



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME



**RESILIENCE  
FUND**



# A PLACE CALLED DISAPPEARED

Text: *Daniela Rea*

Illustrations: *Rosario Lucas*



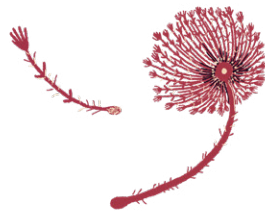
# INTRODUCTION

Mexico's landscapes are scarred by the emotional wounds left behind by people who have disappeared in the war on drugs. And in other parts of the world, migrants also disappear continually, drowned in seas, or abandoned and lost in deserts. Children disappear in illegal adoptions; women who go to another country to seek work vanish without a trace; journalists, activists and whistle-blowers who dare to speak the truth about political, economic and criminal elites also 'disappear', forced into silence. The problem is accentuated when there are high-stakes interests and big capital at risk, and when organized crime actors are involved.

The bodies of the disappeared await to be found in mountains, seas and deserts. Trees, plants, wind and water are testimonies of the horror of clandestine burials and offer clues to those searching for their disappeared. Under the earth, bodies and soil nurture each other.

This is a journey through the landscapes inhabited by the disappeared, led by families who, in search of their loved ones, teach us to read the earth.





Graciela Pérez is searching for her daughter, Milynali, who disappeared while on her way back from holiday. She searches in the ranches in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico. She takes photos everywhere she looks. In one of those photos, there's a stretch of flat land with a hill in the distance bathed by the turquoise waters of Huasteca.

There, on that hill, Graciela found small holes in the ground, like little hollows, filled with bits of charred bones.

How should we look at that landscape? Graciela took that photograph because she needed to confirm what she was seeing. That beautiful scene is also, simultaneously, the gravesite of people who were buried in secret.





*If someone told me what I've seen, I  
wouldn't believe them. That's also why I  
have photos, to really see what horror is.  
[...] But when I look at the photos, when  
I see the horror, I have to face it and be  
prepared for whatever I might find,*

says Graciela.



*A grave is a wound. Searching for wounds  
in the landscape has become an obsession.*

Those searching travel along the highway and if they see some form of misshapen ground, they stop to search; if they are on a bus, they make a note to return to that spot. If they find an abandoned bag, there's probably a body decomposing inside, they reckon. If they see a scorched tree, they imagine that perhaps, in its shade, a group of people gathered to burn bodies.

*To search* is a verb that has been altered here, like the landscapes. *To search* now means *not to find*. Meaning has been altered in this place. *To search* has come to mean *to disappear*.



## The impossibility of finding the disappeared

Graciela has covered more than 300 fields in the north-east of Mexico looking for her daughter Mily. In one of those searches she found a ranch, and inside one of the rooms there were women's and men's dirty clothing and empty bottles.

On the wall, someone had drawn a Virgin of Guadalupe and the word *Mamá* (mother). Graciela ran her fingers over the drawing and thought about Mily, about how much she liked drawing and how much she liked drawing that very image, the Virgin. The police accompanying her on the search took photographs to test the handwriting and determine if Mily had drawn those images, if Mily had been held there – in that room with white walls and sheet-metal roof, with a big hole that was meant to be a window, from which you could see a tree with a thick trunk and lush leaves.

What happens to the disappeared in that space, which to us is a vacuum, an unknown, until someone like Graciela shows it to us, makes it visible?



*You feel that strange presence, sensing that something happened here, you get goose bumps, and you start looking and find packing tape, ties, bullet casings... and you end up finding a knife, votive candles, remains... When you come across the encampments of people who have been kidnapped, with evidence that they were there ... you realize what's happening... You can't deny that they could have been there, and if on top of that you find hidden graves, charred remains of bones, barrels for burning, places where the earth has been disturbed in strange ways ... you can imagine what could have happened to them. ... I would rather my daughter not be alive so that she wouldn't be living through everything I've seen. I would rather find her in a clandestine gravesite because I wouldn't wish this horror on anyone.*

Graciela, Milynali's mother.





