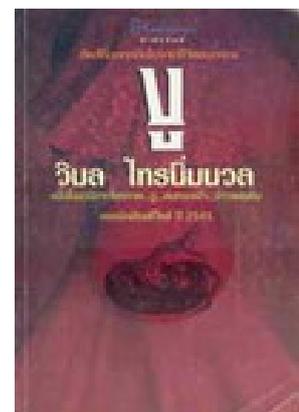


snakes

WIMON SAINIMNUAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG
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A night in the cold season. The sky was clear and stretched far and wide. An almost full moon poured floods of milky light over the fields. Constant gusts of the kite wind sent flickers of rice stubble floating high into the air. Crickets clambered out of earth cracks to nibble at dewdrops on grass blades and rubbed their wings together to call for mates. Rats came out of holes by the dykes in search of tender shoots and insects to eat. And snakes sneaked out and stalked the rats with great stealth.

A young woman and a boy were walking along the narrow path which skirted the bottom end of the village. The boy stroked the prongs of the slingshot hung round his neck while he whistled, his head twisting this way and that as he searched for star clusters he knew.

‘Stop whistling, will you. It’s annoying,’ the young woman scolded.

The boy ignored her, his eyes still roaming from one star pattern to the next. He said, ‘You’re in a hurry to watch TV, aren’t you?’

‘What is there to watch? They’re all working. Mum must be all steamed up by now.’ She prodded her

brother at the shoulder as she said, 'Walk faster. Stop dragging your feet, will you.'

The boy kept quiet. When he saw the Pleiades, he said, 'Teui, guess where the Chicks are.'

'I don't know,' the young woman answered, flustered.

'You mean you really don't know?'

'I just told you I don't. Why do you keep badgering me?'

'You think it's true the chicks threw themselves into the fire after their mum and then they were born again as stars?'

'Are you deaf or something? How many times I must tell you I don't know?' she bawled out at him. 'You're such a pain.'

The boy whistled Phorn Phirom's song entitled 'The Chicks', which he used to hear his father sing. The young woman slapped him on the shoulder with her fingers. 'Come on, hurry up.'

This time, the boy stalked ahead so fast that his sister couldn't keep up. Peeved, she spluttered, 'This boy's a real pain.'

The boy sashayed ahead, but in a moment he hollered, 'Ouch! A snake bit me.'

He fell down, his bottom thudding on the ground, his hands clutching his right leg. What he saw in a trice was a curving oily gleam which absconded into the grass by the dyke. The young woman walked towards him in a huff. 'Hurry up and stop dawdling.'

'A snake bit me, sis,' the boy told her with a shaky voice. He lay on his side, doubled up, his hand still clutching his leg.

'Good! Serves you right!' The young woman started walking away, but when she saw her brother didn't get up, she stopped and turned to look at him.

'Sis! A snake really bit me.'

'Liar.'

'No – it really did.' His face was all twisted.

The young woman switched on the flashlight. A beam of light flooded forth. She walked back to have a look, directed the beam onto his clutching hands, and her heart sank when she saw the two punctures. 'What kind of snake was it? What kind?'

'Ouch, it hurts – dunno – it hurts more 'n' more.'

'I don't know what to do!' she shouted shrilly, sorry not to have believed him from the start. She dropped the flashlight, and the beam stretched over a narrow swathe of ground.

'Help me, sis. It hurts. It really hurts.'

'Can you walk?'

The boy shook his head, which glistened with sweat. 'It hurts.' Then he asked in dread, 'Am I – am I going to die, Teui?'

The young woman sat down, slipped an arm under his neck to help him sit up and her flesh came into contact with the slingshot. She hurriedly took it off her brother's neck, grabbed the prong and the elastic strap and pulled

at them until they came apart. The strap slapped her hand with a pang that smarted and numbed it. She fastened the elastic in haste above the wound. This done, she slipped one arm under her brother's neck again, the other at the fold of his legs, and then strained herself erect with the body in her arms. She staggered for a few steps before she found her balance. In normal circumstances, she'd be totally unable to lift him, but right now, she was oblivious to everything except her brother's life.

Two dogs darted out of the dark space under the house in leaps of barking fury and crowded her back and front as if to tear her to pieces. She turned this way and that to keep facing them. She knew that, as soon as she showed her back to them, they'd go for her calves.

'Uncle Jorn! Uncle Jorn!' she shouted above the dogs' barks. 'Shoo! Shoo! Uncle Jorn! Help me! Quick! Term's been bitten by a snake. Shoo! Uncle Jorn!'

'All right, all right! I heard you, damn it. Why do you always have to call me when I'm asleep? What's wrong anyway?' A dark figure popped out at the top of the stairs.

'Hurry up, uncle! Help me! Term's been bitten by a snake.' She turned to holler, 'Shoo! Shoo!'

'Git! Git, you mangy mutts! Wouldn't know friend from fowl, you confounded curs. Git now!' he shouted as he hurried down the stairs.

The young woman kept moving back and forth to face the dogs, unwilling to put her brother down.

Uncle Jorn hastily took hold of the limp body. 'Quick – let's go to the *kamnan*'s* house.'

The young woman felt giddy, and her arms were numb now that Uncle John had taken charge of Term and was already striding away. She tried to stretch her arms, but they ached so unbearably she left them in the same hold as when she was carrying her brother, then hurried after Uncle Jorn.

A large traditional Thai house stood by the riverside, prominent and graceful. The house was entirely made of teak. Every window was open, revealing shocking-pink curtains embroidered with floral patterns and flapping in the wind. Inside, there were two bedrooms. The rest of the space was used as sitting room. There was a neat row of large showcases which matched the set of sofas on which the owner of the house was sitting watching the news via satellite. To the back, children sat on the floor, their legs tucked to one side, their torsos leaning to the other. They looked bored with the programme they were watching. Some yawned openly, then wondered aloud when one particular classical folk drama was going to start. Under the raised house, the whole expanse of ground was cemented, but now it looked too small as nearly twenty people were busy cooking dishes and desserts for tomorrow's big event. Tiny insects spun

* A *kamnan* is the head of a *tambon* (subdistrict).

around generator-powered neon tubes and only the bright loops of their flight could be seen. Some fell into the food containers to their deaths.

An obese cook was busy sprinkling seasoning into a large aluminium pot. Her swarthy face shone with sweat. As for the others, they sat in circles scraping coconut meat, squeezing cream out of it, pounding chillies, whipping eggs to make golden-thread and jackfruit-seed sweets, or peeling onion and garlic heads. Every circle had a group of young guys just there for a chance to chat up the girls. As for the aged and the already settled, they engaged in merry double entendre. Each punch line about bedtime frolics or the hanky-panky of monks and nuns was greeted with roars of belly-shaking laughter that drew tears of mirth.

Laughter had yet to subside when a shout from outside drifted in. 'Quick! Term's been bitten by a snake.'

Laughter died down at once. Every pair of eyes looked in the direction of the voice. 'What? Who did you say?' one of them asked.

'Term's been bitten by a snake!'

There was instant commotion, as all rushed out to see what had happened.

Snakes is the first part of Wimon Sainimnuan's famed Khoak Phranang quartet of novels, followed by *The Medium*, *Khoak Phranang* and *Lord of the Land* – all novels now translated into English and available only from thaifiction.com.

