

Tanure Ojaide

Tale of the Harmattan

It is harmattan time to prepare every hearth
to combat northeast winds, fierce warriors

that this year have lost their frostbite
but still stir swirls of inescapable dust.

They say in their home country the dunes
have never enjoyed such massive fortune.

On the way hosts slashed and burnt trees
for the desert to advance without hindrance.

Season of brush fires, kites fly overhead
festive formations in smoke-smothered skies;

still we lose not thatched homes or barns
since we keep a wide buffer state, a clearing.

The season's blaze diminishes the hard labour
demanded in preparation for the next planting.

This season like no other in the minstrel's memory
the rubber tappers are frustrated with anemic trees

suffering hardship and baldness from a neighboring
business that devours whatever stands before it.

The exciting spirit of the harmattan lost on us,
there is nothing to celebrate with bonfires

because the regular visitor failed to arrive
with the good luck that follows its wake—

the swarm of generous djinns that invade us
barred from the land by free marketers of oil.

In place of heat from the log-stoked hearth,
we burn from gas flares and oil blowouts

on insomniac nights in the big compound.
We no longer swathe ourselves from cold

in one blanket, warm and inhaling body odor;
the sparkling hearth telling our tale of the harmattan.