*They might have even dug their own graves, most of us think that they dig them themselves. Like in a movie: You get to the spot... the person who took them there walks 10, 15 metres, and stops. (...)*  
*They make them dig their own grave and murder them there. I know because the bullet casings are there, so there's lots of evidence that they could have been murdered in that spot.*

*You see them handcuffed with tape covering their mouths, with bullet holes in their skull, their eyes covered, or covered with their own shirts, their heads covered. The last body we found 15 days ago ... they had put a bag, a bag from a political party, over its head.*

Mirna Medina, searching for her son, Roberto.

## The impossibility of keeping a record

Mexico is nearly 2 million square kilometres; it is the 13th largest country in the world and the largest in Latin America. Its terrain is uneven, crisscrossed by the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental. The land is divided into 32 states.

Between 2006 and 2019, 3 631 clandestine graves were found in Mexico, according to a government registry introduced in early 2020. In 2020, the bodies of 1 124 people were exhumed. Every eight hours, a body is recovered from a clandestine gravesite. The following is a list of sites where bodies have been found.



### ❧ Aguascalientes

While searching an abandoned ranch, government agents found a clandestinely buried corpse. Months earlier, another corpse was found at the same site buried a little over a metre deep in the back patio.

### ❧ Baja California

Authorities found what could be more than a hundred corpses dissolved in acid on a piece of land on the outskirts of Tijuana. Complete bodies were not found.

### ❧ Baja California Sur

Authorities confirmed the discovery of eight corpses in San José del Cabo, on the road to Cabo Pulmo, a national park that is home to the largest coral reef in the Gulf that may be the oldest in the American Pacific.

### ❧ Campeche

At kilometre marker 15+400 on federal highway 180, a grave was discovered with two corpses in a black plastic bag that let off a fetid odour.

### ❧ Chiapas

The remains of two males in a state of advanced decomposition were recovered from a clandestine grave. The grave was located to the south of the Palenque archaeological zone, several metres from a construction site and near a wastewater canal.

### ❧ Chihuahua

In an abandoned warehouse that can be reached through a gap in the highway, a grave was found with six bodies with evidence of bullet wounds. The warehouse is located in the middle of a desert-like expanse.

### ❧ Mexico City

The bodies of women, men, children and students have been found in the Xochimilco canal system. In 2018, they found the body of a woman who had been tied to two cement blocks so she would sink. Later, another woman's body was found floating in the Caltongo canals.

### ❧ Coahuila

A shepherd in the area of Presa de los Muchachos found a clandestine grave containing the bodies of three women. The discovery was made when a dog dug up one of the women's arms. The shepherd, whose name was not released, alerted authorities. Before burying the women, the murderers had removed their clothes and tried to burn the bodies.



### ❧ Colima

Five bodies, including the body of a minor, were found in a clandestine grave in a desolate location. The official in charge reported that these graves contained recently buried remains.

### ❧ Durango

In the middle of a housing development called Las Fuentes, 26 corpses were found in a clandestine grave. At the same site, 10 days earlier, another four bodies had been discovered. Authorities exhumed the bodies with heavy machinery, leaving them unrecognizable and in pieces.

### ❧ Estado de México

Authorities received an anonymous call to the effect that several people were burying human remains. They arrived at the site, a piece of uncultivated land with some abandoned sheet-metal structures, and they found the remains of three men in a clandestine grave.

### ❧ Guanajuato

Farmers found a hidden gravesite in the Nueva Esperanza neighbourhood. The discovery was made when four workers, who were ploughing the land, noticed the partially buried remains of three people.

### ❧ Guerrero

Six bodies were found in five clandestine graves in Acapulco, near a housing development. The site, which lies among dense vegetation of palm and almond trees, is just 60 metres from the Costa Dorada residential area. The bodies showed signs of having been tortured, and it is estimated that they had been buried for three months.

### ❧ Hidalgo

Seven bodies with packing tape wrapped around their heads were found at the entrances to two mines in the Pachuca and Mineral del Chico municipalities.

