The Glass Eye Poem
By Jeannie Vanasco

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 doesn't answer 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)*