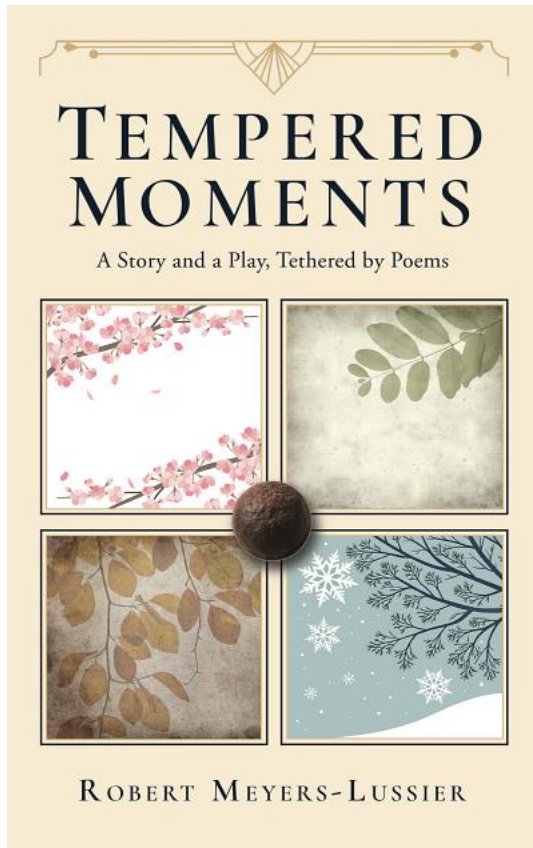




A candymaker's account of a charged year is answered by a one-act play and poems that reveal how memory reshapes desire, craft, and blame. A literary hybrid about two people who shared one moment but not its meaning.

Tempered Moments: A Story and a Play, Tethered by Poems
By Robert Meyers-Lussier

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TEMPERED MOMENTS

A Story and a Play, Tethered by Poems



ROBERT MEYERS-LUSSIER

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Poems "Manic Rainbows," "One (Brief) Moment," and the three psaku in "Interlude" appear courtesy of the author's collection Crystallized Remnants.

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MANIC RAINBOWS

Creation implodes upon contact
 with lies brittle with age
History's truths are divined
 underwritten by human sublimation

Risen is he who chants
 the clearest, the loudest, the longest
Illicitly converting mortality
 from eternal salvation

Satan walks amongst us
 as fire on oceans of freewill
Treachery's steam rises
 from these lecherous liquid liaisons

Olive branches grace the heads
 of serpent-haired prophets
Phenomena of nature supernaturally raptured
 before annihilation

Hellacious are the truths of life
 as red and green tears from heaven
Empty vessels of hope filled
 with the juices of evil's flesh

Rainbows follow this celestial
 downpour of doubts
Manic reflections arched
 by brazened pots of glamour minted

Robert Meyers-Lussier

Crayon creations fill in
dot-to-dot emotions
Colorful lies litter
harvested experiences collected

Orphaned is your soul
estranged from Fatherly attentions
Your fate fatally consumed
by neither the past,
nor the future,
but the present

3 August 1997

THE CANDYMAKER

A Short Story

Spring 1997

Let me tell you about incompetence.

Not the ordinary kind. Not the missed deadline, the forgotten appointment, the careless arithmetic of an ordinary day. I mean the profound sort. The kind that walks upright, smiles, and fools people because the smile arrives first.

Spring of 1997, I was working at Bellamy's, a third-generation candy shop on Maple Street where the copper pots hung like church bells and the air tasted of sugar, cream, and lies. She arrived in April, right when the chocolate eggs were setting wrong, their shells too thin, cracking before they reached the counter. I knew immediately.

You develop an eye for flaws when you have studied the craft properly. When you understand that candy is architecture in miniature. That tempering chocolate requires the precision of a surgeon's hand and the patience to stand alone in a room full of easier answers.

She had none of this.

She smiled at the owners, Miriam and Paul Bellamy, good people, sentimental people, and within a week they had given her the morning shift, the key to the stock room, and trust she had not earned. The cherry blossoms were falling outside our windows, pink petals mashed into the sidewalk like failed fondant, and I remember thinking: this will not end well.

I was right, of course. I am always right about these things. That is one of the burdens of standards: they let you see failure before anyone else is prepared to name it.

