

# Biting



the

# Bullet



Essays on the Courage of Women



*Honorable Mention - Alphabetic Order*

**Wendy Bilen**

Maryland

Wendy Bilen is the author of the award-winning biography-memoir *Finding Josie*. She earned an MFA in creative nonfiction from George Mason University, and her essays, articles, and photography have appeared in several newspapers and journals. The Ragdale Foundation and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities have also recognized her work. She lives in the Washington, DC, area where she teaches writing at the women's college of Trinity Washington University.

### On the Range

The first time a gun goes off, my body jerks as if on strings. I am wearing the issued muffs, but the sound shoots from barrel to target, scattering across the concrete and back into my head. Stacey and I look at each other. The shots continue, one after another, and I twitch and jump, live with nerves.

We are colleagues, professors of English and psychology. We have come to this gun range because Stacey purchased a Groupon, and because our marriages have disintegrated, mine beyond mending. The husbands know we have come. We do not talk it up online or take pictures, conscious of how it could look, what it could imply, now or at any point in the future: evidence of that which does not exist.

Stacey's husband plans to move out. My husband is already gone, having moved seven hundred miles back to Chicago. The marriage has wilted me. I no longer recognize my voice. I question my decisions, leaning on my shopping cart for minutes in the supermarket while I debate which brand of sliced cheese to buy.

I had trouble finding the range, which lies nestled within an industrial park outside Washington, DC, next to a marsh with a noticeable absence of wildlife. I pulled into a spot facing the marsh and turned off the car. Immediately the muffled popping of gunfire poked holes in the silence. I caught peripheral movement through the passenger window, men and women hoisting large firearm cases over their shoulders, and wondered: who are these people?

Stacey had not yet arrived, but concerned about looking suspicious I opted to wait inside. I remember the building as corrugated metal, even as a dull yellow, but neither is right. It was straight up grey concrete, which makes more sense on every level. The door, black and off-center, seemed disproportionately small, squinty, as if whispering, *psst, over here.*

Inside, the surprising space and unsurprising sterility of a warehouse. Muted fluorescent light, the kind that reveals every imperfection, hung suspended over rows of glass counters in a digital configuration. I wandered as if shopping at Tiffany's, entranced but not daring to linger, badge holders and gun cleaners and lock pickers rather than gold pendants and engravable key chains. Target choices lined the wall: zombies, pigs, mobsters. Near the door, cheap plastic chairs remained where customers had left them after sharing a Coke from the machine and maybe a show-and-tell over cheap plastic tables. A strange amalgamation, this place. Mostly it reminded me of pavilions at the fair, where 4-H members display their prize pigs and hand-sewn dresses and the sweet greasy smell of funnel cakes drifts in from outside.

I stated my vow in a rose garden north of Chicago on an overcast September afternoon, slow and emphatic, meaning every word, after the ceremony reinforcing the having and holding with, 'Let's never mention divorce.' I had been divorced. I have routinely told people that my first husband left me for another woman, a story true but oversimplified. I loved him. Everyone loved him. We spent nine years together—high school, college, his graduate school—and then he informed me by the glow of the Christmas tree that the status of our marriage had become *to be determined.* After weeks of this

indecision, gutted, I demanded he move out, a charade intended to halt the madness, draw out the reassurance that he would never leave, and melt us back together. Instead he called my bluff, using my desperation as the running start toward freedom, and, as it turned out, another married woman. Admittedly I had not been an easy partner. I had problems; I got depressed. But he was studying to be a therapist, and I kind of believe that if anyone should have understood, it was him.

When I crawled out from the dark tangle of grief that had nearly persuaded me not to return, I recalibrated. I don't need all the romance, I told myself. I just need someone to walk through life with. I don't need—don't want—a handsome or popular man who might be lured away by a sweeter smile, sharper wit, kinder heart.

I lacked experience at dating casually. During eight years of high school and college I had dated exactly two boys and married one of them. A hopeless believer in lost causes, I felt great distress at ending any relationship once it started. If someone chose me, I was all but doomed.

Into this flimsiness stumbled the anti-ex-husband. Though he had eight years on me, words tripped out of him without the crescendos or decrescendos of social convention, and he didn't seem to notice or care. A purist, he read widely and could dialogue intelligently on the Grateful Dead, the stock market, Hemingway, foreign policy, or wiring an electrical switch. He had been a Marine, had worked in construction, politics, and finance. He laid out his career goal: to redevelop communities from within the banking industry. He gave without reservation to the homeless, volunteered whole Saturdays to charity building projects, wore unraveling sweaters to parties. Worldly, sandpapery, benevolent, an

enigma—and he wanted me. Fascinated and flattered, I let myself be drawn in even as I reached for the glue.

