

# **SPIRIT NIGHTS**



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EASTERINE KIRE



Published by Barbican Press: London & Los Angeles

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Registered office: 1 Ashenden Road, London E5 0DP

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Cover by Rawshock Design

Cover photograph by Seyie Suohu

With thanks to Tromsø Library for their kind support of this publication

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-909954-54-0

Typeset in Adobe Garamond

Typeset by Imprint Digital Ltd

## About Easterine Kire

**D**r Easterine Kire is a poet, short story writer and novelist, born in Kohima, Nagaland, Northeast India. She writes from ‘the frontline of contemporary indigenous literature’.

Nagaland stretches either side of the border between Myanmar and the Indian State of Assam. This is ancient tribal hill country, and Kire writes from inside the fiercely independent Naga culture.

In 1982, she was the first Naga poet in English to have her poetry published. In 2003, she wrote *A Naga Village Remembered*, the first Naga novel in English. Kire has also been the first Naga writer to write books for children.

In 2011 she was awarded the Governor’s medal for excellence in Naga literature. Her novel, *Bitter Wormwood* was shortlisted for the Hindu Lit for Life prize in 2013. In the same year she received the Veu LLIure Prize (Free Voice Prize) from Pen Català, an award that honours authors who have endured some hard times because of opposition to their writing. In 2013, her *Bitter Wormwood* was shortlisted for the Hindu Prize, which she won two years later for *When the River Sleeps*.

Norwegian PEN and the city of Tromsø invited Easterine Kire to Tromsø, inside Norway’s Arctic Circle, where she has lived since 2005. She is a member of the Norway-based band, Jazzpoesi, and a founder member of Barkweaver publications which gathers folk tales and people stories. In 2013 Jazzpoesi released a digital CD which topped the Norwegian jazz charts.

In 2016 her novel *When the River Sleeps* was awarded The Hindu Literature prize. *Son of the Thundercloud* won both the Bal Sahitya Puraskar of the Sahitya Academy and the 2017 Tata Literature Live Book of the Year award.

She has recently released her fifth children’s book, *The Dancing Village*.

Kire holds a PhD in English Literature from Poona University. She performs poetry, delivers lectures on culture and literature, and holds writing workshops in schools and colleges.



## *Early appreciation of Spirit Nights*

'To read Easterine Kire is to fall under the spell of an easeful, velvety, pitch-perfect storytelling. Spirit Nights brings together the lull of fable, the revelation of allegory, the vitality of folklore and the intimacy of the familial in a manner that is distinctly Kire. This book is especially memorable for a powerful female protagonist whose age-ripened wisdom is needed to save a community on the verge of being engulfed and erased by darkness.'  
Gayathri Prabhu

'A rich festival of storytelling - playful, poignant and profound. Easterine Kire reimagines marvels for new audiences, shining fresh light on ancient wisdom and revealing truths that have united humanity for centuries. A beautiful read.' - Ann Morgan

## *And appreciation of Easterine Kire*

'In an extraordinary fury of poems, short stories, histories, novels, and a separate profusion of words and music she calls jazzpoetry, this quietly irrepressible one-woman cultural renaissance has pioneered, nurtured, led and exemplified the modern literary culture of Nagaland, while also establishing herself in the front line of contemporary indigenous literature.' Vivek Menezes, *Scroll*

'Easterine Kire is the keeper of her people's memory, their griot. She is a master of the unadorned language that moves because of the power of its evocative simplicity.' Prof Emeritus Paul Pimomo

'Kire delicately mixes live traditions with new standards.' - Luis Gomez, *The National Herald*

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*“Darkness is real, but the light is even greater”*  
*—Pete Cabrera Jr.*



*Accounts of sudden darkness descending on the land exist in at least two tribal histories of the Naga people, the Rengma and the Chang. The story of Spirit Nights is inspired by a story of darkness narrated by the Chang Naga tribe. Names and incidents are borrowed from the original tale. However, it must be clarified that it is not based on that story, but follows the path of fiction to achieve its telling.*

# Prologue

The drumming could be heard all the way across the valley and well into the next. The men were beating the drum fast and furiously, a beat that any villager would recognise as a warning to return immediately to the village. They seemed to be competing with the darkness that was gathering just as swiftly; it was the great darkness that had descended in the middle of a sunny afternoon and made Namumolo's grandmother exclaim, '*Tiger has eaten the sun! Tiger has eaten the sun!*'

