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.