THE OTHER ORPHEUSES

There's a vase in the museum at Heraklion,
a man who centuries before he had a name,
had a forest he roamed disguised as a bird,
a harp he used to transfix them
with more than paint.
Imagine a world of such birds,
its mornings ubiquitous with their strains.
Imagine such men, how some are pros,
Cyranos on retainer, others pretenders,
unsung, persistent to a fault, like my father,
who, ancient history, knew his way
around a keyboard. If hell were an open mic,
the gods might not have yawned,
though he sounded less weepy
than contrite because the innocent
get just as damned. Eurydice didn't
have to die: sometimes she simply left,
after a slap, a binge, a cocktail napkin
with a smeared number. He had a job
then retired, came back to his life's work
as to my mother he never quite lost
his head over enough to keep him
from soulmates half his age. He believed his own
shameless schmaltz, that the best remained
true to the song itself, desired anyone
who'd listen. Yet now that she's truly gone,
he bangs away about her
in his passé style, in love with maybe
three chords, like a bird in an oak
on a cold spring morning, hearing himself out.

SHIRTWAIST

Amazon doesn't stock them in its warehouse
where you drop your teenage niece off for her shift.
She's emancipated, your brother a drunk.
Your great grandmother wore one in the attic,

her steamer trunk silk-lined like a coffin,
full of elegant debris. In photographs she shrinks
like a butterfly to nothing above the hips,
young yet faded and brittle, her smile outlandish,

since what could make a girl happy
right off the boat? Maybe that it wasn't her
they knew by her teeth or lined up like inventory
on the sidewalk if she chose falling

over fire in New York. Now maquiladoras
sew Lexi's skinny jeans. But there's still crushed
by a forklift, and whoever steals
into the land of Hoffa jokes to pick fruit

or pack meat and loses their hand in a machine
cranks the charred handwheel, the past
one long workweek, a tall tale with anarchy
for a plot, a candle unconsumed

on both ends. See how far pedaling got them
without knocking for a lunch break, a thimble of air,
their Singers screaming "the fabric of our lives."
They own what their bosses wrought,

those fifteen minutes forever on the clock,
cops guarding crowds as ladders strain
for sky, radiant, full of fluttering girls,
and the way flame breathes she goes back inside.