

## CONTEMPORARY CARPETBAGGERS CALLING CAROLINA “HOME”

*a review by Erica  
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**Marjorie Hudson.** *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas.* Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2011.

**Valerie Nieman.** *Blood Clay.* Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2011.

*“You got to keep in mind he is a northerner. They does things different than us.”—William Faulkner, *The Hamlet**

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For any Southerner who’s ever wondered what it’s like to be a Yankee transplant, read *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas*, a short story collection by Marjorie Hudson, and *Blood Clay*, a novel by Valerie Nieman, both published in 2011 by Press 53. While Hudson and Nieman have been taken in as Tar Heels – certainly by the state’s rich literary community – both hail from points north, making good use of their outsiders’ perspectives to create compelling stories of escape, displacement, or integration, while capturing with great sensitivity and authenticity the Carolina landscape and its people.

As the title in **Marjorie Hudson’s** collection suggests, birds – whether caged accidentally or incidentally – populate each of her eight stories, marrying the transitory nature of the avian world to the lost souls who have found a haven in rural stretches of the Carolina landscape. Among the characters are Elizabeth, the willful and self-described “crazy Yankee lady” (11) and “the stranger in the house at the end of the road” (1), whose frozen pipes in her ramshackle farmhouse force an encounter with a local plumber and a self-taught ecologist; Rand, a retired Army colonel with a heart condition who prepares for his death while his energetic wife attempts to find friends among the other transplants in their gated retirement community; Jolene, a Nebraskan Mennonite who wins a scholarship to UNC–Chapel Hill; and Dip, the boy who joins a traveling carnival after his widowed father abandons him. Even Elizabeth’s widowed neighbor and Carolina native, Sarton Lee, “spread in his seat like a wrinkled toad” (2), holds stories and secrets of both the land and its people, and finds

his anchors through the cultivation of his farm and through his golden retriever, Wiener.

Like “accidental birds,” as Hudson defines them in a note at the start of the collection, these characters are “found outside their normal range, breeding area, or migration path, arrived through storm, wind, or unusual weather” (n.p.). Her characters are as diverse in their lostness as the stories’ birds – caged cockatiels and barred owls hooting, “*Who cooks for you?*” (9). They share the page with sparrows and whip-poorwills that – in homage to Walt Whitman – offer a “strange throbbing from the shrubbery at dusk” (2). Beyond the birds and other images drawn from the natural world, escape and isolation – both physical and geographic – permeate nearly all of Hudson’s stories. Many of her characters project a contented kind of aloneness – whether by choice or life circumstance – that comes not from a desire for solitude but rather as a side effect of rejection, illness, escape, or ruination. Eventually, however, these characters ache for real human connection and interaction. For example, Dip, the young carnival worker, realizes that he “doesn’t want a family. But today, for the first time, he wonders if there’s something else you can have, not a father yelling at you, but not this high life shit with Royal either” (42).

Hudson does not allow her characters to languish in their self-imposed cocoons but rather forces each of them to find their version of Dip’s “something else.” Whether it’s Elizabeth taking refuge from a wildfire raging through her kitchen, or Holly’s newfound sexual desire for her poetry teacher, or Sarton digging a hole beyond his rows of fence posts

and laying himself in it, wondering “if what holds us down is as strong as what wants to take us up” (35), each character emerges from his or her psychic or physical hibernation.

Even Nina, a rough-edged woman from Detroit, who flees her abusive soldier husband, finds solace – and home – at a Carolina crossing. There, a three-legged dog named Roger greets her on the porch. The next day, she discovers a strawberry pie from her neighbor, which she eats in its entirety and with her fingers. “I guess I was on a starvation diet, trying to disappear,” Nina says, as she prepares to pay a visit of thanks to her neighbor. “But suddenly I was hungry” (59).

Whereas Hudson’s passel of stories offers a range of characters and situations to explore themes of displacement and engagement in the Southern landscape, **Valerie Nieman’s *Blood Clay*** allows for a slower, more focused unfolding of her protagonist’s escape from the North and subsequent effort to find a home in the small town of Shawton, NC. Tracey Gaines is a newly transplanted special needs teacher from both Pennsylvania and Ohio, who, after her divorce, moves to North Carolina to teach at an alternative school. Volleying the narration between Tracey’s perspective and that of her counterpoint, colleague, and eventual love interest, Dave Fordham, the story unfolds through the lens of two lonely and damaged souls who struggle with their self-imposed barriers toward companionship, community, and love.

Dave is a native of Shawton, a former athlete and farm boy, who took his first teaching job out of graduate school in Baltimore and returned home three years later to care for his ailing mother. His narrative offers an insider’s perspective of Shawton and its history and people, coupled with a keen awareness of the harsh realities of the world beyond. Like so many Southern male characters before him – from William Faulkner’s Quentin Compson to Barry Hannah’s Dr. Ray – Dave struggles with his own failure to be a certain kind of man. Dave, former farm boy, football player, and track star, finds himself middle-aged, with his hair thinned, his leg in a brace, and deeply ashamed of his limp. He can no longer hold his own in a fistfight or drive a stick shift. He struggles continually with his Southern pedigree – “he didn’t want her to think he was a snob for his Pettigrew roots” – yet challenges Tracey on her Northerner’s assumptions about race and heritage: “We’re all bound together,” he tells her. “It’s like the names, the black Chalmerses and the white Chalmerses. . . . That goes a long way back, and there’s a lot of pain, but this is still our home. Our land. We all come out of the same red dirt. Blood and clay.” (74).

