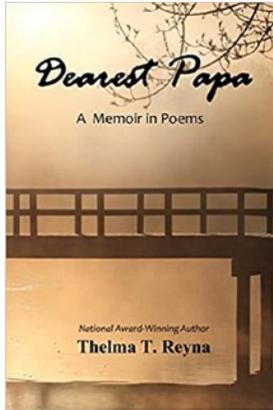


QUILL & PARCHMENT

Reviewed by *Michael Escoubas*



In the foreword to *Dearest Papa*, her memoir honoring her late husband, Thelma T. Reyna avers, “Our lives, all lives unspool with time, unexpected paths take unexpected turns and the unexpected awaits at each curve in our journeys.” No one, least of all Thelma and Victor, expected anything other than a successful minor surgery that day; followed by dinner already planned at their favorite restaurant. Something unexpected raised its ugly head. The arts, and poetry, lends itself to the unexpected, to those things that give a “gut-punch” to the lives of regular people, changing them forever, often growing them to new heights not imagined before.

Thelma’s compelling memoir is arranged in five parts: I. Beginnings, II. Endings, III. Mournings, IV. Balms, and V. Resolutions. Some 12 pages of photographs are salt and peppered throughout the book. These judiciously placed photos depict a smiling, confident Victor, a wedding picture, family members, sports trophies and other treasures that lend a special poignancy to Reyna’s superb poetry. Her poems arise from a sharing of life between two people whose love remained undeterred even by the unspooling of life due to something totally unexpected that changed the trajectory of their lives forever.

From “Beginnings” I was struck by the poet’s openness about shared love. This is evident in an excerpt from “Pete and Tillie”:

When my breasts were young and round, my husband named them
one night as we lay in afterward euphoria.

Pete and Tillie

He tapped each one with a fingertip light as a feather's tip. Monarch
knighting heroes with the delicate touch of a sword. Pete and Tillie.

What comfort, what ease, resides in Thelma's heart as she lifts the veil on intimacies shared. Caresses not of lust but of deeper love reaching beyond physical borders.

Poems throughout "Beginnings" paint a portrait of Victor's dedication to his students as an educator, his love of sports, his impressive physical appearance, and stamina.

"Timeless Teaching" bears witness to Vic's advocacy for a troubled student from a broken home. Because of his testimony the student was allowed to stay in school under Vic's mentorship and tutelage. This was *teaching* that paved the way for a kid to have a better life.

I was surprised that poems about "Endings" were placed early in the memoir. As I worked my way through the collection I easily understood why. Endings, I reasoned, naturally belong at the end. Not so here. As Victor walked barefoot through his house one day, he was bitten by the family cat. Victor thought nothing of it, said nothing. I would have done the exact same thing. The event was like a comma in a sentence, something one barely notices. However, this triviality led ultimately to infection, infection to gangrene, gangrene to amputation of Vic's right foot. The poem, "Cat Bite" is a must read to understand the full picture.

"Papa," as Victor was affectionally known, tolerated the amputation procedure well, even against menacing odds. It was a different procedure, minor by comparison, that resulted in Papa's death. The prose poem "Moment" is one of the best descriptions I've read about what a patient knows or understands at the end of life.

Within the context of endings," I proudly reprint in full Thelma's heart presented in "How Poems are Born":

While walking room to room, to tuck
bedsheets in around the edge, to
wash my cup in morning light of
sink

drop soiled laundry in the tub, wipe coffee
stains from tile, sweep lint from sofa cushions
crumpled flat, fill cubbies with his
books

fingers, hands, legs move like ‘motons
clearing dust, while poems rush in like
fools, disembodied, spinning reels of
recollection

stringing phrases, weaving words he spoke,
parsing empty spaces of the life lived here, making
sense of him and me and death, the poems are
born

Moving ever-so-gently into “Mournings,” Thelma recalls small things, things just between “Papa” and herself. His favorite cologne, the fragrance of the man, so much more that the liquid he splashed on. The “Potty Cat” that greets her every morning, with those mesmerizing green eyes. And the house itself that “will never be / the same again.” She wonders if there is really such a thing as “Broken Heart Syndrome,” where “Disasters shred our fibers like thieves picking / pockets in broad day.”

“Ordinary Things: Tanka Sequence,” echoes Mother Teresa’s timeless saying: *Do small things with great love*. The poem is divided in to 3 divisions of four tanka sequences each: 1. Work; 2. Self; 3. Family. Each paints a subtle picture of the man, his doings, his leavings, his loves. Don’t skip this one.

What shall we do about life when the best part of life is gone? I find so much value in section IV, “Balms.” I can’t help thinking, that without poetry, Thelma’s loss would have been unbearable. I felt her leaning into poetry, reaching deeply into poetry for what she needed, for ways to both understand what happened, (even as if looking into a steamy mirror), and beyond mere understanding, rising toward redemption, toward hope, toward peace.

“So Much Goodness in This World” is a prime example. Four sestets highlight the goodness she finds; here is the opening sestet:

I marvel at unconditioned love,
The givers giving when cameras are off,
Microphones still or gone,
Without name tags, the press,
Tax breaks or trophies,
Unpaid.

After “Balms” Thelma is far from finished. Section V. Resolutions, suggests concrete actions about how to live and what to do to sustain the life and values of her dear Papa. I was struck by “Candle,” a simple, yet profound resolution that lights

Thelma's path ... let it also light everyone's path:

*Death is not the end of the light;
it is putting out the candle
because the dawn has come.*

—Tagore

aurora's
fingers
pinch
flame
spread
iridescent
skirts
on
clouds
fan
gray
away
dawn
can't
die
light
never
snuffed
galaxies
prove
this