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Gone Too Soon!
Thoughts at Ezenwa–Ohaeto’s Graveside
on 23 December 2005

CHRISTMAS 2005 WAS UTTERLY SAD FOR ME from every point of view. I had left the USA on December 10 for a brief visit to Nigeria. Topmost on my agenda was a trip to Owerre-Nkwoji near Orlu in Imo State to meet for the first time the family of the poet laureate, the late Ezenwa–Ohaeto. I needed to be at his graveside to achieve a passionate healing and closure of a friendship of more than two decades. On December 16, I spoke with his young wife, Ngozi, and we agreed that I should arrive at the Ohaeto family house in Owerre–Nkwoji at 12 noon on Friday, December 23, 2005. Owerre-Nkwoji is a short forty-minute drive from my home village, Umunjam, Mbieri, on the outskirts of Owerri, the Imo State capital. In the intervening short period before the appointed date, I had a bit of a sober orientation in my mood for the visit, when suddenly on Monday, December 19, a younger brother of mine, practically Ezenwa’s age, most unexpectedly, died after a seven-hour tussle with a stroke that began at 4 p.m. and was over by 11.30 p.m. He and Ezenwa had one common link—gone too soon in the bloom of youth! Something is amiss in the natural order when elders visit the gravesides of youth cut down in their prime.

That was my frame of mind when I set off for Owerre–Nkwoji on Friday, December 23, 2005, accompanied by a younger brother, Chibunna, a lecturer at the Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, who knew Ezenwa very well, as the latter had taught at the College for some years in the early 1990s, and the President of the Imo State branch of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Camillus Uka. Another member of the Branch Association, Dr Augustine Nwakpuda, would join us from his base at Abia State University, Uturu, not too far from Owerre–Nkwoji. We arrived at the Ohaeto family house at 2.15 p.m. to a very warm welcome by Ezenwa’s wife, Ngozi (an assistant lecturer in the English Department at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, where Ezenwa taught full-time till his death), and Ezenwa’s younger brother, the engineer Ikechukwu (Iyke) Ohaeto, a virtual carbon copy of Ezenwa in form, physique and behavioural patterns. After exchanging a few bitter-sweet pleasantries inside, we went outside to the front of the house to pay our respects at Ezenwa’s graveside.

We stood speechless at the graveside, each apparently re-living the most precious moments with Ezenwa–Ohaeto. For me, the thoughts were of the recent past, the two decades of friendship and fraternity which seemed to have been only yesterday. I had come to know Ezenwa very well and very closely since the 1980s, and I was very fond of him. I had, in a bristling moment in one of those years, suddenly visualized Ezenwa as my protégé in the same sort of way as the late Prof. Donatus I. Nwoga, may have perceived me, except that I was Prof. Nwoga’s former student. By contrast, Ezenwa was never my student. But in some quite indissoluble manner he had endeared himself to me from the years when he consistently attended the then famous annual International Conference on African Literature and the English Language (ICALEL) of the University of Calabar, which I convened between 1981 and 1990. Ezenwa was an impossible-to-miss participant at the conferences, where he invariably featured eloquently as a solid critic, a versatile discussant, a multi-talented writer, and a highly creative performer. He drew crowds whenever he read his poetry. His dramatic renditions of his poetry conveyed his artistic vision of the indisputable affinity between African traditional drama and poetry, between African oratory and festive performance. From Ezenwa’s lips, his poetic images acquired extra dimensions of meanings when spiced with his inimitable spontaneity and effusive, down-to-earth humour.

The zenith came one Wednesday night in the first week of May, 1989, when he performed three of his most famous poems in Pidgin English: namely, “Catch Naira for Me,” “You No Fit Do Nothing,” and “I Wan Bi President.” He held the audience animated and spell-bound with his lively humour and charismatic body movements and gesticulations. The audience