

The Glass Eye Poem  
By Jeannie Vanasco  
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I.

Massaging his iris, a dab of brown, in a soapy film,  
cleaning my father's eye in my palm  
while he lies between the silver rails of his bed:

this is what the end looks like.

He is dying in what used to be the living room  
in a rented bed in a house on the corner of a street  
all too easy to miss.

I am here trying to hold onto him  
but all I can hold is his eye.

This is what the end sounds like:

the white hum of his breathing machine  
underneath his last words, *you're beautiful*.  
For the next two days, my father says nothing.  
I say everything I can. I make promises  
while his hospice nurses move in and out,  
whispering.

I run photographs along the rails of his bed,  
scenes he may have forgotten:  
reading a book to me  
despite the white patch over his eye;  
clutching me on his lap  
and looking off somewhere as if he knew this was coming.

In almost every scene he is looking at me and never at the camera.  
It makes it difficult to choose his obituary photo.  
I mean to write an obituary but it keeps coming out all wrong.

I write these things that don't belong:

(11/1/2002)

II.

The open slits in the Venetian blinds  
let in horizontal strips of light that dress him.  
His pale bald head  
(leaned into the coal-black pinhole lens)  
almost matches the white of his eye.

He wears a paper gown open in the back,  
ripping at the edges like my coloring book.  
A circle of surgical lights shines overhead  
while a narrow doctor stoops over him.

Gold-framed glasses swing half-mast against her chest  
as she leans cautiously into my father,  
prodding his eye with a wand of light.  
What does she see in there?  
Does the eye look sick?

From underneath a sliding metal tray of needles  
and shiny pointed tools,  
I draw what my father says he sees behind the lens:

“A pond, a farmhouse, rolling hills.  
A child playing in a field of weeds.”

I draw big brown mounds of land for hills,  
mounds like the enormous anthills crushed  
into the slats of the hospital sidewalk by some boy I saw.  
I add a circle for a pond and draw a duck  
because there had to have been a duck—  
not behind the lens but in the pond—  
and I color the farmhouse green  
because I would like to see a green farmhouse  
and I would like for my father to see  
what I see.

*(5/4/1989)*

III.

A vision, he sees a vision before him,  
hovering above his bed. I stand before the vision,  
trying to block whatever it is that is frightening him,  
but he looks through me as if I don't exist.

*(11/2/2002)*

IV.

The farmhouse and the hills and the pond  
and the girl disappear.

“I don't see nothing. There's nothing there,” says my father.

He peers into the lens machine with his left eye

as the doctor asked, but the girl has disappeared.

How does my father see nothing?  
How am I to draw nothing?  
Am I disappearing like the girl?

Squeezing my lids shut,  
I can't figure out what color nothing is.  
I try covering my lids with my hands and things darken.  
I open my eyes and scan through my crayons emptied on the floor.  
None of them match the nothing I saw.

I look down at my blank piece of paper and that doesn't look like nothing.  
It looks like something, like untouched paper.  
I can't draw what the eye sees.  
I tell my mom I want a crayon the color of nothing,  
but she never answers and leaves the room.

*(5/4/1989)*

V.

On a tiny floral saucer next to his bed, his eye sits, unseeing  
as the four men empty the living room of him,  
carrying his body into the winter morning.

*(11/3/2002)*

VI.

I should draw a picture of myself in case I disappear  
but what would that matter, how would he see the picture  
if he can't see even me?  
So I draw my father's face as I see it  
in case he disappears.

Dragging the yellow crayon across the page,  
I try to capture all the lines stretched across his forehead,  
but my picture looks wrong, too flat. So I crumple the paper  
and take it to him and say the wrinkles in the paper  
are for the wrinkles in his face and he laughs but he starts to cry too.

A nurse pulls me back and says—  
spoken as an order, not a question—  
why don't you wait in the waiting room  
like a good little girl, but I ignore her  
and continue drawing pictures in new colors.

I draw one of her, fire spewing out of her ears,  
her nostrils, her hands. I press the fire so hard  
it breaks the paper. I never give her this  
but put it on my father's lap instead.  
He laughs and tells me to be a good little girl and I listen.

*(5/4/1989)*

VII.

Where did the men take him?  
They say they are waiting  
for the hard November ground to break  
before they bury my father.  
So where is he now?

*(11/4/2002)*

VIII.

I would like to see my father,  
I tell the nurse,  
but she says the doctors are working on him.  
She says not to push her. That's not nice.  
She says he will be okay soon. What about his old eye,  
I ask. What will they do with it? Where will it go?  
I want to hold on to it, I say, but she says that would be impossible.

*(5/4/1989)*

IX.

It all blurs together. Is this how he saw the world?

X.

There is no breathing machine, no lens  
to look through now.  
Everything is gone except the picture of him  
hanging in a frame above his rented bed  
being wheeled out of our home.

His crinkled portrait faces me.  
It looks more like him than the photos do.  
This should have been in his obituary.

I meant to tell him this in a letter I meant

to drop into his coffin before it closed.

I keep writing him more, addressing them  
nowhere, crumpling them like the picture  
because it was wrong, is  
wrong to think my letters change anything.  
And what did this picture do but remind him  
of how little time we had together?  
How it must have tormented him all these years.

Was my picture of him the last thing he saw,  
was the vision there to guide him,  
or was there nothing?

All this I think of as I take his picture from the wall  
and run my fingers over the wrinkles of his face  
and with the help of a black pen, I  
un-draw him.

*(11/5/2002)*