These themes intensify when Tracey witnesses a pack of dogs attack and kill a neighbor child, Lakesha Sipe, a student at the alternative school. The novel’s action pivots on Tracey’s report of the attack after failing to rescue the girl from the dogs, following which she feels the full brunt of her outsider status from both

COURTESY OF VALERIE NIEMAN



the white and black community. Not only does the dogs’ owner, Artis Pennell, suggest to the local paper that Tracey ran over the girl with her car and is blaming the dogs to cover it up, but also the girl’s mother, Orenna Sipe, blames Tracey for Lakesha’s death because Tracey did not get out of the car to save the child.

Tracey, who had tried to leave her car to help Lakesha but couldn’t because the dogs began to attack her, too, fully admits to cowardice. However, Tracey has a blind spot about why Orenna is so hostile toward her – even before Lakesha’s death – which Tracey never quite realizes or understands. Weeks earlier, Tracey had seen Lakesha at the bus stop “holding a thin sweater close to her bones, and that very night had pulled the coat off the rack at Wal-Mart” (2). Tracey believes that her present of the coat is an indicator of her good will toward Lakesha and her mother and is puzzled by Orenna’s animosity –

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ABOVE **Marjorie Hudson (right) and Valerie Nieman** after their reading at the Joyful Jewel, a gallery in Pittsboro, NC, 16 July 2011

"*Truculent*" (3), Tracey calls it – when she helps to jump-start Orenna's car in the grocery store parking lot. "Was she angry about the coat?" Tracey wonders. "Was that something to be angry about, such a simple thing, to see a child standing cold and give her something bright and warm?" (4). According to Orenna, yes: "Must be she thought I couldn't provide for my girl. She got her some coat and give it to her" (172).

Embedded in Orenna's testimony during Artis Pennell's trial to determine whether his dogs had killed Lakesha is also a charge against Tracey, not for her failure to save Lakesha, but rather for her naïve inability to understand that her act of kindness in giving the child the coat was perceived, in fact, as an indictment of the mother. In large part, Orenna's attitude toward Tracey distracts attention from Tracey's efforts on behalf of Lakesha, focusing attention instead on the Northerner's outsider status; even Orenna's friends and family opt to side with Artis Pennell because "Leastways, he's one of *us*" (111). Meanwhile, Tracey suffers from nightmares, unable to forget "the shy smile when [Lakesha] tried on the new coat and ran her fingers over the bright blue zippers" (62). As Tracey painfully realizes, all the coats in the world couldn't make up for her inability to help Lakesha in a way that mattered when it was needed. As Orenna says at the end of her testimony, "Miz Gaines, she needed you to help her. And then you didn't even come get me, my car in the yard" (173).

After the trial – which offers a verdict as fair as local logic could

muster – Tracey and Dave, now a couple, endeavor to build a life together. Their efforts to grow with each other emulate the growth and change of the community around them. For example, at a tobacco auction – one of the county's last – Dave and Tracey come across a neighbor who's decided to shift away from planting and pulling tobacco in favor of rows of herb gardens "for the city folk" up in Raleigh (143). While to the very last moment, dark elements move throughout the novel, Nieman ends on a more positive note, when Artis Pennell tells Tracey, "[Y]ou can perch here, Tracey, forever, until you die, but you won't ever, ever be part of this place." However, Dave, whose Shawton roots are as deep as Artis's, replies on Tracey's behalf, "That's not true, Artis. She has roots with me. The two of us" (192).

As the characters in Nieman's and Hudson's books learn, it's nearly impossible to move into a new place and remain anonymous for long; there is no such thing as escape or isolation. "Southerners, like nature, abhor a vacuum" (11), Hudson's Elizabeth says. Anonymity – at least in these parts of the Carolinas – ends the moment they run down to the store for a loaf of bread and the newspaper, or they endeavor to take a run through the neighborhood, or they buy a coat for a little girl. Here, it is actions that define a person. And more often than not, the past won't simply go away because of change in geography; as Tracey learns, the past will simply manifest itself in new ways: "Sometimes you think you can get free

by leaving home," Tracey tells Dave. But "[s]ometimes all you do is get another angle on what you want, or can't have. Sometimes you have to go back" (79–80).

Southern historian C. Vann Woodward has suggested that all Southerners have left of their identity is their shared, collective experiences.\* Both *Accidental Birds* and *Blood Clay* are a testament to Northerners' efforts to become a part of that shared experience through the sometimes harsh lessons of meaningful engagement. Both Hudson's stories and Nieman's novel offer insight on how to understand and come to terms with the idiosyncratic attributes of these adopted homes and how to share in the experience of the history of the South and its future. More importantly, these works remind readers that no matter where they were born, they are at many levels responsible for their homes, adopted or otherwise. It's not just the practically feral animals, neglected gardens, or run-down farmhouses that need care and attention; it's the people, too. Like Hudson's Elizabeth says, as she embraces her expanded capacity for love, "I was a creature of this world, and like all living things, subject to the dizzying laws of nature" (23). As these characters find that elusive moment of peace, healing, and growth within themselves, they discover in the process that they might be able to provide peace and healing and growth for others. Like so many "accidental birds" who've found a spot to nest, these wayward characters are able finally to embrace being of a place rather than simply and transiently a visitor in it. ■

\* See C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1993) 16.

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