As It Flies

K. A. Jagai

An hour out of Mesa Verde, driving west
on Route 160, a single black brushstroke circling
overhead. A hoarse cry. A lament.
One for sorrow; this I know.

We listen to *August and Everything After*, an ominous quiet
over the car and then a smell I know with a visceral ache—
the firefighters rappelling down from their choppers, the ash
inches deep, enough to hide a stick burnt to a perfect cylinder,

enough to roll my ankle. My body turns boneless, slinky-ing
sideways like an inflatable tube man, nothing to hold in miles
of low mountain scrub, and then down on my knees
penitent once again, nine and eleven and twenty-seven and

kneeling at a pew in St. Patrick's, the whole miracle cathedral
mostly empty because of fucking COVID. I am praying for the first time
in over a decade in the hopes my dead grandma will come
to my homosexual wedding like she didn't think I was gonna burn.

Memory, always, like matryoshka dolls. I remember you—
the church, the name, you're dead—and then we come around the

corner
and across the valley,
thousands of skeletons.

Like the dream you had—uncountable silver skeletons
climbing into the sky, and the sun is setting now, the smell
of pine smoke rising up with the evening exhale
of what was once a verdant forest. Mesa Verde. Green.

Black spines on the back of the mountain
like a porcupine, shaking gently with every step
or in the wind—but this place is dead and still.
Skin of the land burnt crisp, the warm scent overwhelming

and gorgeous. We love the smell of a campfire.
We love the way the wood crackles in the pit,
the way sparks fly up into the starry heavens, dancing gold
against watery blue, ink-blue, the blue-black depths

like the ocean, like caverns, and the spill of the Milky Way
sprinkling feather dust down as Cygnus spreads his wings,
wider than the planet.
Oh, grief. How it envelops the body

calls us back
to ourselves, to our every self

who has felt this ache, like a cancer overtaking the cells.
I turn the radio down, listen to four bodies breathing

in sacred mourning.
We drive through miles of ashblack,
empty death.
Up above, the seer screams on.