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Behind Gershwin's Eyes

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the blaze with a forked
madrone branch. Soon there
is fire between us
again and more heat
than we can bear.
Our shadowy pattern
flickers on the peeling
wall. My body fills
with warmth where it is
touched by the glowing
of your fires.

BEHIND GERSHWIN’S EYES

Nobody else smelled burning garbage because
Gershwin’s olfactory sensation came from a
slow-growing tumor on the right temporal
lobe of his brain.
—Joan Peyser, The Memory of All That

They did not believe him.
They told him the smell
of burning garbage was all
in his head. Some mornings
it was all he could do
to lift his head from
the pillow. Some nights
his brain was on fire,
songs he thought would take
a hundred years to write
suddenly aflame behind
his bulging eyes.

Dizzy in the barber’s
chair, dizzy before
the chorus, dizzy
on the tennis court.
They did not believe him even when he was adrift in the first movement of his Concerto in F. He felt darkness beyond the footlights seep into his soul, nothing but a sea of dream everywhere, and heard the echo of unplucked strings, a quiver of timpani dying out quickly as one long note from an oboe wafted heavenward. Then he found himself back in Los Angeles, familiar body still upright on the piano stool, Smallens with his baton frozen at the shoulder, only to blunder again in the andante and they told him nothing was wrong.

Dizzy in the Brown Derby, dizzy before the surf, dizzy in the swimming pool.

They believed he was not happy in Hollywood. There is nothing wrong with Gershwin that a song hit wouldn't cure. It was in his head, he was lovelorn or he was riddled
with guilt, he was balding
and drooling, muddle-headed
by noon, listless underneath
the stars. They believed
him sapped by motion picture
making and longing for New
York City. Those hands
once a blur on the keyboard
could only move slow as flowers
toward the sun yet nothing
was wrong. In the spring
those sandaled feet
that could only shuffle
in the summer garden
had been quick as flame
to his own new music
yet nothing was wrong.

A blade of light
where the drawn shades
meet. Roses without odor,
icewater leaping from its cut
glass goblet, eyes leached
of luster in the shadowy
mirror of his brother's eyes.
He spread chocolates melted
in the oven of his palm
up his arms like an ointment,
and soon he was gone.