What I did not anticipate was how thoroughly she would convince them otherwise. How she would manage, through some alchemy I still do not fully understand, to make competence look like cruelty and standards look like spite.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Let me start with that first morning, when she walked through the door in a spring dress the color of sugared almonds, and I tasted something I had not tasted in years.

Possibility, I thought then.

Now I know it was simply the first note of something turning sour.

That first morning she stood at the marble cooling table, watching me temper dark chocolate for the Easter rabbits we molded through May. Her hands were empty. She had not washed them yet, had not tied her apron, had not asked where anything was kept. She just stood there, breathing in the warm vanilla air as if she had entered a spa instead of a working kitchen.

I remember the angle of light through the front windows, how it caught the fine hairs on her forearm and turned them golden against her skin.

For one second, maybe two, I watched the light on her forearm.

Then the thermometer dipped, and I looked away.

"The temperature has to drop exactly three degrees every two minutes," I told her, not looking up. "Cocoa butter has six crystal formations. Only one produces the proper snap and sheen. It is chemistry, not guesswork."

She moved closer. Too close. I could smell her soap, floral and cheap beneath the bitter cacao.

"Show me," she said.

Her fingertip traced the edge of the marble where chocolate had already begun to set, leaving a smudge.

I felt my jaw tighten. This was how it would be, I realized. Carelessness presented as curiosity. Ignorance dressed as willingness to learn. And me, expected to clean up after her. Expected to teach someone who had not yet learned that craft begins in humility.

But I showed her anyway.

In that moment, I wanted to.

That was my first mistake.

I guided her hands through the motions, showing her how to spread the tempered chocolate thin across the marble, working it with the offset spatula in long, deliberate strokes. She watched my technique with what seemed like genuine attention, her head tilted slightly, and I found myself explaining more than I intended.

The way cocoa butter crystallizes. The importance of working quickly once the gloss begins. How you can tell by sound alone when chocolate has reached the proper consistency, that particular whisper it makes against metal.

She asked good questions, I will admit that. Where does the batch go wrong? What happens if the temperature climbs even half a degree? For a moment I almost believed she cared about the answers.

For a moment, I wanted her to.

Then she tried it herself, and her strokes were too heavy, too slow. The chocolate pulled and tore instead of flowing.

"Like this," I said, covering her hand with mine to correct the angle.

Her skin was warm. Warmer than I expected.

I held on a fraction longer than instruction required, then pulled away quickly.

"You'll need to practice," I told her, my voice sharper than necessary.

Through the front windows, I could see Miriam watching us from the register, smiling that maternal smile she reserved for her grandchildren. Already making stories. Already choosing sides.

That was the trouble with Miriam. She could see two bodies close together and begin setting a place for them in the future.

The morning sun had climbed higher, and dust motes drifted through the light like sugar crystals that would never set.

By noon, we had moved to the tempering room in back, where the humidity had to stay below forty percent and the temperature never varied more than two degrees. She was struggling with the ganache for the spring truffles, whisking cream into melted chocolate with the graceless enthusiasm of someone who had never understood that force and speed are not the same as skill.

The mixture was breaking, fat separating into glossy pools that would never emulsify properly.

I watched her for longer than I should have, studying the concentration on her face, the small furrow between her eyebrows, the way she bit her lower lip when she thought no one was looking.

"You are overworking it," I said finally.

She looked up, startled, and I saw something flash across her face. Embarrassment, maybe. Or annoyance that I had caught her failing.

“The proteins need to bond,” I continued, taking the bowl from her hands.

Our fingers touched briefly. Hers were sticky with chocolate. Mine were clean.

“You cannot rush chemistry,” I said.

Even as I spoke, I heard how it sounded. Pedantic. Cold. Like I was talking about more than ganache.

She smiled then, a small apologetic smile that made me angrier somehow.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ll get better.”

And I believed her.

I believed her then, standing in that humid little room with the broken ganache between us and spring pressing its stupid pink face against the windows.

Then was enough.

The owners were already planning the Easter display, already asking her opinion about ribbon colors and basket arrangements, things that had nothing to do with the craft. Outside, the afternoon breeze scattered more cherry blossoms across Maple Street. Pink snow falling on a world that mistook sweetness for substance.

That first week she arrived early every morning, always in those spring dresses, pastels that reminded me of fondant colors I had spent years learning to mix by hand. Butter yellow. Mint green. That particular shade of pink that comes from adding just a drop of beet juice to white chocolate.

She tied her apron with a small flourish, humming sometimes, and the whole shop would seem to shift around her presence, as if she were the center and everything else, including me, had become decorative.

