Thread

I come to lead you to the other shore,
To the eternal dark, to fire and frost.
And you approaching there, you living soul,
keep well away from these—they are dead.

—-Dante, Inferno

A paper house for the dead man
traveled across the waves
from Hong Kong to Cheung Chau Island
Charon’s son kept watch.

He built the house from toothpicks, secured by bits of thread.
A girl walks by and touches this offering to the dead.

He watches the tide below,
follows its ebb and flow.
    He leaves the passengers alone
      as they come and as they go.

The waves
will only carry souls that have a tomb.

—-Virgil, Aeneid

His was a family trade. As a child,
Charon’s son lay in the silk-lined interiors of what could be space shuttles or battleship shells

but he now calls none other than the very best caskets a man can claim as a final resting place. Take a whiff, he offers. The woody scent stays on his fingertips.

The needle still pricks his mother’s index finger when she embroiders fat progeny of the dead ten thousand naked babies on both sides of shou yi —these silken robes of everlasting life. No stitch must show, for what immortals wear are infinite
without seam,
beyond end.

A coffin leaves the warehouse today but there is one for her Charon’s son will keep. When her time has come, she too will have her lineage in thread.

And here a multitude was rushing, swarming shoreward, with men and mothers, bodies of high-hearted heroes stripped of life, and boys and unwed girls, and young men set upon the pyre of death before their father’s eyes.

—Virgil, Aeneid.

The white tip of the girl’s mourner cap is the first thing Charon’s son can see as he climbs up to the hilltop crematory. From head to toe, she is swathed in coarse white cloth. To her chest, she clutches her father’s black and white photograph. Charon’s son looks away from the girl’s blank gaze looks away from the beardless face in the frame avoiding two pairs of obsidian irides.

Black smoke stings the eye the furnace round sparks red. The dead man his rosewood casket and rice paper house they smolder and char instead Charon’s son sees a spaceship launch through soot and ash.

But the blaze burns for another. Still alive, Charon’s son must retrace his path and traverse the fabric of the universe invisible as a loop of thread to secure the only passage of the dead.