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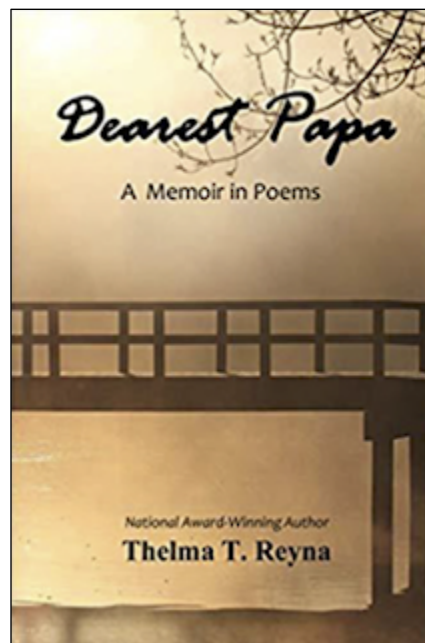
## Sudden Death Living's Imperative

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Review: Thelma T. Reyna. **Dearest Papa. A Memoir in Poems.**

Pasadena, CA: [Golden Foothills Press](#), 2020.

By Michael Sedano



**Dearest Papa: A Memoir in Poems** by Thelma T. Reyna starts like so many books, with an Author's Foreword. "Poems," the subtitle calls itself, hence, ordinarily I'd flip through the

prefatory pages searching for the poetry. Ordinarily, I'd do that, but some power compelled me to start at the Foreword and read **Dearest Papa** cover-to-cover, and you'll be glad you do this, too. Every word matters in a collection like this.

**Dearest Papa. A Memoir in Poems** isn't about poetry. Dearest Papa is about getting ready for death. Don't take that wrong. Dying is universal, but knowing about how to live with death comes hard, or not at all, to the living.

Fifty years, Victor and Thelma had. As the Foreword states: Back sometime in the late sixties, "Two young Latino college students from backgrounds of poverty, with divergent life stories and roots, made vows to live life together" and that's what they did for 50 years. Until one ordinary day Papa takes a flukish bite from his cat. The wound poisons his diabetic system, with extended medical treatments, amputation, hospitalizations, all eventually leading to a minor surgical procedure that kills him.

Readers who come to **Dearest Papa** find themselves privileged to share this wife's final words, the last thoughts she will ever get to say to her "Papa," the grandfather, father, husband, lover. No words will ever be as intimate as these, important to Thelma Reyna, but now part of a reader's experience. The privilege of sharing intimacy makes a person special, not solely in those passionate moments of metaphor and narrative, but afterward, when the reader steps out of apostrophe into eulogy, then into literature as equipment for living.

Everyone knows or shall know grief. **Dearest Papa** accounts Thelma T. Reyna's passage through her husband's illness, death, absence. Reyna expresses her sorrow through prose poems and verse that create a stunning narrative of minor events unfolding into catastrophe. On every page, readers share the poet's grief, regret, celebration. Reyna's overwhelming gratitude for life makes **Dearest Papa** a book to share with caregivers, diabetics, elders, and people who love. This book belongs in so many readers' hands and deserves to be read along with Rudolfo Anaya's masterful exploration of death, dying, and grief, **The Old Man's Love Story**.

*Beginnings* and *Endings* constitute the first two sections of the book, a chronology in poetry of Papa's life and death. Then the widow's *Mourning*. Her *Balms* and *Resolutions* conclude her poet-widow's five-step journey, of taking a deep breath, making sense of the unaccountable, dealing with loneliness, moving on purposefully. People cannot sustain grief without becoming emotional cripples, at least until memory fades or something worse comes along. In its way, **Dearest Papa** is the old woman's love story and a valuable addition to United States literature of grief and consolation. This book is an antidote to suffering.

The poet structures the collection to confront mourning and recovery with dramatic immediacy. In the 116-page book, Papa is gone before the book is half complete. This structure offers a pointed reminder that life continues once the duality of beginning ending have wound their paths.

*Beginning* remembers a handsome young man and a quiet, inconspicuous woman. They court and couple. The poet marks their vigor and commitment in erotic poetry, their sexual playfulness a demonstration of the wholeness inside that quiet girl he notices sitting in the back of their college classroom. Like the poet, readers remember intense days of blossoming love, this first section so open and true, so intimate and private, it's the poet signaling her trust in her readers

with a completely open ethos. Writing openly about something as elemental as sex prepares readers to think about something even more elemental, sudden death.

When Papa dies, the poet doesn't challenge herself to ask "why" nor "why me?" It is what it is. Papa physically disappears from the work halfway. After the section *Mourning*, he's a pronoun or an allusion. In the section *Balms*, remembered scenes and incidents involving Papa provide solace for the poet, as do nature and other sources of comfort. Death doesn't matter anymore to the dead, so death is now for the living.

The poet allows herself remonstrance in "Dear Doctor." Her husband is dead, the doctor is telling the woman consumed in grief. She ignores that fact, wildly seeking succor in everything else that's wrong about this moment. The poet nor the poem says what the poem really wants to say to the doctor, "Doctor, you killed Papa." Don't ponder why she doesn't say that, nor does she beat the anesthesiologist over the head with bitter words. What good would it do?

In the prose poem, "Moment," Reyna, suffused with grief, wonders about what the moment of death was like for her beloved husband.

*Did you hear your surgeon say, "I've got to tell his wife." Did you see him pull his face mask off, and did he scurry out the door, a frightened ant? They said compressions on your silent chest went on and on, that your heartbeat blipped back for a tiny flash, then disappeared, fading faster each time. Did you see them staring at the screen, and did anybody cry? .... They say humans know the moment they expire.*

But words and the world of sounds will be just out of reach to everyone, the living and the dead. There are always things that mattered, ideas that need to be gathered, words that need to be said in a eulogy so everyone left behind can hear what no longer matters but my gosh, it used to matter so much to two people.

**Dearest Papa: A Memoir in Poems** collects all the words Thelma Reyna has to say about the man her family called Papa. Words are all that remain after fifty years and eight months of life together. The poems, verse and prose poems, the narrative elements, these, every word, are the final expressions and memories in one woman's life about something everyone is going to experience. Profoundly intimate, the words, in the end, don't have to mean anything to anyone but Thelma Reyna. They don't have to, but when you start confronting inevitability, don't panic. Read **Dearest Papa** before not even words remain.

The book is available for \$15 plus tax and shipping through [www.GoldenFoothillsPress.com](http://www.GoldenFoothillsPress.com), as well as through amazon. Mail a check or pay through Paypal.

Posted by msedano at 12:00 AM 

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