I disliked that.

I also waited for it.

Paul started making jokes, calling us “the dream team,” as if competence could be achieved through proximity, as if her enthusiasm might somehow be contagious.

One morning a regular customer came in, a woman who had been buying our truffles for her dinner parties for years. She looked past the new girl at the register, caught my eye in the back, and called out, “Are you

making the raspberry ganache this week? My guests always ask for yours specifically.”

I nodded, and she smiled, satisfied.

The new girl’s smile tightened slightly, but she said nothing.

I noticed. Of course I noticed.

Miriam brought in flowers for the counter, tulips in a glass vase, because “spring should feel like spring.”

I said nothing.

What was there to say? That cut flowers die faster than unpruned ones? That forcing blooms early ruins the bulb for next season? That beauty on display is often just decay arranged where customers can admire it?

No one wants that kind of truth before lunch.

On Thursday she burned a batch of caramel. Let it go too far. The smell of scorched sugar filled the shop for hours, a smell I normally loved, now ruined.

She apologized profusely, her eyes actually welling up, and Miriam patted her shoulder, told her everyone makes mistakes, that this is how we learn.

When Miriam went to help a customer, I leaned close, scraping the ruined pot clean.

“You weren’t watching the temperature,” I said quietly.

She turned, and we were suddenly face to face, close enough that I could see the small scar above her eyebrow, close enough to smell that cheap floral soap beneath the caramel.

“I know,” she whispered.

Then, so soft I almost missed it:

“Teach me.”

I should have heard the danger in that.

Not because she was dangerous. Not yet. Not in any way I could prove. The danger was simpler than that. She had given me exactly what I wanted in exactly the moment I wanted it.

Need.

A person can live a long time on being needed. Longer than he can live on being loved, I think.

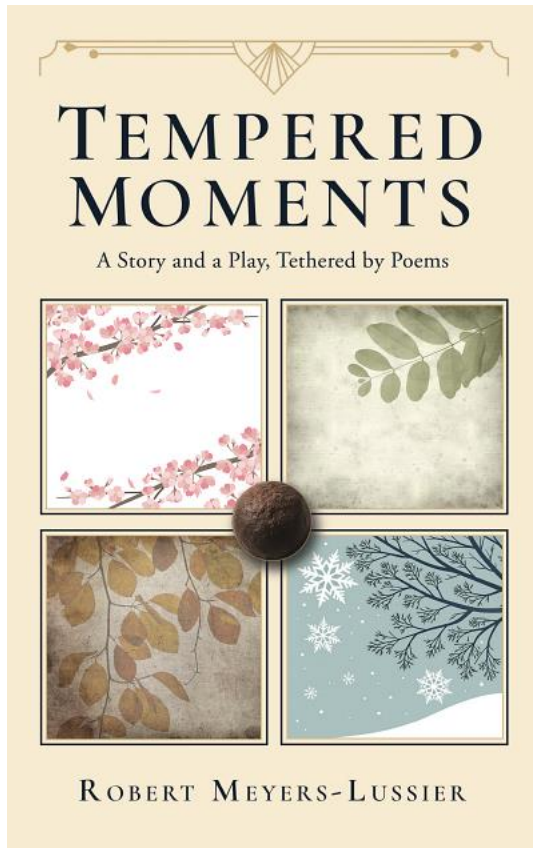
And then, in that little room, I knew that I would teach her.

That was my second mistake.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Meyers-Lussier is a poet, photographer, cook, former soldier, and longtime legal professional whose creative life has been shaped by language, image, memory, and close observation. As a teenager, he lived in Japan as an exchange student, an experience that deepened his sense of restraint, atmosphere, beauty, and impermanence. He later served in the United States Army from 1983 to 1989, including work as a Signals Intelligence analyst, where listening closely, recognizing patterns, and reading what is hidden beneath the surface became part of his way of seeing.

Across poetry, photography, food, and prose, his work returns to craft as a way of understanding experience. His hardcover book *Psaiku: Haiku of the Psyche* (2001) introduced the psaiiku form, a compressed poetic structure shaped by psychological perception, precision, and resonance. Five poems from his second published work, *Crystallized Remnants* (2017), appear in this volume. He is also the author of the cookbook *This Is Delicious! What Is It?* (2004). An award-winning fine-art photographer, his images have appeared in national and international exhibitions. Since 1994, he has worked in the legal industry, a field that has deepened his understanding of language, conflict, memory, and the stories people carry.



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