Amaud Jamaul Johnson
Fancywork

Picture her, the Black Patti—
A black soprano, a wunderkind,
Lovers like medallions, bossy.
In burgundy, studded maybe,
After the dog acts and acrobats,
Maybe in white gloves, she
Walks out, begins Faust or Martha.
Did they notice her back, the arrow
Of her voice, those hands, ringing?
Mama’s little songbird until
Miss Lady began to lionize
Those notes, their brocade, her lungs,
Her breath, ornate and lingering
long after the wash. Then The Grand,
The Orpheum, men chewing their
Fat cigars. Someone will say The air
Was baroque. Their eyes, a gaudy
Mosaic, and her voice, a hurdle.
Even Garvey, general of no nation,
Starts tittering where he sits.
Nigger Heaven, and the applause,
Limp as some broken idiom.
ENCORE

Take the architecture of the wrist,
how the hands flit, hinged

& bony as a blur of wing pulling
each egret across the slow drag

of the lake. Or the way the whole flock,
given the hound dog’s solfeggio

& the report-refrain of some pistol,
how each tendon, how every muscle

of the limb seems to reach
some agreement & move.

Even the box seats & the balcony,
the taste of that song tangled

like moss about my Adam’s apple,
& I see them beginning to stand

& applaud, & if I could spoon
out every eye, or fasten their tongues

like red scarves around a flagpole. *Think,*
*come morning, the both of us, rich men!*

So I wait for them to release
their bellies, to rest their elbows,
to stop slapping their knees. I adjust my top hat, smooth my hands against my breast & tail. I step center-stage. I steady, I steady & bow.