### ❧ Jalisco

A week of exhumation work uncovered 30 bodies in 17 clandestine graves in the town of La Barca. The graves are in a deserted area, and the search continued along the Río Lerma riverbed. Some of the bodies were mutilated.

### ❧ Michoacán

On the El Tecolote mountainside, the remains of five women and three men were found in two clandestine graves. One of the bodies had a tattoo of the word *guerrero* (warrior). Clothing was also found.

### ❧ Morelos

A clandestine grave was found in the Morelos market in a town called Amozoc. The grave was located near the flower vendors' area. Soldiers carried out an operation that uncovered parts of two human legs and a backhoe, which had presumably been used to dig the grave.

### ❧ Nayarit

Authorities reported that a clandestine grave was found near Tepic Airport, where 21 bodies were then exhumed. This site is the location with the largest number of bodies discovered thus far in the state.

### ❧ Nuevo León

On the *Las Abejas ranch*, thousands of charred bone fragments were found in a grave in an area enclosed with barbed wire.

### ❧ Oaxaca

Seven corpses were found in a clandestine grave along a dirt road. Government agents visited the site after a neighbour had reported a rotten smell nearby. The bodies were discovered 4 metres underground gagged with packing tape.

### ❧ Puebla

At least 10 barrels with 12 mutilated bodies dissolved in acid were found on farmland in San Andrés Calpan. The barrels were found among the farm plots.

### ❧ Querétaro

Families of missing persons found the remains of three people near a cliff. This discovery shows that there are clandestine graves in the state of Querétaro, contrary to what the local authorities had stated.

### ❧ Quintana Roo

State authorities found a well that was used as a 'narco-grave'. Three bodies were removed from the well, though it is believed that there may be more remains in the water.

### ❧ San Luis Potosí

Tamasopo became the site of a clandestine gravesite where five human skeletons were discovered in June 2019.

### ❧ Sinaloa

In a swamp in the Mazatlán municipality, a clandestine grave was found at a site; the ground was oozing with a mixture of mud and blood. Authorities removed 41 bodies from the swamp over the course of 71 days.

### ❧ Sonora

Relatives of disappeared people and the authorities dug up the remains of 42 people at a clandestine gravesite in Puerto Peñasco in the Sonoran Desert.

### ❧ Tabasco

A farmer discovered the partially buried body of a little boy. The man was on his way home after working in the fields when he noticed something strange sticking out of the ground near his house. Upon unearthing the body, he discovered it was a young boy wrapped in a blood-stained blanket. He immediately alerted the authorities.

### ❧ Tamaulipas

A large cluster of clandestine graves was found in the *San Fernando* municipality, at the same site where members of the navy and army had discovered the corpses of 72 migrants in a warehouse a year before. Authorities recovered 120 bodies.

### ❧ Tlaxcala

Authorities reported that they found three graves across two municipalities from which they recovered three bodies. Two of the bodies were identified.



### ❧ Veracruz

A clandestine grave was found on an island in the Pueblo Viejo Lagoon. The bodies were buried in a swampy area surrounded by discarded remains of fish. Fishermen use the island as a base where they clean fish and shrimps.

### ❧ Yucatán

Government authorities found a clandestine grave in a cave in the Tekax hills where they discovered the skeletons of two women.

### ❧ Zacatecas

A clandestine gravesite with 14 bodies, 11 men and three women, was found in a mountainous area of the Valparaíso municipality. In some cases, the bodies were cut into pieces, some had their hands tied and others had been placed there recently.



*Our country is used as a tomb. Clandestine gravesites have been found in almost all of its regions. This snapshot of news reports, undertaken with the urgent need to denounce, to recount what has happened, is an attempt to give a material account of this horror.*

## Inhabiting the landscape

When the families of the disappeared walk through an area in search of these graves, they activate that space. The histories of those places, preserved in the earth, in the trees, in the animals and in the air, awaken to tell them: here.

