

Ambiguous Loss*

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

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**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.