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—Contributor.....Gen Louise Mangiaratti
—Contributor email.....genlouisemang@gmail.com
—For section.....The Arts
—Format.....Column
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Excellent job, Gen. Lede works!

—You’ll see in the interview that I removed some filler words and took more license in converting voice to readable printed word. It’s always a judgment call, but if I stumbled reading it cold, I tweaked it.

—Also, I removed the identifier of the cheerleader captain. Williamstown is a small-enough town that changing the name isn’t enough, if she intends to anonymize the story.*

—I needed a sentence or two for the column format. If you would like to rewrite it, I would be happy for you to do so. When we do columns or interviews, I can pick up bios easily, so it can be your official Commons bio and you can change it anytime or adapt it to the context of the content it’s accompanying. It would be nice to have a thumbnail photo to go with it — it helps differentiate the design of the columns from straight news — but that’s optional.

* When WSESD fired Steve Perrin over accusations of weird-ass behavior, the accuser spoke to Ginny on condition of anonymity. When I edited the story, I called Ginny and said, “Is Jane Doe’s name [Name]?” It was. I figured it out based on the fact that Ginny wrote that she was living with her father, who had cancer, in the Brooks House at the time of the fire (which was relevant to the charges against Perrin, who tried to retaliate against her and threatened to withhold her diploma because school books were destroyed in the fire).

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 ‘Undulating between womanhood and childhood’

####END HED####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

2 Brattleboro poet Diana Whitney's 'Girl Trouble' is a
3 nostalgic, empowering collection

#####END SUBHED#####

4 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

5 A POEM BY Brattleboro writer Diana Whitney introduces a
6 narrator clad in a bandana, slinky bracelets, and "the pearly jelly
7 flats everyone craved." When she gets laughed at by mulleted,
8 bra-snapping "JT," she takes revenge by striking him out in gym
9 class softball.

10 JT's friends boo him, and as our protagonist relishes in
11 her victory, a spaceship explodes on live TV.

12 This childhood recollection of the 1986 Challenger
13 disaster is one of many visceral moments in the poems that make
14 up Whitney's fourth book, *Girl Trouble*, published April 7 by
15 CavanKerry Press.

16 "What I love about poetry is its compression, and how
17 language is heightened," Whitney said in a recent Zoom call. "It
18 really allows me to just focus right in, on a line at a time or word
19 at a time, and really take that care, and find that precision."

20 Whitney, a teen in the 1980s through early '90s, places
21 us in time with minute details, such as clothing, patterns, and
22 products tied to certain eras. Now 52, she draws inspiration over
23 the course of her life, from coming of age as a queer youth in a
24 small New England town through becoming a mother of
25 daughters.

26 Born in England, her family moved to Washington, D.C.,
27 when she was 2. She spent her childhood in the nation's capital,
28 and the family moved again to Williamstown, Massachusetts,
29 where Whitney spent her middle and high school years.

30 “There was, in a way, a sense of freedom, compared to
31 maybe today,” Whitney said of what in one poem she refers to as
32 the “unsupervised ‘80s.”

33 “It was before the digital age, but it was also a really hard
34 time to be someone who was different. I was very much in the
35 closet as a queer kid, even to myself.”

36 Her first relationship, she said, was with her best friend
37 in seventh grade.

38 “That was a shameful secret that was very defining for
39 me in Williamstown, in this small town,” she said. “And so, there
40 are some poems about that.”

41 Whitney also writes of living through sexual violence
42 and highlights the stories of other survivors in a section titled
43 “Open Secret.”

44 “I wanted to amplify the voices of survivors, to really
45 show that my story and my experiences are totally not unique,”
46 she said. “I wanted to really shine a light on this epidemic —
47 pandemic, I guess — of violence against girls and women.”

48 A resident of Brattleboro since 2005, Whitney started
49 writing the book during the height of the pandemic, just as
50 allegations of longtime abuse by a former Brattleboro teacher
51 were in the news.

52 “I started to see the way institutions had failed survivors,
53 and that was what I wanted to convey in that section,” she said of
54 “Open Secret,” which, out of the book’s four sections, contains
55 arguably its heaviest material.

56 “It’s not just the open secret of, for example, Epstein’s
57 global empire of sex trafficking and crimes against children, but
58 it’s this open secret that can happen right here in our
59 community.”

