

The enduring power of poetry by Romaine Washington

Leonardo DiCaprio, Teona Taylor, Sean Penn, and Benicio Del Toro light up the screen in the Oscar-nominated, wildly unpredictable [One Battle After Another](#). Lines from Gil Scott-Heron's famous song [The Revolution Will Not Be Televised](#) were sprinkled throughout the movie. The theme of the film and Heron's lyrics made me think about Assata Shakur (July 16, 1947-September 25, 2025). I had the pleasure of reading [Assata: An Autobiography](#) (1987) this past fall, to help prepare for a [Beyond Baroque](#) memorial program celebrating the life of this brilliant activist/poet who escaped to Cuba in 1979.

As a young, educated revolutionary, she believed deeply in the possible equality she was willing to fight and die for. I felt like I was right beside her as I read about the vicious torture she endured. Her resolve was strengthened by reciting [Claude McKay's](#) poem, [If We Must Die](#). McKay (1890-1948) was inspired to write this Shakespearean sonnet during the Red Summer of 1919.

For those of us who may not remember history lessons from the previous century, this was a time period where many African Americans were discharged from the military after World War I. These men returned home with the skills, discipline, and desire to work middle-class jobs and be invited back home to the country they were willing to fight and die for. Instead of equality, they were welcomed back into Jim Crow and second-class citizenship. That summer, they were met with an increase in violence. According to the [National World War Museum and Memorial](#), lynchings rose from sixty-four in 1918 to eighty-three in 1919, and there were riots in twenty-six cities across the United States.

The poet-activist, Claude McKay, wrote a poem whose potency traveled five decades into the [Black Panther Party](#) (BPP). While the organization's name is controversial, it started many socially beneficial programs, some of which were later adopted by school districts.

Local chapters of the Panthers, often led by women, focused attention on community "survival programs." They organized a **free breakfast program** for 20,000 children each day, as well as a free food program for families and the elderly. They sponsored schools, legal aid offices, clothing distribution, local transportation, health clinics, and sickle-cell testing centers in several cities. These activities provided concrete aid to low-income communities and drew support for the Panthers.

BPP leader Fred Hampton also knew *If We Must Die* by heart. In the midst of this century's pandemic, Daniel Kaluuya won a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award for the role of Fred Hampton in [Judas and the Black Messiah](#). My heart swelled as I watched the scene where the poem was recited. It is one thing to craft a poem to capture and express the emotions during a specific crisis. This poem has traveled a century from the Red Summer and [Harlem Renaissance](#) to the [Black Arts Movement](#) and the [Black Panther Party](#) (1966 – 1982) to a Hollywood movie script. As a Language Arts high school teacher, I introduced the poem to my students every school year. It is a staple in anthologies, from

high school to Poetry Out Loud competitions, where we learn McKay's potent warrior poem. Yes, words endure, and they have power.

This is important to remember as we see websites being taken down, and information and displays that accurately recount the history of our country being dismantled, and programs and institutions being threatened with extinction. *If We Must Die*, let it be with integrity. This is the crux of McKay's poem. According to AP News:

Since 2005, more than 3,500 newspapers have closed in the United States, representing over a quarter of the nation's total, with the pace accelerating to an average of two closures every week. This sustained decline has left roughly 50 million people living in "news deserts"—areas with limited or no local news access.

This past week, [The Washington Post](#) downsized and eliminated its sports and book sections. Yes, I said, the book section!!! The irony is in their slogan, "Democracy Dies in Darkness." This is assuredly a wake-up call.

In 2024, [Small Press Distributors](#) closed, leaving many small presses in hardship. Electric Lit. has a list of [Twenty-three Independent Presses to support](#). You can also inquire locally about small presses that serve your writing community and see if they accept donations. [Inlandia](#) is one of many presses in the Inland Empire that would greatly appreciate your involvement, either through volunteering time or finances or both.

In the words of [Dylan Thomas](#), "we must not go gentle into that good night." We currently have a looming crisis, according to [sciencedirect.com](#), Big Data and algorithms, and a lack of accountability with what we see, learn, and know, and how we are governed. It is crucial we are not devoured by memes, and we take time to sit and read, think, and create. We must have a deeply rooted understanding of the power of words. If a poem can help a woman endure sadistic torture and inspire revolutionaries, words are indispensable, and we must value them for the lives they preserve and encourage.

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