

# Desaparecidos

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I heard about them on National Public Radio. They won't take leave of my thoughts. Mothers in Veracruz, Mexico, are looking for their lost sons. They carry picks, shovels, and gloves hoping to find the bones of the boys they birthed and raised. Young men have been kidnapped by drug cartels or police—who knows which—then killed and dumped into scattered graves.

I'm driving from St. Paul back home to Minneapolis and listening to the radio after dropping off my smiling daughter at school. The story of these mothers unfolds and I swear it feels like one of them is in my passenger seat. I'm taking her bumping along an uneven road. Although I have never crossed the border into Mexico, I see her, the same way I see myself, mother of vulnerable children.

She tells me about her weekly scavenging. Among the occasional body bag, tooth, or skull is the usual mix of grass and litter: a deflated red balloon, a plastic superhero, a child's doll whose arm grows through the dirt. Children who live across the street play here.

I ask where her anger is. She says it's right here and points at her chest. I stop the car at the hillside. I place my hand under her collarbone and feel her warmth, the space of love for her child who owned an auto mechanic business. A lump that won't

go away. I say anger and love. Mismo mismo she says, from the hole in my heart. I want to be the one digging for her.

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It hasn't always been like this, my daughter grinning as she lugs the weight of her electric-blue backpack across her shoulder, telling me to have a good day. Almost six months ago, on Mother's Day, I sat outside on the patio of a South Minneapolis arepas restaurant with my family. My fourteen-year-old daughter was absent. I wanted to protect myself from revealing the horror to my sister-in-law and mother-in-law that only the day before I left her at the hospital to treat her depression and suicidal thoughts. For that week after dropping her off, I visited her every day, watching her take slow command of calling her spirit back into herself. It was like watching my premature twin babies learn to grow and thrive outside of my womb all over again.

The day before Mother's Day was sunny, cool, and windy. Spring had arrived, and I spent the late morning planting yellow tomato seedlings, cilantro, and thyme in a small patch of tilled earth in my backyard. At the same time, my daughter was struggling to get out of bed, to make it through the day without carving fresh wounds into her thighs. We spoke. She told me she was in pain, and I dropped everything to find support to bring her back to this life. Her hospital room consisted of two beds, an alarm clock, shelves, and a bathroom. But there was a wide window, and through it was clear sky, the sunshine, and a view of the Mississippi River. Mommy, I'm so vulnerable she said to me. Never forget this view I said to her.

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No mother should have to search the soil for pieces of her child, or find teeth and long for the smile in the photo pressed into her back pocket. No mother should ever have to wonder which of the three skulls in the black trash bag is your son, or the son of your friend. I'm driving along the interstate and asking how can I be connected like an allmother to all mothers and be me on this morning. I am the mother who dropped off my alive daughter at the curb, watched her round the corner and disappear into school.

I am connected to the mother who is and is not in my passenger seat. I know her like I know the grief in my bones. I hold her hope in my garden, in the shade of my vegetables. I sit with her and she pours out anger and love.

