

## If We Must Die

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
 5 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
 10 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
 What though before us lies the open grave?  
 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

1919, 1922

## LOUISE BENNETT

Louise Bennett (1919–2006), the preeminent West Indian poet of Creole verse, was born and grew up in Kingston, Jamaica, in the British West Indies, her mother a dressmaker, her father a baker. After she had published her first book of poetry, *Dialect Verses* (1942), she attended London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. As "Miss Lou" she won a mass following in the Caribbean through her vibrant stage performances of her poetry and of folk song; her weekly "dialect" poems published from 1943 in Jamaica's national newspaper, the *Gleaner*; her radio show, "Miss Lou's Views" (1966–82); and her children's television program, "Ring Ding" (1970–82).

Bennett helped dismantle the view that Jamaican English is a corruption of Standard English, a prejudice she lambasted in radio monologues such as "Jamaica Language" and in poems such as "Dry-Foot Bwoy," which humorously juxtaposes a metaphor-rich Creole with a hollowly imitative British English. From a young age she felt that the humor, wit, and vigor of Creole were largely untapped possibilities for writing and performing poetry, even though this commitment to Jamaican English prevented her from being recognized as a poet until after the black cultural revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. In her poetry she often assumes the perspective of a West Indian trickster, such as the woman who cunningly subverts gender and geographic hierarchies in "Jamaica Oman [Woman]." Bennett makes wily and ebullient use of received forms, employing the ironic possibilities of dramatic monologue, the contrasts and inversions afforded by the ballad stanza, and the time-tested wisdom and pith of Jamaican proverbs. Both on the page and in her recorded performances, Bennett's vital characters and robust imagination help win over readers unfamiliar with Jamaican English, who can join in the laughing seriousness of poems such as "Colonization in Reverse," which ironically inverts Britain's xenophobic apprehension at the postwar influx of Jamaican immigrants, while also casting a suspicious eye on some Jamaicans' reverse exploitation of their exploiters. No one is safe from the multiple ironies and carnivalesque irreverence of Bennett's verse.