

National Award-Winning Author Thelma T. Reyna's New Collection of Poetry: Sensitive, Riveting, and Theatrical

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March 28, 2020

If you are interested in reading an achingly touching and beautiful book of poetry written as a memoir, run, do not walk, to order Thelma T. Reyna's *Dearest Papa: A Memoir in Poems*, published this month. The memoir is a tribute to the former Poet Laureate's husband Victor, who died suddenly in 2018 during minor surgery. This book is a blow to the senses, a jab to the belly of your being.

On the day of the surgery, Reyna had spent all day with Victor in the pre-op, then waited for him in the family waiting room during what was to be a one-and-a-half hour surgery to implant a small medical device in his arm. The couple had planned a dinner date for later that day at their favorite restaurant. Before Victor was wheeled into the operating room, the poet had said a prayer at his bedside, had blessed him with the sign of the cross on his forehead, and kissed him. She never saw him alive again.

Divided into five sections, the poetry follows a chronological arc, beginning with a fruitful, substantive marriage of 50 years, followed by scenes from their marriage and family life, and moving quickly into intense and heart-wrenching grieving over a fatality that could have easily been prevented. The book progresses to a brave and strong acceptance of, and moving on, from tragedy.

On page 36, in the haibun, "Brave," the award-winning author paints a deeply personal portrait of her husband's courage and spirit during many health and medical struggles, leading to her declaration in the last line:

I'm not brave like him. When gangrene invaded his flesh and doctors warned him he'd lose his leg, Papa never moaned, groaned, or complained. Never wondered, why me?

They butchered his foot, slicing, scooping decayed bone, leaving his foot's innards open like an abbatoir. They then entwined his foot white. As healing pattered forward, month after month, bacteria crept in behind his heart, virus invaded his lungs, kidneys turned traitors and started shutting down.

But through it all, Papa's eyes shone with gratefulness for each sunset he saw casting its lavender beams through his hospital windows. Papa's spirit stayed stout.

The four poems on pages 38, 39, 40 and 41-42, the very heart of the volume, make this collection as much an indictment of the American medical system as of loss or grief. "Before They Took You Away" on page 38 is tragic, sad and tremulously toxic.

*they should've scheduled you early morning as they always did
should've made you fast 6 hours instead of 20
should've made you first that day not last
should've seen the passing hours weaken you with hunger, thirst
should've remembered this surgery was not urgent
should've said put on your shirt and shoes you're going home we've made you
wait too long*

OR...

*should've given you just one anesthetic drug not two
...should've said put on your shirt and shoes you're going home we've made you
wait too long*

On page 39, the melancholy "This Is How Grief Goes" may very well be the best poem in the book. Brief, but wonderfully powerful and electric, it stuns with raw honesty.

*When loss is swift, when it strikes like a viper in a pot,
blunting hopes and well-laid plans, the hole
that swallows us is bottomless and fierce.*

*Emptiness unspools like mummy's tape, endless, frayed, muffling,
gagging, dooming lips and eyes to tombs devoid of words and light,
stripped of loving hands,
caverns of ululations.*

*Loss flattens us.
But this is how we sink, to rise,
how brokenness is patched together again,
how despair ultimately defies death.*

Page 40's "Dear Doctor," which speaks directly to the surgeon in charge when her husband died, brings beauty in potency, plurality and poise, and is one of the saddest, yet most sincere poems this critic has ever read.

*All of us are fallible. You should have offered me a chair when your scrub nurse
summoned me from the waiting room. Mask pulled around your neck, you should have
stood when I entered, knowing as you did.*

*You should have spoken soft, looked me in the eye, said you're moving heaven and earth to
save him. You should have held my hand because you remembered you never saw him without
me.*

*But all of us are fallible. You sat, I stood, while your pursed lips played your line not looking
good five times. Your warmest lines. As if any other surgery, you said to me, return outside
and wait.*

You should have known he cupped his life into your hands before your anesthesia sealed his eyes and stomped his heart. You should have said I'm sorry so so very sorry before you rose and walked away from me.

In another striking poem combining science and grief, "Broken Heart Syndrome," on page 60, Reyna's strength and single-mindedness speak out thus:

*There is such a thing,
doctors say –not
the zigzag-split pointy hearts, two
pasted halves on Hallmark cards.*

No, docs say, hearts really do fall apart.

*Disasters shred our fibers like thieves picking
pockets in broad day. Suddenness of things gone wrong, small or big,
chip chunks of stamina and strength
from hearts like Greenland's glaciers sliding into
open sea. Our chambers are invaded, locks picked,
thresholds split, so heartbreak can slip in.*

Yes, doctors say, there is such a thing.

*A violent spat, a gun jabbed in your face. A lover in his mistress'
embrace, caught in your bed. A husband with a
bullet in his head, or found suddenly at dawn, blankets warm but skin
cold. Startling things, ambush-grief, unplanned loss, faith shattered and
tossed. World upended, though brief, can be enough to cleave your heart.*

Yes, doctors say there is such a thing.

*No wonder, then, that spouses married long and tight, depart this world
in tandem, or one soon after. No wonder, then, that when Carrie,
princess of galaxies, died sudden, her icon mother, consumed with grief,
followed close. No wonder, then, that elders in love for life die days
apace.*

*Yes, not all wounded depart, but they
stumble along, with fluttering hearts, weakened
pulse, leaking valves, raided chambers... pattering
onward, broken heart syndrome and all.*

Yes, doctors say there is such a thing.

As the book moves chronologically in the lives of the couple, it also documents the journey of grief as it occurs. Maybe the most definite realization in the final chapter titled "Resolutions," is the poem "Piecing the Breakage," on page 100.

*There comes the day when we resign
ourselves--as Hindi brides stepping into
the pyre--to the impermeable.
The cudgel of loss has struck, and it
will not unswing itself.*

*We grind teeth, gird tired loins,
and plod on--blind, limping, bleeding,
broken, or miraculously soothed--
into the new what is.*

*Piecing the breakage together again
may take priests, imams, wizards,
shamans, or crystal ball gazers--
elders, lovers, books, pilgrimages--
or whatever trods the journey of loss
with us.*

*But the journey has been walked.
All roads face forward from here.*

On page 104, in "After the Last Act," the author invokes theatrical metaphors that appeal to readers sparked and impassioned by the stage." Addressing her deceased husband, the author ends the book on a note of hope and devotion.

*No curtain call for me.
When the drama's done, soon or late.
I'll rush backstage
and seek you out.*

*You'll be there.
Our tears will be our "Bravo!"s
as we meld our soul-bodies
into one again*

*and smile at the scenes I botched,
my anemic lines of heroism,
my maudlin moments,
my final soliloquy of hope.*

*You played the script before
and left the boards not long ago
to sit backstage and wait for me.
You knew we'd meet once more.*

*And so we shall.
I'll set up residence backstage,
immortal lovers, you and I,
after the final act.*

What a way to finish a once-in-a-lifetime memoir written in poems. Reyna wrote the collection in real time during the first year of grieving after her husband's death in October 2018, starting the book about two weeks after her loss. The couple were married fifty years. This book is a brilliant character study in language and words that showcases Reyna's spirit and courage in the face of dread and defeat. Tears emerge, but are quickly replaced by muscle, the kind that makes the heart stronger.

This masterpiece of a memoir in verse leaves us, the readers, not so much blindsided by death, but walking hand-in-hand and shoulder-to-shoulder with it in admiration, respect, grief, pain, but also celebration of life.

Edited for length for this website.