### The country is farmland

*We receive the maps via chat, message, phone. People see me in the street and give me a little piece of paper. We look for gravesites based on anonymous messages. The first messages that we got took us to San Rafael Calería, a town in Veracruz. There, we found a grave; the public prosecutor said they were rags and burnt wood, but it wasn't wood – what we had held in our hands was burnt bones. Those bones are fragile, already touched by rain, wind and fire.*

*Sometimes, people from the countryside point us to some spots. A man once told us that he could see the remains while he was working the land. It makes us think that people know. Sometimes they don't talk out of fear that something will happen to their families. It is easier for people to be silent than to share what they know.*

*Other times, it is the fetid smell of death that points us in the right direction. The smell alone lets you know that it's more than your imagination: something really happened there.*

*To get to these places, there are dirt roads; some are narrow lanes, while some are wide enough for trucks. You follow the tracks of horses or tyres, along the cornfields or among sugarcane plantations, sometimes lush and green from the rain, sometimes dry.*



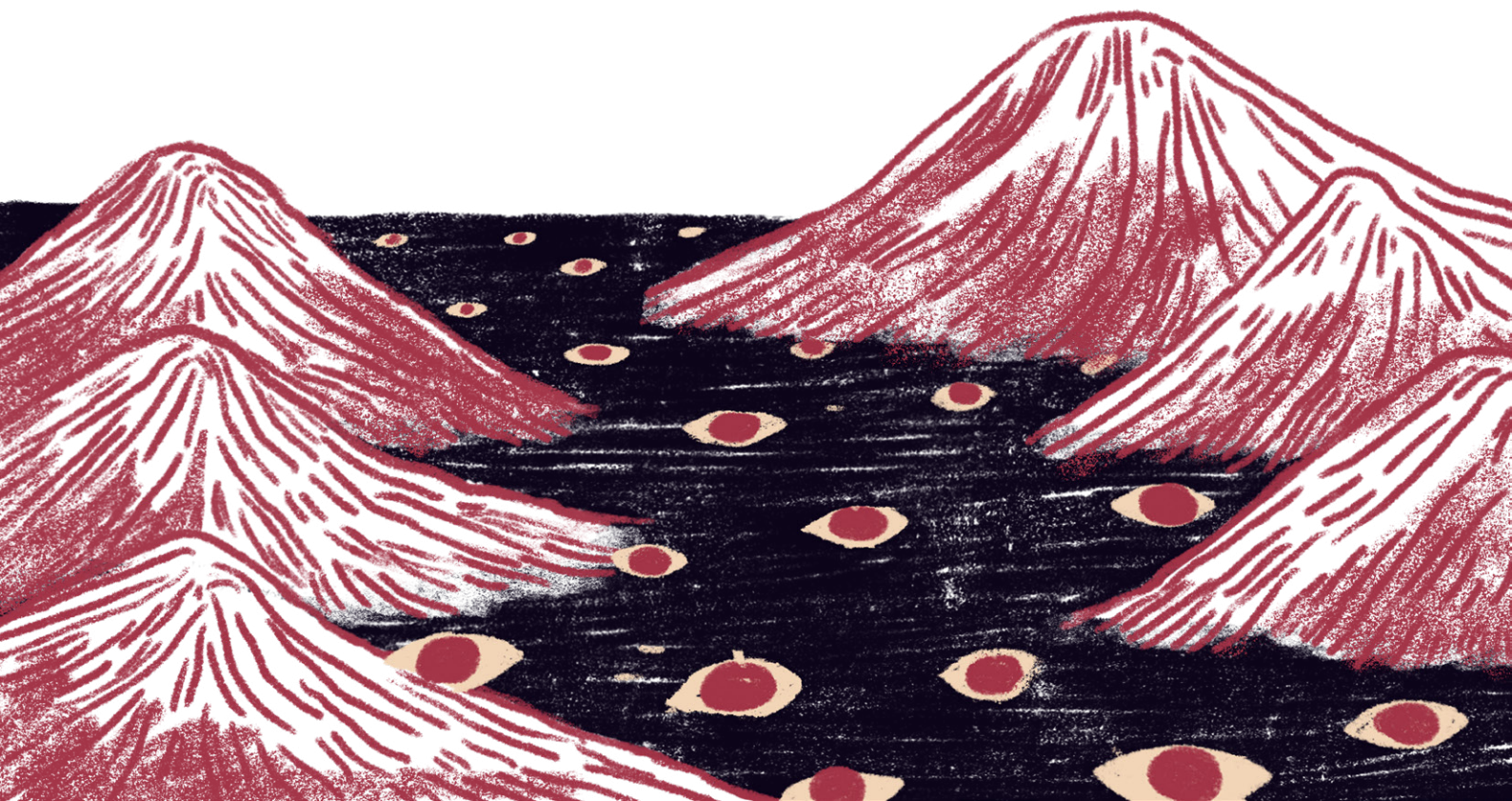


*In an article, Swiss reporters compared this place to Afghanistan: they said that what happened here was like a war, with those tossed-out bodies. This is worse than war.*

