

Violent Love and Loving Violence in I. S. Jones’ Bloodmercy

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How do relationships—whether they exist between loved ones or among aspects of an individual person—emerge from complex webs of violence, grace, and intimacy? As its title suggests, CSUN alumna I. S. Jones’s poetry collection *Bloodmercy* evokes both blood and mercy to explore relationships as multifaceted fusions of cruelty and love. *Bloodmercy* draws from the biblical story of humanity’s first murder, which occurred when Adam and Eve’s firstborn son, Cain, killed his brother Abel. In visceral free verse poetry, Jones remythologizes Cain and Abel as two Black sisters struggling towards adulthood and learning to navigate relationships with each other, a hostile and self-centered father, and a mother who defies traditional expectations of femininity. Each of the sisters comes to understand their ties to womanhood through their own experiences as well as the connection they share with one another. *Bloodmercy* contains two poems that share a title, “Bloodmercy,” with the collection itself. The first, situated a third of the way through the book, inhabits Cain’s perspective, while the other closes out the collection in Abel’s voice. Deeper study of Cain’s version of “Bloodmercy” reveals this speaker-persona’s changing outlook on her relationships with her sister and herself, illustrating the interconnection between violence and mercy.

Cain’s “Bloodmercy” begins with a description of a late summer day that embodies Cain and Abel’s shifting perceptions of each other and themselves. While much of the collection focuses on the relationships within and between people, Jones often calls on natural imagery to deepen the symbolic representations of these ties. In particular, “Bloodmercy” takes place

just as “summer begins its descent,” positioning the sisters in a seasonal parallel to the transition between childhood and adulthood (Jones 20). This motif recurs halfway through the poem, when the changing of the seasons marks a new distance between Cain and Abel as they “stop knowing each other” (Jones 20). The poem’s long and somewhat prose-like lines of free verse resemble the vast outdoor space Cain and Abel find themselves in. While nature in “Bloodmercy” appears less perfect than the biblical Garden of Eden their parents were cast out of, it provides a space for Cain and Abel to enjoy their childhoods and experiment with adulthood—a stimulating environment that differs from the paradise their mother Eve calls “boring” in “Contempt for Eden” (Jones 19). Natural similes and metaphors enrich the sisters’ connection with the earth, comparing their clarity and understanding to light, and the growing distance between them to a wind guiding them apart. Their relationship with nature hints at their original roles in the Bible, in which Cain worked as a farmer and Abel as a shepherd. It also grounds “Bloodmercy” in the lineage of ecopoetry, which emphasizes nature as a common theme. As Camille T. Dungy writes in her introduction to *Black Nature*, ecopoetry holds particular significance to many Black writers, whose work often includes “elements of the environment [that] simultaneously function as imaginative, literal, and figurative realities” (xxiii). To this end, the yard in “Bloodmercy” acts as a physical environment while transcending reality to become a mythic signifier of Cain and Abel’s development as individuals and as sisters. Jones’s diction reiterates this growth, showing Cain’s “mastery” in styling Abel’s hair, her new acknowledgement of “wisdom” and “understanding”, and the eventual “clarity” of her connection with her sister (20).

However, the setting points towards another theme—violence. While Cain and Abel view nature as a place of freedom and growth, it also inflicts cruelty on them. Most notably, a piece of tree bark scratches Abel’s hand deeply enough to draw blood. Jones additionally uses double meanings to deepen the presence of violence in the text. While “each green blade” corresponds with the grass that the sisters traverse, the focus on “blade” underscores the looming threat that culminates in Abel’s blood being spilled (Jones 20). Moreover, the red drips of melting popsicle that stain Cain and Abel’s “good dresses” evoke the image of blood, especially menstrual blood (Jones 20). This tie between menstruation and violence pervades the entire collection. In “Daddy’s Girl,” for example, Cain laments how “the first blood” ostracized her from her father and her male friends (Jones 15). Abel echoes this sentiment in “Fawn”, stating that “my father stopped hugging me / when the first blood came” (Jones 42). *Bloodmercy* treats menstruation as a punishment for sin—a form of physical and social violence towards peo-

ple born female who dare to transgress ideals of womanhood. In “Bloodmercy” specifically, menstruation represents one of many steps into adulthood, which eventually drives the sisters away from each other.

Violence and various reactions to it also hold implications for how relationships manifest. When Abel’s hand bleeds, Cain shows empathy by cutting her own skin and mixing her blood with Abel’s. This mixture—“cainabel”—physicalizes shared pain, as well as a relationship’s creation from the sum of its parts (Jones 20). Cain cares for her sister, as shown when she rinses Abel’s blood with the hose. “Bloodmercy” thus portrays mercy emerging from blood as a reaction of solidarity, or of action to lessen further pain. Despite empathizing with Abel, however, Cain also acts as a perpetrator of violence. Jones directly verbalizes Cain’s intentions in lines aimed at Abel: “I wanted to deliver you / from cruelty & gave you my own instead” (20). The tension between Cain and Abel hearkens back to their biblical origins as the first murderer and murder victim, respectively. The Cain of “Bloodmercy” desires both closeness and separation from her sister, resulting in seemingly contradictory behavior that includes both betrayal and mercy.

Reading Cain and Abel as two parts of a whole rather than two individuals brings further insight into the dynamics present in “Bloodmercy.” In an interview with Darius Phelps, Jones stated that during her writing process for *Bloodmercy*, she “realized Cain and Abel represent my childhood selves, while Eve embodies my adult womanhood” (Phelps and Troy). Writing the collection through multiple speakers enabled her to confront different aspects of herself, including her queerness through Abel’s exploration of sexuality, her experience of adulthood through Eve, and her distant relationship with her own sister through Cain’s relationship with Abel. Cain’s mourning for a time when she and Abel “were of one mind and two bodies” suggests the shape this collection’s speaker might occupy with all these fragmented perspectives taken into account—a complex individual with many dissimilar and even contradicting pieces that make up their identity (Jones 20). Thus, the connection between Cain and Abel becomes fully realized as a person’s maturing viewpoint towards themselves, as well as their internal and external relationships. As displayed in I. S. Jones’s “Bloodmercy,” blood and mercy each drive how people harm and help themselves in close tandem with the rest of the world.

Works Cited

- Dungy, Camille T. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. The University of Georgia Press, 2009.
 Jones, I. S. *Bloodmercy*. *The American Poetry Review*, 2025.

Phelps, Darius, and Tiffany Troy. “Blood as Language, Mercy as Rebellion’: An Interview with I. S. Jones.” *Tupelo Quarterly*, www.tupeloquarterly.com/editors-feature/blood-as-language-mercy-as-rebellion-an-interview-with-i-s-jones-curated-by-darius-phelps/.