rare back that sinewy arm that once carried an M-16 in Nam and blast it forward. The impact lifted boys off the ground and echoed through the halls. He'd wind up a second and third time and plaster the backs of both thighs.

Boys were fond of showing off their Cochran tattoos in the showers, red whelps punctuated with white holes like slices of Swiss. I had my share of em. That sweet pain hurled me into new dimensions. History achieved new significance after a whipping. I became a warrior and bled with fighting men at Shiloh.

The clock was ticking. We had two minutes to be on the field. Golden stretched his neck out the window.

"Hurryup, Coach is lookin at his watch," he said. Jolly jammed shoulder pads down over Timberly's head. Timberly thrashed and backhanded me upside my ear, which was already numb from his screaming. I grabbed a helmet by the face mask and set it on Timberly's head, then shoved it down. It about ripped his ears off. He let out a squeal to break the lights in the scoreboard.

When we tried to walk Timberly out of the gym, he made his body limp like kids will do when they don't want to behave. His legs were like jelly. Jolly, that hefty farm bastard, lifted Timberly over his shoulder and packed him like a sack of feed



down the steps. I scrambled to get my cleats on and followed.

Running down the steps, I noticed the other boys already lined up for jumping jacks. Timberly was wallowing on his back at the bottom of the stairwell, wailing.

"Pick em up!" I said.

"He's too heavy; I got off balance," said Jolly.

"Grab his feet then, I'll get his shoulders."

We jogged onto the field, with the body dangling between us like a hammock. We dropped Timberly on the earth at the back of the formation and ran to our places in front and faced the team.

"You men are draggin ass today," Coach yelled, after a long blow on his whistle. "Twenty exter laps after practice, for everbody."

Beautiful world, we saw some ferocious hitting that day. Every player boned up for a killing. There was growling and gnashing of teeth. The huddle was a pressure cooker. Even the lazy second-string players wanted some tail.

Coach put Timberly on the scab team at defensive guard, right across from 220-lb. Mackey Maupin. Coach yelled out the plays.

"Buck dive right!" he yelled, and we ran it right down Timberly's throat. First, Big Mackey bowling over him like a tractor-trailor. Then me, carrying the ball on Mack's heels, trampling over Timberly's stomach.

"Whaaaaaa!" Timberly squirmed on his back like a cut nightcrawler.

"Get up Tim!" Coach bellowed. "Suck it up like a man!"

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Timberly sucked it up, sure enough. He sucked up more snot and dirt than any player on the team. He lifted himself up from the earth and crouched like a bullfrog, both hands and knees on the ground: not ready for action, just filling the gap.

We huddled up.

"Buck dive right!" Coach yelled. The quarterback called the play. The guys were out of breath and snickering at the fun of it. Behind each facemask, bared teeth and lips stretched wicked.

"Stomp his pussy ass," somebody said.

We plunged through the gap again. Timberly remained on his back this time and refused to get up.

"Buck dive right!" Coach yelled. Coach's face was a big bloody boil. He had fire in his eyes, grit in his teeth. He was enjoying the show.

Timberly's stomach was like damp moss as my cleats dug into it.

"I hate you Mr. Cochran!" Timberly screamed over and over, through it all. Timberly's pain was musical. It pushed us to new levels, where we had to slice through a planet of high notes to get to the real stuff, the smashing of bodies and helmets. We'd line up to run a new series, enveloped in superhuman squealing. It was like being at a heavy metal show, where guitar gods blast bone-crushing noise and electrify nerves for slamming. It was near impossible to make out the quarterback's cadence. We were in surround sound. Timberly's agony fueled our fire. We got our payback for those extra laps around the field. We loved it. Coach too. He ate that shit up.

"Are you about finished?" Cornelia interrupted me again. "I got to clean this table," she said.

"Yeah, just about," I said. "Now listen up, because this is the worst part."

That afternoon after practice, after running the extra laps and practicing some extra point kicks, I walked through the locker room on my way to the showers. Crumpton was sitting in a chair against the wall, with Timberly on his lap. Both were in their underwear. Crumpton had his biceps under Timberly's armpits and his forearms locked behind Timberly's head in a nelson. Timberly cried and struggled but couldn't move much, while Jay Hicks straddled their legs and slapped his pecker against Timberly's lips and chin.

"Suck it, big boy!" Hicks yelled. The last I saw before walking into the showers was Timberly's outraged eyes like ping-pong balls in a pool of tomato sauce, and his blubbering lips being strummed by Hicks.

"Thank God," Cornelia said, already scooping plates from the table.

"What's that mean?"

"It means your tale went on a supper too long," she said. She balanced plates on one upturned hand and cradled the tea jug against her breast.

"Why don't you give me a swig of that tea?" I said. "I'm feeling a bit thirsty."

Cornelia walked away toward the kitchen. In a minute she was back. She didn't say anything but

filled my tea glass. Her eyebrows were crinkled up. She's got a lot of spittfire in her, Cornelia does. I put my hand on the small of her back, and she pulled away.

I said, "Forget those dishes a while. Right now, let's you and me trip on into the weight room. I'm contemplating a coup of your innards."

Cornelia stared me dead.

"You didn't help him?" she said. "You just walked right past?"

"What?"

"The boy," she said. "The one in the locker room."

"You still dwelling on that?"

"Why do you keep telling me these awful stories?"

"Listen," I said. "Boys will be boys. And my boy's going to be a boy. That's why he's not playing with dolls or taking piano lessons or acting in any school plays. He's growing up normal, by God."

That's what I told my wife yesterday, when I layed down the law.

I didn't get any trim last night. Cornelia said the romance had been sapped right out of her by my story.

Oh hell.

I might die horny defending manliness.