*I think that they were moved when they were already dead; sometimes we think that they also made them walk, still alive, to get here, because we've seen bullet casings in the graves. What might they be thinking on their way to this place?*

*When you stop in sites where a body was discovered, you feel anger, helplessness, imagining the horror of what happened there. The scent of fear. Rain mixes with your tears when you find a site.*

Araceli Salcedo, Rubí's mother. Searching in Orizaba, Veracruz.





## The country is a river, a stream of water

*They are areas with water, they always have water: a river, a little canal. Green, turquoise water, the kind that comes down from the mountain already filtered. Sometimes they are rivers that appear and disappear with the rains, and that's when we find the bones.*

*All of the encampments have a road and an entrance and exit, an emergency exit. They all have mobile phone reception; we haven't found a single one that's cut off from communication.*

*There's an area that seems to have been for training because of the bullet casings you find. Or for executions. But you don't find blood, though it could be because of the rain, which washes it away.*

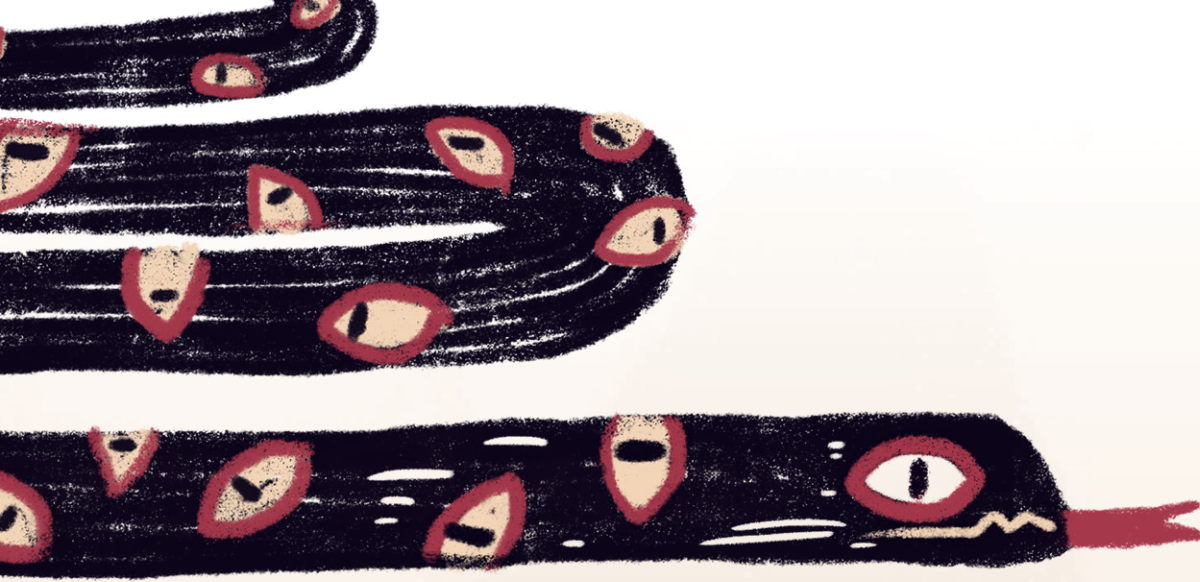
*Other areas seem like good places to leave the people they've kidnapped because they have bedrooms, for example. And because of the clothing that's there, hundreds of suitcases, clothing for men, women, children, little boys, young girls.*

