Elegy for Ezenwa–Ohaeto

“There are few of us left. Soon there will be none.”
These were the first words that crossed my mind when I heard of your death. Isidore Diala was there at your bedside and told me how you suffered; how you worried about your wife and children not about yourself when the doctor said that time, Fate’s referee, had blown his final whistle. Hours later, Cambridge became a blur; Nsukka a blackout; and by midnight dirges were fluting through the air in England, Germany, Canada, USA, and Nigeria. Tears completed sentences on the phone. We wept for you.

I wept for the money I never sent when you were languishing in Worcester. Wept for the final interview we never had at Boulder, Colorado. Wept for the twenty-three years of friendship poisoned by exile: Nsukka! Abuja! Calabar! Wept as I recalled your voice from Harvard telling me to soldier on in the USA, this mad camp to which we all came like children running into sea America where poetry commits suicide on the cement

floor of the departments of English Literature daily.

“Publish all your plays in one anthology,” you said
to me over the phone “so we can teach them at home!”
I wept for that never-say-die voice now gagged by death.

And you were doing so well, in the newspapers,
the air waves, the classroom, at conferences,
universities, in Germany you were a star, and now,
just as the cock was about to throw out his chest
and crow to wake up the final sun, the dead reached out
from the entrails of the earth and pulled it by the tail
into the grave and covered the colours and the feathers
and the clarion call and wattle
and severed neck with dust
and ash. There are few of us left. Soon there will be none.

When I go home in December, I will go to see your mother
and your wife and your son. And I will tell them where you are.
I will also tell them who you really are. Evula oji isi eme ogu,
Gassire, who dropped the spear and sword and shield for the lute.
Amadioha who stole the white ram from the grip of lightning.
Egbe eluigwe in whose rumble we hear the voices of the gods.
Ezenwa–Ohaeto, okeosis, osisoma, ihe enyo ma-ehi ahu uzo
Otu mkpuru agidi gbagburu nwa enwe. Nmanwu eji aga mba

DIRGEMASTER: Nwannem atukwasilam obi
MOURNERS: Obi! Obi!
DIRGEMASTER: Nwannem atukwasilam obi
MOURNERS: Obi! Obi!
DIRGEMASTER: Anyi nile dika okoko flower
Mgbe anwu wara anyi adaa n’ala kponwusia

I am composing this dirge in a little clearing in a forest
near Stroud’s Lake somewhere in the heart of Ohio.
There is nothing between me and you now except
the years, the memories, the dreams we shared.