Stacey handed over the Groupon. A chunky twentysomething with a buzz cut and a square peg through his earlobe set the gun and a box of bullets down, pivoting quickly, almost as if slinging a burger and fries. With a counter at shoulder height, the revolver lay inches from my face. A Taurus .38 Special. It surprised me with its long round barrel and curved wood handle, a prop that belonged in the hands of Clint Eastwood.

Brandon picked the gun back up, turning it over in his hands as he talked us through its anatomy. He clicked open the chamber, spun it, stopped it. After shaking a few shiny brass bullets from the box, he showed us how to slide them in. This gun, he noted, has no safety. Stacey and I exchanged a look.

Over in the practice booth, an imitation of things to come, he showed us how to stand. Plant your feet shoulder width apart. Lock your elbow so that the shot travels up your arm. Look through the sights, one in the middle, two on the outside. Many women like to cock the hammer halfway, which makes shooting easier. What most people aren't used to, he emphasized, is the sound.

In my hands the weight of the revolver makes it feel more real than any toy I've ever held, much more than a blue squirt gun that spews icy water from the hose or a cap gun loaded with dotted paper lines or grey plastic molded to look like metal for boys playing war. This is the temptress for stewing minds and idle hands, the destroyer of lives.

Armed guards and sharpshooters stand watch over important people at important sites not far from where I live and work: outside the White House, atop the Capitol, in

motorcades of black SUVs. Neither semiautomatic handguns strapped to the belts of city law enforcement officers nor M-16s resting on the hips of Secret Service surprise me anymore, but my eyes still travel down to the weapon.

The odd reality: guns are everywhere and nowhere. I look but don't touch, so they stay familiar and foreign, someone else's power. I don't think of it as power, and I like to believe that if someone pulled a gun on me, I would not be afraid. (*What can man do to me?*) But I have been shaken by far less, so such an assumption collapses under its naiveté. I could have the power if I wanted it, but I don't want it. I don't want a gun in my house, don't want to go hunting, don't want to use one, ever, so why did I volunteer to come with Stacey, and why do I think that shooting a gun will make me feel better?

I recognized early in my second marriage, within weeks, that *union* was optimistic and talked myself out of the feelings of rejection my new husband's partitions evoked in me. So he closes the door to the bathroom. So he insists on folding his own laundry, buying his own deodorant and toothpaste. I considered these partitions cardboard symptoms of adjustment, those of a bachelor over forty, from a reserved Scandinavian family, a man who had lived alone for a long time. Surely they would bend and tear and eventually go out with the trash.

In some ways he employed the saccharine and superficial cuteness of early courtship, and in others, shifted into low idle. As if on cue, compliments stopped almost completely, except in cards adorned with bears and hearts on birthdays and anniversaries and Valentine's Day. He recoiled at my hands on his shoulders, touching me only when he wanted sex. He refused to shelve his books with mine, would not let me make his lunch for work, often talked to the dog more than he talked

to me. Instead of relaxing into each other, we retained a terse, tense formality. I could not understand why our lives weren't merging and sobbed without sound, clutching the sheet in the dark as his breathing slowed and he fell asleep.

Efforts to talk it through ended badly. He felt attacked, engulfed by overly high expectations, and I felt I had not loved him enough.

I remembered a conversation in his garden apartment before we married. His parents concerned me, I said. I had cringed at the relationship between his mother, so fragile, nearly apologizing for her existence, and his father, who barked at her and repeated the same few stories on an endless loop. I did not want to end up with a marriage like theirs: silent, seemingly strained.

'That's not going to happen,' he had said.

At our house in Northeast DC, I sometimes heard gunshots. I tried to convince myself they were firecrackers, maybe, or something automotive. But I had seen the squad cars speeding down our street, a blur of blue and red, and had caught the stories in the *Post*. My husband came to loathe that house, DC, and the East Coast, longing to return to the Midwest. We loved Illinois, home to us both for most of our lives, but left shortly after getting married simply because we wanted to do something different. I got homesick first, but he convinced me to wait it out, to move from the suburbs in Virginia to the city itself. We bought a fixer-upper. I finished an MFA and graduated with a full-time college teaching job and book contract in hand.