*They have beds, sheets of plywood thrown together. There are lots of mesquite plants, they call it huizache, and then in the middle are the places where they sleep. In other camps, there are houses.*

*The majority of camps are nearby. For example, one is 10 minutes away, and everything around it on that hillside is very clean, there are really lovely ranches, tidy, well cultivated, prosperous, and in the middle, there's that horror.*

*And nearly the vast majority have a river. Or a stream. Everyone needs water — even them; if not, they die.*

Graciela Pérez, Milynali's mother. Searching in Mante, Tamaulipas.



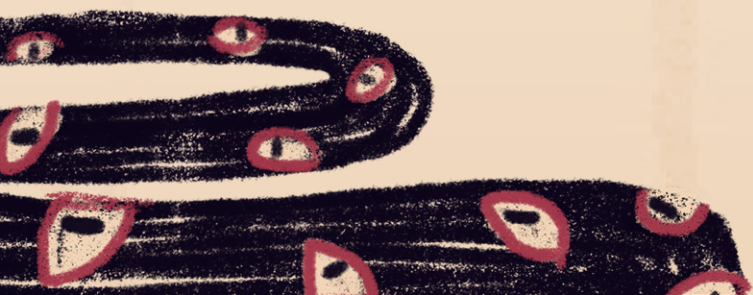
### The country is a desert

*We searched for our daughter for many years in the hope of finding her alive, until we saw that they were burying people in the countryside, in the hillside.*

*They say that there were a lot of people around there, and you could hear the screams and those with any information would hide. We went, we saw someone, and we talked to him: 'We're not interested in the perpetrators, we don't want to know about them. We just want to find our relative, help us out. Really, you don't know what we're going through.' 'Look,' he said, 'search along the canal, but don't say that I told you.' It was a guy around our age, 50-something. And that's where we started.*

*We found Patrocinio, a clandestine extermination camp, because of him. It's a very remote place, far away... I imagine them there, screaming, and no one heard them. Who heard them? Who could help?*

*Here, in this notebook, we wrote down the places we found and planned how we'd start the search. Because it's so big, so big that how do you start? The world is very big when you're searching for your disappeared.*



