

BLOODLINE

A man with dark hair, wearing a grey tank top, stands in profile, looking to the right. He is positioned in front of a vibrant graffiti wall. The graffiti features large, stylized eyes with red and yellow centers, and blue cloud-like shapes above them. The overall style is bold and expressive.

Joe Jiménez

"Jiménez explores shades of manhood and all it entails with a deft, poetic hand."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

Bloodline

Joe Jiménez



PIÑATA BOOKS
ARTE PÚBLICO PRESS
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Bloodline is funded in part by grants from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance and the Texas Commission on the Arts. We are grateful for their support.

Piñata Books are full of surprises!

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by John-Michael Perkins
Cover photo by Eloísa Pérez-Lozano

Names: Jiménez, Joe, author.

Title: *Bloodline* / by Joe Jimenez.

Description: Houston, TX : Pinata Books, an imprint of Arte Publico Press, [2016] | Summary: Seventeen-year-old Abraham is in love, but his girlfriend and the grandmother who raised him are worried about his fighting, and things only get worse when his uncle introduces him to boxing.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015050270 (print) | LCCN 2016019005 (ebook) | ISBN 9781558858282 (trade pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781518500565 (ePub) | ISBN 9781518500572 (Kindle) | ISBN 9781518500589 (pdf)

Subjects: | CYAC: Fighting (Psychology)—Fiction. | Family problems—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. | Grandmothers—Fiction. | Boxing—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.J53 Blo 2016 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.J53 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2015050270>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

© 2016 by Joe Jiménez

Printed in the United States of America
April 2016–May 2016
Versa Press, Inc., East Peoria, IL
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Praise for *Bloodline*

“A haunting, beautiful story about the vulnerability and heartbreak of young adulthood. Jiménez’ lyrical novel will resonate with teen and adult readers alike.”
—Reyna Grande, author of *The Distance Between Us*

“A punch in the gut, *Bloodline* is an exceptional debut novel. Joe Jiménez’s killer literary instinct, his precision of language, his mastery of story is second to none. There is no young adult novel quite like this one. It challenges the way we think about masculinity, family and love.”
—Virginia Grise, author of *blu*

“Joe Jiménez’ debut YA novel is beautiful in the hardest way—luminous and poetic, heartbreaking and violent. *Bloodline* is the story of 17-year-old Abram and all the questions he’s grappling with—family and relationships, school and the future, loneliness and dreams, and all the struggles that come with trying to discover who he really is and who he wants to be. In the outside world, Abram fights with his fists, and on the inside, he fights to listen to the inner voice urging him towards life.”
—ire’ne lara silva, author of *Blood Sugar Canto*

“Pay attention to this novel. It’s a story that provocatively asks if we need fathers to be men. Jiménez’s storytelling offers up a grandma who wears man-pants, Abram who throws fists full of hard questions and a game-changing Uncle Claudio who together play out a surprising answer for readers. With his spectacular visual poeticism, his strong representation of place and an excellent command of voices underrepresented in literature, Jiménez expertly delivers the heart wrenching blow-by-blow of this important tale.”
—Richard Villegas, Jr., author of *La Música Romántica*

“This lyrical debut novel documents an entire ocean that is a young man’s inner beauty struggling to balance between interminable, raging and violent seas. In gorgeous language portraits that only a poet like Jiménez can unapologetically conjure, where a room stands as still as an arm bone, and where all the world becomes light and silence, this contemporary Hamlet-inspired story features a Claudio, an Ophelia, a Polonius in Afghanistan and living and non-living men who intersect with each other and with the inevitable destiny that is their bloodline. This is a complex and honest portrayal of angst inside the mind of a brilliant and sensitive teenager who is in love, who is bursting with vision and who allows his bones to breathe new life as he tragically remembers his one wild and precious life.”
—Natalia Treviño, author of *Lavando la Dirty Laundry*

for Sophia and Santiago

1

"He needs a father," you hear your grandmother tell her friend Becky. At the square table in the center of the little kitchen, the two sit, sipping *manzanilla* tea and picking at pineapple bread. Your grandmother's thumbs are at her temples, rubbing. Her voice is quiet, like a bird sitting on a fence just before morning.

With her man pants on and her teeth holding back rough words, Becky says, "Why?"

"I don't want him to be lost."

In the hall by the green square bathroom, near the light switch that glows orange at night and the painting of Saint Michael, you stand where no one can see you. Seventeen. It is the year you learned how to drive stick, the year you felt love for the very first time, like a gray balloon expanding inside your chest. Seventeen. The year you fought Willie P., Gabriel, George and Jacob—all before Thanksgiving. Four fights, two suspensions. And they said: "He's lost his last chance."

It is 11 p.m., and you are supposed to be asleep. But when you'd put your head to the pillow, anxiety overcame you, thudding and thumping and twirling itself in your brain and your arms, in the hollow box of your chest and in your knees, which quivered on your old mattress. Alone in your room, all you felt like was to get up, to not

sleep, to stand in the hall and listen to your grandmother and her girlfriend whispering about you in the kitchen.

It is 11 p.m., and your heart is rapping its knuckles on your throat.

The wall behind you is yellow. It holds up your spine. The floor is a ghost; its echoes swallow your ankles and feet. So you stand very still, like a light post or maybe a pylon in a parking lot, a pylon made of yellow cement, designed to keep things from crashing into other things. You should be sleeping now, your face buried in bed-sheets and dreamland, a pillow holding your thoughts. But sleep is some flame-filled thing you want no part of.

"Another fight," your grandmother mumbles to Becky, who gently pushes aside your grandmother's gray braid to knead the stony knot in her shoulder. The sound of your grandmother's syllables shrinks, and you can hear the sadness fall from her sobs, which are soft, like a handful of cotton balls.