She shouted at Namu to get people back from the fields immediately because it was just too dangerous to be outside at this time. No one knew where the darkness had come from. Or why. One moment people were working their fields and tending to the paddy stalks that were beginning to bear grain, and in the next few moments, there was pandemonium as the sun suddenly disappeared and a perfectly clear sky turned dark and darker and darker still, until the darkness seemed to swallow the land. Even as they wasted precious minutes discussing if a storm was on the way and whether they should go home or wait it out, the sound of drums broke into their thoughts, each beat hurtling over the fields. The drumming was insistent and the beating desperate; everyone knew the rhythm that was being beaten. They were all taught to recognise it from childhood. The rapid, staccato bursts were only used to warn of great danger; the drums were

calling out that there was not a second to waste. Every child of the village was taught this beat from childhood, so they all knew the immediacy of the danger it warned against. There was no time for arguments or questions.

‘Hurry!’ cried the older members to the younger. ‘Leave that be! Leave everything behind and start running! Soto! Come out this instant. Is your hoe more precious than your life? Come on, we must go now. There is Death in those drums. We have to outrace him!’

The younger ones stopped dawdling and did as they were told. They saw their elders throwing their implements into the bushes, and they did the same and began to run, men carrying their children and women carrying their baskets. The darkness never let up. Some of them stumbled on the narrow path from the fields to the village; some of them fell and cut themselves on wayside stones. But they quickly got up and kept on running, fear numbing their pain. There was no starlight to help them see the way in front of them because it was still afternoon – people were only halfway through their labours when the drums sounded. No one carried a wormwood torch, nor was there time to stop and make one. They had to get to the village as quickly as they could.

‘Hunters!’ shouted one of the elderly men. ‘Lead us home!’ As he called for hunters, four of the men ran forward and they led the way back, for they were the ones who knew their way about in the dark. Two young men came last, guarding those at the back and helping the weaker members.

Sweat broke out on Namu’s brow and rolled downward as he pounded the giant drum with wooden pestles. The four men beating the log-drum were exhausted. They had been beating for more than an hour now, and the signals for warning against

danger were the most demanding. They beat the drum frenziedly, punishingly, in their efforts to reach their villagers and get them to safety. Their hands were beginning to ache from the impact, but they could not stop. Not even to check if their drumming had had any effect. The headman had told them that on no account were they to stop drumming. They kept at it, not exchanging a single word, grim-faced, each man buried deep in his own thoughts. The darkness magnified sound. Each drum beat travelled longer in the dark than it would by day; the sound cut knife-like, through the gathering murkiness.

All the drummers had members of their families out in the fields. They had stayed back in the village because it was their turn to guard the village. And all this had happened on their watch! They renewed their efforts at beating the big wooden drum, as though that would hasten their people home.

‘Tiger has eaten the sun!’ Grandmother’s words echoed in Namu’s ears. Whatever did Grandmother mean by that? As weird as it sounded, Namu knew deep inside that his grandmother was possibly the only person in their village who would know what was happening.

# Chapter One

‘Grandmother! Look! I’ve caught three grasshoppers!’  
The little boy ran excitedly to the old woman and held up his fist. She saw the crushed wings, legs and bruised green bodies of the insects he had caught.

‘Can we eat them?’ He was looking up eagerly at the grey-haired woman. The five-year-old had lost both his parents in a brutal enemy attack and his grandmother was the only parent he had ever known. He had been only a few months old when it happened. It was a wonder he had not been killed when their village was overrun and people were massacred in their own houses. Luckily for him, the killers had not seen the baby sleeping beside his mother and, having killed both adults in the house, the men escaped to avoid being caught in a counter attack.

‘We don’t eat grasshoppers, Namu. You can give that to our chickens and I will catch something else for you,’ his grandmother replied. She broke off a broad leaf and handed it him. ‘Here. Wrap them in this leaf and put it in your basket. We will take your catch home later.’

Tola, the old woman, worked hard to get enough food for the two of them. She had lost her husband ten years ago in a freak hunting accident. Namu’s father had been her only son, and with him gone, Namu was the only family left to her. Tola tried to teach him the most important lesson of life, how to get food.

