

Ambiguous Loss\*

by [Sarah Gordon](#) in the [July 2023](#) issue

*\*term given by psychiatrists to describe the emotional state of those who do not know whether*

*their lost loved ones are dead or alive—The New Yorker, January 16, 2023*

For starters, the missing cat.  
Soon enough, high school pals,  
college boyfriends, harmless  
rivals, that beloved professor  
you thought you'd never forget,  
glasses strung on a cord around  
her neck, that imposing gaze.  
The world stretches out, pulled  
taut, investigated, penetrated,  
pummeled, and parched,  
and you're forced to behold,  
beyond the backyard  
and distant border, unsettling  
images of hordes foraging  
for food in the desert, bending  
over the burning earth in desperate  
prayerful attendance. You must  
witness, as well, the young mothers,  
babies strapped to their backs,  
some treading water, others  
sliding down muddy banks.  
Seeking asylum, they're briefly  
tented and tended by others—  
kinsmen, natives, even a few traders—  
before moving toward that boundless  
wall. The wall is real, of course.

Beyond it is what we cannot know.  
Or know what finally happened to:  
cousins, allies, colleagues, multitudes  
of distraught strangers seeking  
kith and kin. Forensics forever  
beats its head against that cold concrete,  
searching for DNA, examining the fragile  
toys strewn about the scrapyards of our lives,  
riffing through stacks of inventory,  
always encountering, oh yes indeed,  
a stunning halt to retrieval.