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Poems
by
doctors

Watching someone die

Lenrie Peters

Watching someone die
is a fraudulent experience
The deep significance is felt
the meaning escapes
like a child's first punishment.
The dying ravish your strength
whether by throttle of convulsive gasp
or tideless fading away
like ancient familiar sounds in sea shells
the moment is the same
reinforced brutality to life
a rugged cliff bloodstained
with the agonising rhythm of many heads.
A cold demise; each
successive moment a banishment.
The terror is in leaving behind
the ache is in departing.

Humming fantasies crowd their stings
to seize and record the moment
the hands curl in spasm
to hold it back; this life, this infidel.
It is too late. Everything and nothing
has happened. A huge machine
the earth, grinds to a bolt-knocking halt.

It is the changing of the tide
at the boundary hour
Life like a handful of feathers
engulfed by cliff winds
one like yourself swept
Oh so swiftly into the anchorage of history
Tears and sighs; sighs and tears
stamping the leaden feet
the solid agony of years
they all abound.
One life or a million
contrived by nature or by man
greatly obscures the issue.

Face to face with dying
you are none-the-wiser
Yet it seems a most ignoble epitaph
'He was a man and had to die; after all.'

Lenrie Peters was born in Bathurst (Banjul), The Gambia, in 1932. He studied medicine at Trinity College Cambridge and later trained as a surgeon. He currently practises in The Gambia. He has been Chairman of the West African Examinations Council. He has published one novel, *The Second Round*, and four volumes of poetry – *Poems* (Mbari Press, 1964), *Satellites* (Heinemann, 1967), *Katchikali* (Heinemann, 1971) and *Selected Poetry* (Heinemann, 1981). He is the Officer of the Republic of the Gambia. This poem is taken from *Satellites* by kind permission of the author.

Selected by Femi Oyeboode.