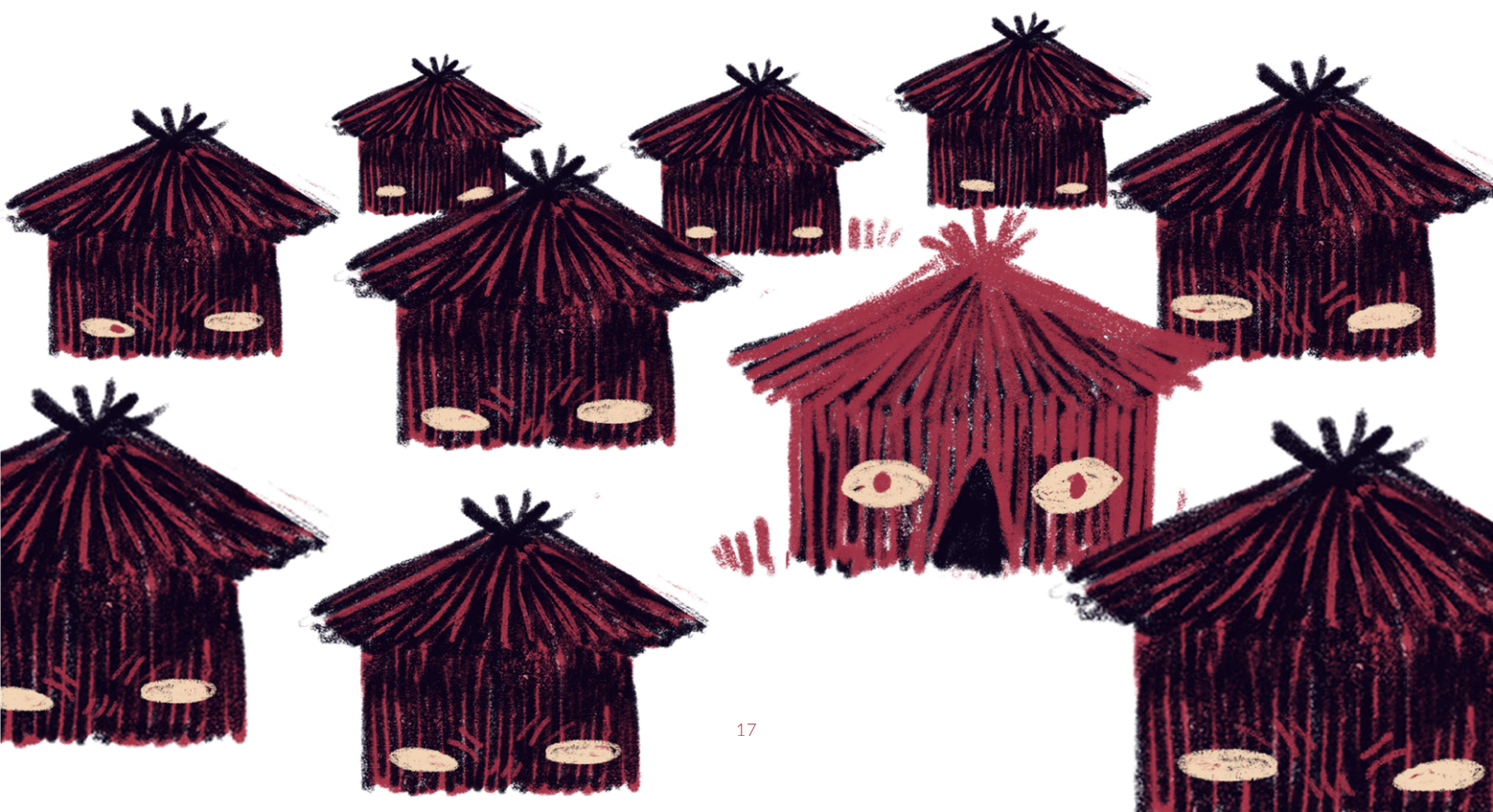


*We have found thousands, thousands of bone fragments. A human body has 206 bones. Can you imagine how many people it could be? The attorney general's office prefers to measure them by weight because the weight is always the same, it doesn't change if the bones are broken.*

*We've reached the point where the demand, 'They took them alive; we want them back alive' is not valid any more. Not any more because, you know what, a lot of people have gotten it into their heads – too many people – that they're going to get them back alive, and they don't recognize that we're harming people, the mothers, when we say that. I know it's a slogan, but they're internalizing it as something real, literal... I'm not willing to say, 'They took them alive; we want them back alive' – because this will give false hope to some of the mothers.*

*I'm not denying that some are alive, but they're finding bodies all across the country, all across the country.*

Silvia Ortiz, Fanny's mother. Searching in Torreón, Coahuila.





### The country is a hillside

*My brother was kidnapped in 2012. My sister Mayra started to search for him in the newspapers' crime and accidents sections. Every time a death was reported, she read the descriptions of the bodies. She never found anything that could have been linked to him.*

*After a while, my mother told me, 'They are saying that they kill people and bury them in the countryside. Why don't you go look?'. I didn't know how. I would see the hills through the window. They're huge.*

*When we started digging up graves, we went up the mountainside. Along the way, we ran into someone, a farmer. He told us that a while back that area smelled horrible. 'I keep animals, and I thought one of them had died,' he told us, 'but I counted them and, no, it wasn't one of my animals.'*





