TANURE OJAIDE

The Minstrel Wails

(In memory of Ezenwa–Ohaeto)

At last death threw you down flat
after you wrestled with all in your warrior heart—

until the final fall even with deep bruises
brave one, your face still lit with smiles.

Death that tackled the elephant to fall in the forest,
who can escape its villainous craft in a clearing?

Why it picked on you so early, I know not.
We are all prone to the random punch of woes.

Mine is to wail the sapling iroko struck by lightning.
The minstrel’s voice stilled but swathed with songs.

It’s not the elder’s beat to lead the wail for the young
& you were not even age-mate in the calendar of birth

but o Muse, suspend the rules of rituals
for a fellow minstrel muted in high noon.

Wandering minstrel, you traversed the world with songs.
Sojourner, you made home of every known soil.

A minstrel leaves and the living one muses—
the young elephant falls and the forlorn family wails.

We cannot tell the mind of fate—who receives
the blessings of minstrelsy suffers its calamitous blow!

The muse that lavishes her favorite with gifts
the same muse gives him up in a storm to spirits!

You who brought firewood to the communal hearth
and kept warm everybody in the cold

you who placed your harvest of yams on the table
so that no one would be tortured by the taunting famine

you made a road to the sun and to the moon
so that there will always be pathways to our dreams

but fate knocked down the reflective signs you put up
in its forays to draw sadness from your happy songs.

You wanted to be president to make *yabbis* of power,
your song of a soldier routed coup-makers from barracks;

you knew the chant of the night masquerade
and feared not the guttural noises in the dark.

You were minstrel of all seasons and peoples
and no hand can cover the brilliance of your songs;

the commander of songs falls in the battlefield
& foot soldiers take over the standard fighting on.

Death tackles the young elephant to a fall
but the tusks raise songs that outlive the call.