In his way, he had supported me during the long process of discovering my life's work and supported me still, though inconsistently and with methods I could not understand. He

would research something I mentioned during dinner or be quick to help with questions that arose as I wrote, but I received no word of congratulations or hug when I met him on the front step with the first copy of my book. He would buy my favorite Italian chocolates just because, leaving them in a drawer or on the counter, but frequently he would not acknowledge me when I walked into the house after we had been apart for a day or longer.

I had theories.

The house. The house had launched a full attack, cracking, spouting water, sinking, and revealing secrets that revealed more secrets, all of which involved work that we did ourselves. In the evenings and on weekends, we hammered, mudded, painted, and tiled, dragging carloads of plaster to the dump.

His job. He had reached his mid-forties and still held positions that did not allow him to fulfill his passion for rebuilding communities. He was working his way there, he said, but since I met him he had been through at least ten jobs. Each one started with promise, but when *They don't know what they're doing* surfaced during dinner, I knew it was a matter of time.

Our news. I could not have children.

The common denominator: me.

Let's take a break from the house, I said, or even pay someone. Normal people pay people. Get a job you want, I said. Take the pay cut. We'll figure it out. He would not entertain this reasoning. He still would not let me get him a soda from the refrigerator.

The same frustrations that stirred dissatisfaction within him bound me to that place. An inverse correlation, my

colleagues tell me. Yes, we tore the second floor down to its studs, but we built it back up again. Despite faltering my way through the first few semesters, politically and pedagogically, I had the chance every day to instill confidence, life skills, and value in dozens of under-resourced young women as I taught them how to write. Sometimes they ignored me, resisted, and/or disappeared, but some tried, and some learned. I knew that I was doing something very important, and I was good at it. I felt myself settle into the house and the city. For the first time in years, I felt anchored, and for the first time in my life, I didn't think of my job as a job. I felt alive. Free. When I lived in Illinois, restaurants and streets and parks—nearly everything, really—reminded me of what I had lost. Here, North Capitol Street and the gelato at the National Gallery belonged not to my ex-husband, not to my ex-marriage, but to me, and to my now-life, a life crafted from perseverance.

We worked on our house and edged toward adopting a child through the DC foster care system. We drove downtown for training sessions with other would-be foster parents, rolled our fingers for prints, completed long questionnaires (*How likely are you to take a child with fetal alcohol syndrome?*), did whatever needed doing to be someone's forever family.

On 08.08.08 an eleven-year-old girl moved in. Lanky, sassy, clingy, and moody, she had problems. I still believed in the possibility of my marriage, but problems + problems = more problems. Instead of seeing her behaviors for what they were, the inclinations of a very troubled child, my husband took them personally. He said he needed to see more improvement. She said she wanted another father. He set a deadline. She didn't meet it. She wanted out. He said to give it to her. I knew she didn't want out. I knew exactly what she

wanted because I had wanted the same thing from both of my husbands: to hear the words, 'I love you more than I can say, and I'm not going anywhere.'

Another problem: I saw her as my daughter, and I did love her more than I could say.

He made me choose: him or her. Because she was not legally our daughter yet, I couldn't choose her—take a still-foster child and leave my husband?—so I went along with his argument that she didn't want to live with us, and she left after nine months. When she drove away with the social worker, part of me and a big part of my marriage dragged along behind the van, the remains mangled and unrecognizable.

During a momentary pause in the shooting, Stacey and I open the black metal door and carry our .38 Special, box of bullets, and complimentary targets into the range, looking for booth 11. The frigid air startles me. On the walls, black foam in a parquet pattern. On the floor, a steel grate over a concrete pit, alive with the gleam of bullet casings. White noise seems to fill the headphones that aren't headphones, like the far-off sound of the sea in a shell.

Three men in booth 12 begin firing semi-automatic handguns. I cannot see them fully because of the partial walls, but I see enough to know they do not flinch. I cannot stop flinching. I focus on their paper target, some ten yards away, and watch the holes appear. The black silhouette turns into a sieve. Casings fly into our booth, bouncing off the counter and the walls with a steady echo: bass, treble.

Unfamiliar and a little disoriented, we peer and twist, deducing and concluding so that we can do the work we have come to do. We spot a small digital box on the wall and tentatively press one of the buttons. The holder flies toward us,

We clip the target to the holder and press another button. The target rushes away, trying to keep up.

Stacey goes first. She hits above the shoulder. She pauses, considers, looks back at me, and then fires again. Still too high. The gun pulls her arms upward with the recoil.