60 Mindy Haskins Rogers, who in 2021 authored a piece
61 [[“Breaking the silence,”](#) Voices, Aug. 11, 2021] detailing the
62 reported abuses in Brattleboro, said she is eager to read *Girl*
63 *Trouble*.

64 “Diana writes the everyday violence of women’s lives
65 with so much force and grace that we can’t look away. And why
66 would we want to — her poems are vivid and beautiful, even as
67 they reveal brutalities,” Rogers, a writer in Northampton,
68 Massachusetts, said in an email.

69 Michelle Dussault, of South Newfane, a writer who has
70 shared work with Whitney for 15 years, said when she thinks
71 about Whitney’s poetry, she feels like she’s outside.

72 “I can feel the sun. I can feel the elements, the
73 dewdrops. She infuses the natural world into all of her work. But
74 then there’s also nostalgia and these vignettes from childhood
75 and motherhood,” Dussault said. “She’s just got this beautiful way
76 of undulating between womanhood and childhood.”

77 While preparing for the release of *Girl Trouble*, Whitney
78 took some time to talk with *The Commons* about her beginnings
79 as a young poet, reclaiming her queer youth through writing,
80 Courtney Love, and “jump scare” lines.

81 * * *

82 **Gen Louise Mangiaratti:** How did you start writing
83 poetry?

84 **Diana Whitney:** Even as a child, I loved books and
85 reading. My mom read to us a lot. As a child, I was really lucky to
86 be well-loved and nurtured, and stories and poems and language
87 were really part of growing up.

88 So I started writing really early, like in elementary school.
89 I would have journals, and I would write short stories, mostly for
90 school.

91 There were some young poems that I did, probably
92 acrostic, where you make your name and you do the letters. But I
93 really discovered poetry in junior high, which is, you know, what
94 we call middle school.

95 During that time that I was writing about in the book, of
96 coming of age, it was one of the hardest times of my life. I
97 struggle with depression, cyclically, and it really began around
98 that age: 12, 13.

99 For me, poetry was a real outlet, and it was often very
100 private. I would write it in my journal.

101 Again, I was lucky to have a wonderful mother.
102 Sometimes I would share something with her, and she would be
103 very affirming, tell me it was wonderful — which is what you
104 should always say to a young person who's writing.

105 Then in high school, I started sharing more, with some
106 wonderful English teachers who supported me. I was editor of a
107 literary magazine in high school.

108 It was really in college that I became more serious. I was
109 a creative writing major and found my mentors there.

110 **G.L.M.:** Can you talk about the poems that explore your
111 experience of coming of age as a queer individual?

112 **D.W.:** I kind of thread them through. "After School with
113 D'aulaires' Book of Greek Myths" is a childhood poem, but it
114 was really clear to me when I was doing this project of
115 excavating my own childhood and girlhood that I was a queer
116 kid.

117 I had sort of crushes on all my best friends — it wasn't
118 romantic. It's presexual. That poem is really about celebrating that
119 and also the sort of confusion around it.

120 The same with "I Bring My Secret Home from Junior
121 High." That's the secret — the best friend. There's a lot of darkness
122 in that poem. There's that line in that poem: "the ache to trade
123 bodies with another girl. What witchery is this?"

124 Once we get into the last section of the book, which is
125 "Praise the Ending," that's where it's more the reclaiming that I
126 felt I was writing through towards the end of the book. I
127 discovered that some of these hardest times that I'd had — junior
128 high, high school, college? I could actually go back and rewrite
129 them.

130 "Prom After-Party Revisited" is me getting to hook up
131 with my girl crush at the prom, instead of just going with a
132 sympathy date and pretending, like I had to do back in 1991. It

133 was me getting to imagine what that would have been like. And
134 it's totally exhilarating.

135 At the end, there's one of my favorite ones, "My 16-Year-
136 Old Self Makes Out with Jaimie Rossi." The first line is, "Forget
137 the football team. I watched the cheerleaders."

138 She was a real person — I changed her name. She was
139 incredible. Back before we talked at all about gender, she was
140 dressing up as Axl Rose, and it was so hot and so bold.

141 So I got to reimagine myself as a sophomore, 16 years
142 old. What if I could have expressed that desire and curiosity? As a
143 middle-aged woman, it's really empowering and healing to get to
144 feel like, through your writing, through your own imagination,
145 that you can actually have a do-over.

