

THE MUDDY SEASON

Matthew Raymond



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She was born in the muddy season, with the rain coming steadily down and the villagers standing at the window looking in. Pulling her blue and wet from her mother and saying quietly, Life is suffering, the midwife smacked her until she cried, then dried her and wrapped her and laid her in her mother's arms. Thanks be to God, the villagers said, and they made the movement of their hands over their hearts which was a gesture of code between the heavens and their souls, a sort of selfblessing, for they were endowed with that capacity. Then they stepped out from under the eaves and went back to the fields, working as they did all through the wet summers.

Her mother, weak from the labor, wasn't so much holding her newborn child in her arms as she was tolerating its weight against her bosom and biceps. She seemed in a daze, as if asleep, yet staring out the open window at the blur of quiet rain, at the heavy clouds which eased themselves against the hills, the hills seeming to wait patiently, to accept everything that came down upon them. The first thing her mother did after resting in that glaze-eyed exhaustion was cry.

Or rather: They were born in the muddy season, with the rain coming down steadily and the villagers standing at the window looking in and the government agent sitting under the front awning in his strange outfit that removed all contour from his body. He appeared not to hear the cries of the labor, the moaning, the sharp native cursing, but only looked calmly out over the wet land.

Pulling first her sister and then her from their sweating, heaving mother, the first midwife said under her breath, Life is suffering, and smacked them each one until they cried. Then the second midwife dried them each one and laid them in the arms of their mother. The mother made no move to hold her babies. She tried to ignore their gentle bare weight against her bosom and biceps, her eyes staring out the window of the one room house at the thick clouds pushing down on the hills, which were so patient and accepting of the rain, though it was heavier that year and constant with the promise of floods.

The villagers standing at the window made the sign over their hearts which was their code of faith between the heavens and their hearts, a gesture which was made as often and with as much thought as turning their heads to spit. They said, Thanks be to God, and turned and stepped out from under the eaves and went back to the fields where they worked all day every summer regardless of the weather, heavy rain or scorching sun. They did not look at the government agent on the porch, and he did not look at them. Out by the road was the agent's truck, in the back of which soldiers sat smoking cigarettes and playing cards.

When the cries of the mother had stopped and the new cries began, the agent stood up. He passed his hand over the front of his shirt as if to smooth any wrinkle, though there was no wrinkle to smooth. Then, abruptly, he stopped, turned his head ever so slightly. Was it two babies that he heard? He listened a moment. Yes, he realized, two. He took his leather folder from the floor where it leaned against a chair leg and set it on the chair and searched through it until he found the papers he needed and pulled them out. He also took out a small black book and flipped through it a moment. Reading something in the tiny lettering, he nodded and then put the book back in the folder.



Matthew Raymond teaches English in California. His stories have appeared in *Oyster Boy Review* and *Euphony*. His poems have appeared in *Parcel*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Permafrost*, *Grasslands*, and *Sulphur River Literary Review*. *The Muddy Season* is his first chapbook.