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ACCLAIMED LOCAL POET THELMA REYNA PAYS TRIBUTE TO HER LATE HUSBAND VICTOR WITH NEW COLLECTION OF POETRY

By **CARL KOZLOWSKI**

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Thelma and Victor Reyna were much like countless other couples in love. They met while in college during the late 1960s, both having grown up in poverty and having divergent life stories and roots but still coming together to form a marriage and family over 50 years together.

But tragedy struck in October 2018 when Victor died from complications from a minor surgical procedure. The man she and their family loved to call “Papa” had already been victim of a fluke

bite from his cat, which had poisoned his diabetic system and led to extended medical treatments, amputations and hospitalizations before that final procedure.

Thelma had built an acclaimed career as one of America's best poets, so she decided to use her talents as a means of coping with her immense loss. The resulting book of poems, "Dearest Papa," is a tribute not only to his life, but to the importance of family and connectedness to nature, friends and others in building resilience and defeating adversity.

"Papa's death was totally unexpected. We had a dinner date after the procedure would be finished," Reyna recalls. "It was just a simple outpatient surgery he'd had before, with the same surgeon, same hospital. He died within minutes of the start of his procedure. My family and I were devastated.

"If I hadn't had writing as an outlet, I believe dealing with his death would have been even harder," she continues. "All my life, writing poems or stories about big losses such as the deaths of my father, my kid brother, my best friend and my mother was cathartic to me and helped me navigate the loss and find a way forward."

Reyna wrote the book over the course of last year, leading up to the anniversary of Victor's passing. She found that it "kept me grounded, allowed me to grieve fully as I wished, helped me reflect on our 50 years of marriage, remember happy events, relive milestones, and describe mitigations of sorrow that I call 'balms' in the book." She was also motivated by the chance to honor and memorialize her husband by documenting his suffering, bravery, devotion, and purposeful life in a book that she feels he would have liked, and to share her journey of grief with readers in the hope of helping them process and move through their own losses.

"Dearest Papa" begins with poems about Victor's high school years, with flashbacks to his earlier life, before moving chronologically through their college years together, their wedding, then snippets of their long marriage. It focuses on the highlights as well as small aspects of Victor's life and career, with poignant depictions of his failing health amid the last two years of his life playing a large part in the book as well.

"I knew it had to be a memoir but I wanted his to be different," says Reyna. "So it includes photos, silly stories that capture his wit and great sense of humor, all forms of poetry, prose blended with haiku, and prose poetry based on factual medical information relevant to him, particularly regarding death. There are recollections of his youth, anecdotes about him and our grandchildren, whom he adored.

“What I wrote during the year varied from week to week and was not programmed or linear,” she continues. “I knew I would sequence all the parts as needed when the book was done, which I did. My vision of the book was unchanged, but I added and removed writings, trying to balance out the sorrow with the happy times and the hopefulness of survival.”

“I’m hoping that readers will feel the emotion, will be stirred to reflection, will be able to relate and to find universality and inspiration in Papa’s life. I’m hoping they’ll learn new things, that they’ll like the poems for their imagery and musicality or descriptiveness, and that they’ll understand the journey of grief a bit better. I’m hoping that those who have suffered great loss will feel a sense of hope.”

Reyna has also set her mind to her next work, her ninth book, which will be “an anthology about this horrific COVID-19 pandemic.” She has selected nearly 30 distinguished poets and prose writers she knows and invited them to submit poems, short fiction, or essays “on the various dimensions of this pandemic: the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and political ramifications as this crisis is being experienced here in America.”

In addition, Reyna has solicited black and white photos from a renowned professional photographer to be included in the book. The resulting tome will be published later this year through her family’s independent imprint, Golden Foothills Press.

“Dearest Papa” sells for \$15 plus shipping and is available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or through Reyna’s personal websites, [GoldenFoothillsPress.com](https://www.GoldenFoothillsPress.com) and [AuthorThelmaReyna.com](https://www.AuthorThelmaReyna.com).

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