146 Another one was "My 17-Year-Old Self Gets Voted Best
147 Body," where I kind of position myself as kind of like a Wonder
148 Woman character in a rainbow bikini who goes back into the
149 halls of the high school. It's a little bit tongue-in-cheek.

150 **G.L.M.:** How much of this book would you say is
151 autobiographical?

152 **D.W.:** One of the things I love about poetry is: It's not
153 nonfiction. It's not memoir. If you write a memoir, you're really
154 coming out and saying, "This is fact to the best of my memory."

155 I do write from personal experience. There are elements
156 that are very much autobiographical, but there are also multiple
157 speakers that you can have in poetry. Some of them echo my own
158 experience, and some of them don't. There are daughters in the
159 book. Some of them are echoes of my own daughters and what
160 they've been through, and some of them are not.

161 One of the beauties of poetry as a genre is that there are
162 really so many possibilities. There are so many forms, so many
163 things you can do with these different voices and speakers.

164 [Some are what] I guess you might call "persona poems," or
165 poems that are actually in the voices of the Epstein survivors.

166 Those are clearly not me.

167 **G.L.M.:** *Girl Trouble* contains an acrostic poem that
168 references Courtney Love. Can you talk about the inspiration
169 behind it?

170 **D.W.:** Her band Hole put out a really seminal album in
171 1994. I was an activist in college, and it was a very formative
172 time, kind of that riot grrrl, punk ethos. She's a survivor. She
173 wrote really openly and with a lot of rage and power about
174 surviving sexual violence.

175 I put the lyrics to the song ["Asking for It"] — "Was she
176 asking for it? / Was she asking nice? / Did she ask you for it? / Did
177 she ask you twice?" — down the side of the poem and made an
178 acrostic from it.

179 We hear that phrase of blaming victims. It's still
180 everywhere. It permeates the culture.

181 So that was my way of being playful about it and paying
182 homage to Courtney Love and Hole.

183 **G.L.M.:** This is more of an observation than a question.
184 Your poems contain something similar to lyrics by Liz Phair and
185 Taylor Swift. Some people call them "jump scare" lines. For
186 example, the line about the Challenger exploding while you were
187 in gym class. You also have a poem where a young girl says, "It
188 happened to me, it happened when I was 12," which reminds me
189 of a Liz Phair song where she says, "even when I was 12."

190 **D.W.:** Actually, I'm glad you mentioned Liz Phair
191 because — a huge influence, right? We're talking about that sort
192 of '90s, really raw. I think that line is actually a little bit of paying
193 homage.

194 One of the poems in the "Open Secret" section talks
195 about the ages of the victims: "Don't ask how they got there,
196 some young as 13, young as 11."

197 I want people to feel shocked. I want a reader to feel
198 shocked when they see those ages, because we should be. We
199 should be absolutely appalled and enraged and devastated that
200 this happened and is happening.

201 So I think you're right. I like that "jump scare" reference.
202 I don't want to shy away from that.

203 **G.L.M.:** How does it feel to see this collection of poems
204 go out into the world?

205 **D.W.:** Getting to share this work with the world is so
206 important for me, not because of my own story being special in
207 any way, but because I really want to shine the light on the
208 experience of girls and women, and the world that we want to
209 build: a world of safety, where we get to feel at home in our
210 bodies, where there's not threats of harm.

211 I've been very involved as an advocate for survivors right
212 here in this town. I want survivors to know that they're not alone,
213 and that there's incredible strength and resilience in telling our
214 stories and sharing them.

215 That is really part of my mission with *Girl Trouble* — to
216 use it as a jumping-off point and a place of springboard for
217 conversations about these issues, so they're not continually
218 silenced or swept under the rug.

219 * * *

220 A book launch, set for Friday, April 10, at 7:30 p.m. at
221 Next Stage Arts in Putney, will feature Whitney in conversation
222 with poet Eve Alexandra, followed by a dance party featuring
223 music from the '80s, '90s, and today.

224 There will be snacks, a cash bar, and books available to
225 purchase.

226 * * *

227 *Editor's note: Stories presented as interviews in this*
228 *format are lightly edited for clarity, readability, and space. Words*
229 *not spoken by interview subjects appear in brackets, as do*
230 *editorial clarifications.*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

231 **GEN LOUISE MANAGIARATTI** is the former arts and
232 entertainment editor for the *Brattleboro Reformer* and its sister
233 newspapers and worked in a variety of editorial roles at the
234 *Greenfield Recorder* and the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* in
235 Massachusetts.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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