

Rachel Romeo

## **Finding Balance: A Review of a “Lucky Girl” and her Journey of Self-Discovery**

Jane DiVita Woody. *Lucky Girl: Growing up Italian-American in Appalachia: A Memoir*. 2017.

Jane DiVita Woody’s memoir, *Lucky Girl*, reflects our modern fascination with cultural and gender identity. Awakened by her memories of growing up in a small dusty coal town in southern West Virginia as a second-generation Italian-American, Woody offers us a sense of who she is now and where she came from. Yet Woody’s memoir is not just a simple collection of her memories, but also an example of how our environment and the people directly involved in our lives contribute to who we become. While our heritage may be a major part of our identity, our family, community, and landscapes also shape who we become.

Woody carries some aspects of her family’s rich Italian culture into her adult life but grows to reject others. For example, traditional Italian foods spill over into her adult life, while her Catholicism wanes. Growing up, food was what often brought her family together, and she devotes an entire chapter to it. She writes, “In our household the evening meal was considered sacred”; the “spaghetti and meatballs were served family style, the pasta and tomato sauce mixed together, put on a large platter, and passed around.” She describes the openness of their house to family visitors and how she remembers “feeling happy belonging to all of these relatives.” Looking back, she longs for the rich, delicious foods that were then uncommon in West Virginia: ricotta cheese, artichokes, olives, and lupino beans. Her reflection on these traditions produces a desire to reconnect with her brothers as she explains their modern ritual of “mini-reunions” in their adult lives.

Despite these fond reminiscences, Woody also remembers her strong desire to escape the restrictions placed on her by her small town and overprotective father. From a young age her ambitions shattered the gender roles and expectations of her time. She describes herself as having a “high activity level,” and expresses her love for gym class in school. She recalls a dance performance and describes how that physicality gave her “a sense of power.”

Recognizing strength in one’s body wasn’t typical for girls of this time, and gender came to define much of Woody’s childhood as the only daughter of the family. She identified with the feminine roles in

the house as expected, helping her mother with daily household chores, but she also was an adventurous tomboy who wanted to play and fit in with the boys. She remembers not having as much freedom as her brothers: her father saw her “specialness as a girl,” which also labeled her as “vulnerable and in need of protection.” Reminiscing on her dating life, or lack thereof, she felt like her dad treated her like a “princess” who nobody was good enough to take out. Woody recalls having “to face the reality of being a girl” at a certain age, and she is able to find a balance between masculine and feminine roles. She writes, “being a tomboy as well as a girlie-girl turned out a good mix for me.”

Woody’s memoir also makes a statement about the impact of immigration. Immigrants, like her mother and father, brought with them a strong work ethic and desire to prove themselves. She recounts her “parents’ strong message: work hard, achieve, fit into American society, and honor yourself and your family.” This belief system trickled down into their family dynamic and daily lifestyle. Her father defined himself with his sense of duty, and even became an alcoholic in the face of failure. Woody carried a desire to conquer even from a young age, from the metal horizontal bars at the school playground to her desire to leave her small town for greater opportunity. Her ability to use education as her way out mirrors what her ancestors must have felt when they were brave enough to migrate to a new world.

I can relate to much of this memoir. I am a third-generation Italian-American girl who grew up and still lives in Appalachia. I was raised in a house with my parents and grandparents until I was around ten years old. My grandparents had a garden in our backyard, and we enjoyed the simple pleasures of life together. Our spaghetti dinner every Sunday, served family style, with our fresh garden tomato salad, was a tradition considered sacred. There were no exceptions for skipping. Like Woody, I carry with me happy memories of my Italian family, but also like Woody, I remember feeling a little lost in the vastness of it all emotionally, and I used my education to experience another way of life. Our Italian heritage is strong, beautiful, and full of passion, but the heavy family and societal expectations can often obscure our individual identities. It is only through having our own experiences that we can look back and appreciate where we came from. Woody’s memoir is a charming example of not only her appreciation for her family, but also her self-awareness as a feminist and pioneer in her own sense. She is, in fact, a “Lucky Girl.”

Jane DiVita Woody’s “The Football Game” appeared in *Kestrel* 36.

Douglas Van Gundy

## A Vessel Waiting to be Filled

Michael Dowdy. *Urbilly*. Main Street Rag, 2017.