Watching her, I think of Brian Turner's poem, 'Here, Bullet.' I remember the scene in 'Salvador' when Joan Didion reaches into her purse on a deserted sidewalk and suddenly hears the cocking of guns up and down the street. I think of the boy in *96 Minutes* who uses the power of a gun to avoid paying for his chips, of *Unforgiven*, when Clint Eastwood really is holding a prop.

I think about people who live with this sound, without headphones, and the nervous silence in between: soldiers, civilians, some of my students. In my head swirl images of children hypnotized by a screen, their faces contorting and their hands an intense orchestration of *staccato* and *presto* (points for death).

Stacey hands the gun to me.

He didn't want to talk about losing our child. As I sat crumpled in tears, the marriage counselor, visibly exasperated, said to him, 'Can't you come alongside her as she grieves?' He had no idea what that meant.

It's not that he *wouldn't* do these things I expected, he said, but that he *couldn't*. He *couldn't* ask about my life, respond to my touch, grieve with me—and *couldn't* change. A good man, who loved me, who couldn't do the things required to develop intimacy in a marriage: it's not that I *wouldn't* but that I *couldn't* understand.

He lost his job. He left our church. After eighteen months, despite my protests, he took a position in Chicago. We

could adopt, he said, if I left my teaching job and my church, and my friends, and our home. He would not negotiate. Everything in DC had come to represent all that was wrong with our marriage, that which had soured and poisoned us. We had planned to leave DC, but that was before. I didn't want to let go of my work or my home without a child—for whom I now knew I would go anywhere. Now he placed before me another choice: my marriage or my life's work, a family or my home. I didn't know if I could believe him when he said a child was forthcoming.

For another year and a half, I stayed in DC while I tried to find a life for myself in Chicago. I prayed, wondered if I was being selfish, looked for every possible way to keep gripping that which was slipping away again. But *he couldn't*. Somehow the responsibility of the decision, like a grenade, tossed, still landed at *my* feet. I did not want to hurt him, to end another marriage, to effectively leave someone when I knew what it was like to have someone leave me. Friends, family, pastors, and coworkers said to me, 'But Wendy, *he* left.' That somehow did not add up to enough.

Broken, I finally said no more and pulled the trigger.

Gun raised before me, I peer down the barrel, which leads to the target like an estuary to the sea. As I line up the sights, my body tenses, knowing, and I curl my finger until the trigger gives. The force races up my arms to my shoulders, the tiny explosion of powder and metal powerful and, for the moment, in control.

The first time I shoot, I hit the heart. Twice.

I shoot again, again, again, losing track of how many bullets I have left. The barrel heats and sends up a thread of



smoke. I get worse instead of better, aiming low and hitting high.

There is only the target, the gun, and me. It seems surreal, childish, a small, desperate fusion of wood and steel, and I feel nothing but a terrible awareness of the power in my grip.

I want to keep shooting, but I also want the noise to stop.

The noise does stop when we run out of bullets and when I inform the judge there is no hope for reconciliation.

I tell my husband, 'All I wanted was you.'

He replies, 'You had me.'

I believe in a God with power far greater than our need, but that power has not worked in my marriage. Twice. Of course not: power cannot coexist with love. Despite all this talk of women's rights and American dreams, I cannot will a man to know me or pray him into staying. The first time, I gave myself so completely that I nearly died when he left. The second time, I nearly died because I stayed. I morphed into something I could not recognize, my self pushed down and hid, corseted, the me who had not had a chance to become. My life, a loaded gun that stood in the corner until they came and carried me away.

You can't unshoot a gun, unhear the noise, unpierce the target. You can forgive. You can choose to hold hope close, to survive, to avoid turning the gun on yourself.

*Honorable Mention - Alphabetic Order*

**Colleen Lutz Clemens**

Pennsylvania



Colleen Lutz Clemens is the editor of several books of non-fiction including *Philadelphia Reflections: Stories from the Delaware to the Schuylkill* and has published short essays in various collections such as *Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists*. Her work on miscarriage and infertility has been published in

the magazine *TRIVIA* and the collection *Three Minus One*. She writes about writing, mothering, and culture for *Scary Mommy*, *Literary Mama*, *Noodle*, *bitchflicks*, and *feministing*. Colleen lives in Bucks County, PA, with her partner, dogs, and daughter and can be reached via her blog [kupoco.wordpress.com](http://kupoco.wordpress.com).