They left early every morning to work at the *jhum* field where she had sowed hill rice. In the patches cleared for vegetables, she always had a good crop of chillies, tomatoes, egg plant, and beans growing. Native cabbages sprouted up in season, and if they plucked them before the caterpillars got to them, they made a nice addition to their evening meal. The tapioca and sweet potatoes grew wild and did well even though left quite untended. When they were out in the field, she would take her hoe and expertly dig out a few sweet potatoes for the boy. He loved to eat them raw, the juice dribbling down his chin. Namu was still too young to help, but he followed his grandmother around, carrying his little basket and imitating her as she plucked edible leaves and put them in her cane basket.

Tola checked the grain on the paddy stalks and satisfied herself that the ears were filling up. In three or four weeks they would turn yellow and be ready to be harvested . It was hard work, but it gave them food for a good part of the year. Like the rest of her fellow villagers, Tola owned a small terrace field down in the valley. Working in the field was a little less demanding than cultivating hill rice, and as she got older, the thought had crossed her mind that she should probably stop tilling the hill slopes altogether. Some years ago she had begun to grow millet, which was also known by its native name, *the food of war*. It was so called because millet could be stocked for many months without spoiling, and when a village had been prevented by war from tilling their fields for months on end, they could still survive if they had millet in stock.

It was relatively easier to care for since the fast-growing millet plants required much less water than paddy. Weeding was done a few times during the growth season and the millet was always harvested before the rice. Those villagers who had big plots of

land planted millet all along the edges. Tola had done as they did, sowing the hardy cereal after the second rain. As long as she was able to, she would provide food for the two of them in the one way she knew, by tilling the ancestral fields that she and her husband owned. She had given up tilling her father's fields as it was too much work. Besides, they had enough food for the two of them. One day, Namu would inherit all the fields and plots of land owned by her and her husband. He would also inherit her father's lands because she was his only child, and the only other male relative who might have made claims on the land had more than sufficient land of his own.

Tola's hoe suddenly struck a rock, forcing her to stop digging. She instinctively put out her hand to check that the blade had not cracked from the impact. Then she looked at the sky; the sun was behind the plantain trees, wearing a halo of orange mist through which you could see the diaphanous wings of evening insects. It would linger there until it set, but on the days when Namu was with her, she preferred to set off for home earlier than the other field-goers.

'Come on, Namu, it's time to go home,' she called out to the boy. He had struggled halfway up a young Nutgall tree, trying to grab a bird's nest on the upper branches.

'But it's not dark yet, Grandmother,' Namu pleaded.

'And what are you going to do with the dark when it comes?' she asked in a rough voice. Namu knew that tone well. It brooked no arguments. He slung his basket on his back and followed her down the narrow path until it joined with the wider field path.

In the autumn months, Namu and his grandmother trapped small birds and locusts and dragonflies. Tola had a long stick with one end smeared with glue from mistletoe seeds, and she

used it to trap unsuspecting dragonflies resting on paddy stalks. She taught Namu to smear leaves and branches with the glue and thoroughly cover the water surface in the stream with the smeared branches; at dawn, birds coming to drink water would get stuck on the leaves and wood. Early the next morning, the pair would run down to collect the birds they had trapped and they would take their catch home. Tola's job was to clean the birds and hang them over the fire to dry, while it fell to Namu to sweep the feathers into the fire and burn them. Tola cooked the meat with lightly pounded garlic and country ginger and red chilli. The broth was pungent and nourishing. In the winter months, she added three or four of the small, local tomatoes, after crushing them thoroughly so that the sourness would seep into the rest of the ingredients. The tomatoes gave the broth a tangy flavour that both of them liked.

As for the locusts and dragonflies, Tola always removed the wings and legs before roasting them lightly on the embers. She liked to sprinkle a little salt on top and serve the roasted meat atop warm rice. 'Eat, it's good for you,' she would tell Namu.

While the two were making their way home, Tola caught two green-backed frogs. As soon as they reached the house, she removed the entrails, chopped the meat and began to cook it in an old clay pot, adding fresh chilli, crushed garlic and tomatoes. Frog meat was considered medicinal in many tribes, and highly recommended for wounds and injuries, fevers and infections; people had such great faith in its healing properties. Boys were encouraged to catch them in the rainy season, and the surplus meat was dried over the hearth to be used sparingly. Frogs, river-crabs and snails were abundant in these months – seasonal food for the farmer.