

Sing

When she expressed not only shock that her father was dying but resentment that such a thing could be happening to her, her naiveté provoked me, outweighing the compassion I like to think I feel, so I stated primly that my first memory was of my grandmother's funeral and, it having being followed by too many others to count, my most reliable expectation was loss.

“What is it about you,” she shot back, “that attracts so much death?”

Dumbfounded, I had no answer. So I closed my eyes and—summoning my super-power of imaginative retribution—pictured her in a skimpy flowered bikini, bobbing along on an air mattress, feeling invulnerable because she remembered to put on sunscreen, oblivious that the same current leads us all, irresistibly, into the rapids.

I only joke because I'm sad. A heritage of days responding politely to telephone solicitations, marking papers, scrubbing mildew from between bathroom tiles with an old toothbrush, toting up the bills, hoping the balance will be lower this month than last, scanning the newspaper, stomach churning at atrocities committed here or in places the names of which I can't find on the map ...

And after people die, what are we left with?
Things left unsaid. The wish to have lived with intensity every blessed day, to have told loved ones how much we cared before they were stretched flat under starched sheets mouths opening for a last sweet spoonful, rheumy eyes blinking at the squeak of linoleum under the nurses' rubber soles as they come in to plump up the pillows, asking brightly “And how are we doing today?”

Not too well, actually. We're none of us doing all that well but words fail us, yet again. So maybe words are not the answer. Maybe when people are dying what we ought to do is just sing to them: not vent idle chatter, pretending nothing's wrong,

or grasp for closure with portentous conversation,
but lift our voices in praise of what they were

each bar of music a step articulating their comings and goings
the way a staircase goes both up and down
at exactly the same time.

SUSAN GLICKMAN