"Not all boys need fathers. Better to have no man around than to have a bad one, don't you think?"

The spoon that holds your grandmother's sugar clinks against her cup.

A father? You scoff, the back of your head pressing against the wall. Underneath the painting of Saint Michael vanquishing a demon, your blood fist-pumps vigorously in your throat and behind your eyes, and your mouth is as dry as a dune.

The kitchen is quiet.

Beneath you, the floor, coldly and knowingly, holds you.

Your feet sweat. You fear they'll stick to the floor.

"The counselor told me this was his last chance. What can I do? I don't want him lost. Or to drop out."

With a hardness that is almost inescapable, almost impossible to contain, the fear leaks out. It is hard for you to stomach the miry slur of your grandmother's tears. Knowing you've caused them jabs at your throat.

"He needs a man. I can't do this, Becky. We can't. I can't. Not on my own."



A year ago, your grandmother hung the Saint Michael over the dark hole in the wall you punched one afternoon when everything seemed small and lightless and unfair and wicked. By Saint Michael, in the hall, with the pale yellow wall behind your heart, no one can see you, barefoot, one hand swollen and pressed against your chest like you held something there, some coin or toy or a small shield. Against the stubborn wall, listening and listening to words that are not meant for you.

You think: I've done wrong. You've brought disappointment and worry to your grandmother. You hate this. She has done so much for you. Your knuckles throb. They lock and sing red and ache from hitting Jacob enough times this morning to bust open his mouth, open like a jar of a thousand flies, the whole thick, wet swarm of them left to hang in the air and fall. Jacob with his big mouth spitting disrespect at everyone—*stupid bitch, faggot, dumb ho*—and today, this morning, after math class, because you stood in his way, he chose you.

"I'm afraid he'll end up in prison. On drugs. Or dead," she moans, gripping Becky's hand, the spare flesh over her knuckles shivering.

Next to a spoon, a plate of crumbs and salt, and on the plate, the shadow of the women's heads.

Your own throat flares.

The demon is taking Saint Michael's sword.

You eat the part of you that wanted to cry.

You should not be listening to any of this.

You bite your lip and hold your fists to your belly, unclenching them, quelling them, calling them home.

If only you, too, owned a saber to defeat the beast you fear.

Like a pane in the window of her worries, your grandmother's words have all cracked and shattered. "I'm just afraid," she mutters. "Abram needs to learn how to be a man. I'm thinking to ask Claudio back into the house to live."

"No. Oh, no. Don't. Don't say that." Becky puts her hand on your grandmother's shoulder because the bird of your grandmother's face has sunken into the soft earth of her hands. "You are being good to him. He has your goodness, Gertrudis. You're a part of him, always. Abraham has you to follow. God knows."

The part of you that loves your grandmother more than anything else rises up in your throat and sits there like a hard lump. On the wall across from where you stand, there is a mirror, and if you cock your head just right, you can see them: your grandmother, her friend, the plates, the mugs and the forks, benign shadows.

Uncle Claudio, you think, hearing your grandmother weep, seeing Becky console her. You remember the last time he came, the day after Christmas last year, how he threw food all over the table and the walls and kicked the TV, yelled at your grandmother and burst through the front door. He shouldn't come back, you said then and say to yourself again.

"He's my son. He's not all bad," your grandmother tells Becky. "I can't teach Abram how to be a man. But Claudio can. I think he can."

"No. This won't end good. I know he's your son, but, babe, that don't make him good."

"Don't start. Don't. I have enough to worry about . . ."

But Becky just shakes her head, and she holds your grandmother and pulls her close to her heart and kisses her hair. When you hear the squeal of the chairs, you know it is time for you to get back into bed. Still, you press your nose to the wall, and with Saint Michael next to your chin, you think of your father, digging far into the memories with nothing but the spoon of your want. When you return to your bed, you lay as quiet as a log.

It is November. The world is a cushion—flat and over-used, strangely dim and so far from its original form. You cross yourself, and the pecan limbs above the house gnash at the roof. Why would she invite him back? Am I really that bad?

Each night, you lay in this noisy little bed, fending off sleep, pushing it away like a hot sheet, watching the ceiling grow darker, watching the fan spin its life away, watching your hands glow with darkness and sometimes, if you're lucky, with light. Pushed against a wall, the old bed groans every time you move, and the fan across the room, perched on a chair, blows the hairs on your legs, falls on your cheeks like whispers and odd light or leaves that are fleeing. You wonder if these things that are wrong with your life might undo themselves: not suddenly or full of miracle, but slowly, loosening their grip enough so that with force, with want, with intent, you might someday, soon, slip away from them.

From your bed, the light from the hall is dim and slides beneath the door timidly. The voices from the kitchen have halted their work, and soon, you recognize the dim hum of Becky's truck engine. The headlights splay the darkness in the room, and the bed creaks, because you move to block the truck light with your pillow. As the light melts away, you wish you could shake off the thought of your grandmother worrying that you are lost, that the future before you is bleak and choked with troubles, filled with hardship, moving toward an irreparable ending.

Your eyes grow heavy. Leaden. Lint clogged. Smudged. Sludge.

She's made up her mind, you think. He's gonna come back.

The ceiling begins to fall.

The pecan tree scratches the roof.

Walls blur, then blaze in white, and then, with your head pressed deeply into the thin white pillow, your eyes grow heavy as clots. Though your eyelids sit on themselves, thick and demanding, though you do arithmetic and repeat dates, it comes.

You do not want sleep to come, but it does. Of course, it will. It always does.

The bed coils grunt.