You have to hand it to poet Michael Dowdy: he has some chutzpah. The first poem in his debut collection, *Urbilly*, (“The Urbilly’s Field Guide”) is a cento comprised of lines from “The Road,” Muriel Ruykeyser’s poem from her legendary and revered *The Book of the Dead*. It is a bold move for a young poet in a first book. Bolder still may be the second poem in the book, “Born on the Breath of a Sucker MC,” which mashes up hip-hop and hillbilly popular culture, and hinges around the stunning juxtaposition of the “X” of Spike Lee’s iconic Malcolm X shirt and the “X” of the Confederate battle flag (also seen on a t-shirt), acknowledging the permeability between the present and the past, and between local (read “Appalachian”) and national cultures. This strong beginning promises an eye-opening ride through the next eighty pages, and Dowdy doesn’t disappoint.

Throughout *Urbilly*, Dowdy explores the idea of a particular culture belonging to a particular place, but also being somehow portable. In his poems, kids in rural Virginia dress like their hip-hop heroes from television, sporting “Kangols / and chains fat as forearms” and moonwalk during little league games, while elsewhere Brooklyn hipsters nourish their apartment windowsill vegetable gardens with household compost.

Dowdy has a particular gift for quick characterization, and many of the strongest poems in this collection are portraits of singular, eccentric people, be they family members or neighbors. In “Chainsaw at the Pearly Gates,” the poet’s grandfather is conjured in closely-rendered braggadocio:

He would wind up his skinny arms  
and gather his calloused fingers  
into tight balls of bunched leather,  
fists dancing like marionettes  
teased and jerked by the god of want,  
then grin and boast that he’s so mean  
he’d yank up young corn by its roots  
and push baby chicks in the creek  
where they’d drown in a whirlpool of clucks.

In “Duke Teaches the Urbilly to Avoid Failure,” a worker in a Virginia mill comes to three-dimensional life in the negative space within Dowdy’s musical description of his workplace:

Duke mans a forklift between pallets and piles  
of casing stacked and wrapped in packing tape.  
Fans blow dust out the warehouse dock.

His footprints smack the millwork floor,  
pack the dirt and spit of ex-cons,  
men sure to die by drowning or drink.

While, as readers, we feel we know these people through Dowdy’s deft descriptions, we are left to wonder who, exactly, is the Urbilly of the title? It’s a bit of an intentional mystery. The Urbilly doesn’t really seem to be at home anywhere. He loves his mountains, but hungers for the culture of New York and Paris. He moves to the city, but craves nature, and is forced to settle for simulacra: Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal stands in for his native rivers in “Passing for Mountains,” and Central Park for his native forests and fields in “Silent Springs.” The Urbilly sometimes feels like an echo of “The Brier” in the late Jim Wayne Miller’s *The Brier Poems*: a mountain everyman with a particular view of the current state of things. But where Miller’s Brier is a fount, preaching and teaching and telling, the Urbilly is a vessel waiting to be filled, eager to take in wisdom of whatever kind, as in the poems “Slim Schools the Urbilly on Velocity,” “Wildman Gives the Urbilly a Lesson on Gravity,” and “To the Urbilly Bub Preaches Holy Fire.”

It is, of course, impossible to read these poems without assuming that the Urbilly is Dowdy himself, or at least a version of him. “The Urbilly Visits the Dump” begins: “In summers I balled Big Red / a flatbed truck loud as sunrise, / hauling scrap / from my father’s shop.” Later, in the excellent and more overtly autobiographical “Black Friday Pilgrimage,” there is another reference to working for his father:

Long ago I’d sold my twang for a song,  
fleeing north from my father’s family biz,  
yanking the surplus notes like wisdom teeth,  
hoping my hick would molt, its flakes a blur  
of Edison bulbs and other Brooklyn gems.

It’s nice to read “Appalachian” poems that are largely stripped of sentimentality and that don’t romanticize poverty. Dowdy manages

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to capture a common-enough struggle—the love of place, the need to leave, the desire to return—while managing to be both timeless and contemporary.

As a preface to the whole collection, Dowdy tells us the Urbilly was born in Virginia in 1988 and died in Brooklyn in 2014, and provides us with his epitaph:

He repped where he's from  
(when it wasn't where he sat).

He hyped where he'd been  
(when it bled from the map).

In this way, the Urbilly is like all of us who are caught between a love of home and a fascination with the larger world. Maybe Dowdy is making the bold suggestion that we don't have to choose one over the other. Maybe his Urbilly is teaching and preaching after all.