*And so we started to look for ridges, bumps in the earth. It smelled horrific. We parked the cars and got out to look, we dug in the ground like crazy people, feeling a tremendous anxiety. We inserted a rod in the ground to see if it smelled like earth or decomposing bodies, and when we pulled it out, we smelled that odour. Those bodies were burned with firewood. When I imagine it, I think that they made the hole, tossed the bodies in with the wood, and I think that, with the fire, the fat ran out and the wood got soaked in the fat. The first thing we noticed was the smell, the soaked wood.*

*Later we went back, during the rainy season, and we were there in La Laguna. It was the first piece of land we searched. We started to dig, and the bones came to the surface. The first thing we discovered was a femur, it was a long bone. We broke down.*

*The bones sprouted from the ground with the rain, and we recovered between 18 and 21 bodies.*

*We knew we were going to look for people buried there, but we didn't know we were actually going to find them.*

*The countryside is beautiful. I really like to walk, I like the country, I like the animals, the flowers. I think that the bodies are better sheltered there in the ground, more so than in a refrigerator, because there are families who have waited up to a year to receive the body we found for them in the graves.*

Mario Vergara, Tomy's brother. Searching in Huitzuco, Guerrero.

## The country is a rainy night

*I started looking for him along the edges of roads, in abandoned houses, ranches. I started alone, but after I posted about it on social media, I saw that there were a lot of people with their own disappeared.*

*The first search was on a Saturday, in the town where we used to live. It was raining, and the rain washed the earth away, and a knee sprouted from the earth. That's how we found the first grave, which had two bodies. We kept looking and found two more bodies.*

*It was a hillside just behind a swamp, in that town, a plot of land that was never used for planting. A place that lent itself to this because there were trees that covered it up, and the ground was also very soft, ground that was practical for digging and burying someone. Because it takes work to dig a grave – it's not easy.*

*That day they didn't let us work because of the rain. 'Come back tomorrow, in the morning,' the authorities told us. We stayed there, waiting; we didn't want to leave. We thought that someone might show up and take the bodies away, and so we stayed there all night. And it rained all night too.*

*The next day, the authorities arrived and cordoned off the area. I don't remember if I could hear or see. Only that knee emerging from the grave remained etched in my mind.*

*Because when you're at a grave, you lose all notion of time, you don't hear, you don't see. We become someone else, we transform. A lot of times you might think you're getting used to it, but the truth is you never get used to it, you can't. Because when you find someone, you feel that that body won't have to suffer there any longer.*

*We've heard about some corpses, and the reports are so painful that it hurts us, makes our bones ache, our heads ache, as though we'd been run over by a truck. If we don't find anything in that place, we promise to go back. Because we're sure that there are bodies there.*

*Once we went out to search, and a man stopped searching because he found a snake nest – they're worth 100 pesos each. He changed his mind about going with us and kept the snakes.*

*We've had all kinds of experiences, some really sad ones, because of how we found the bodies, others that are lovely. Sometimes we cry, sometimes we argue, sometimes we sing.*

Mirna Medina, Roberto's mother. She searched and found him in El Fuerte, Sinaloa.



## The country is a garbage dump

*There is a garbage dump where bodies are thrown with the aim of letting them disintegrate from the constant humidity of the moisture trickling down. Teeth. Bones mixed with bodies. Humans who were tossed there. And animals. Clothing, shoes, bottles, hamburger wrappers, fast-food wrappers, there was water, boots, bullet casings. A place turned into a specialized area for handling the bodies, for disposing of them, not only by cutting them into pieces but accelerating the decomposition of those small pieces.*

Alejandro, archaeologist



## The country is a sea

*The fisherman told us that he had found the bodies floating near the dock. First one, then another. It's not common to see bodies floating in the sea; he thought it was a log, like those that herons perch on to rest. But it wasn't a log, it was a man, the body of a man.*

Marité Valadez, Fernando's brother. Searching in Guaymas, Sonora.



## Caring for bodies, caring for the earth

The earth is not just a container for bodies. Body and earth are in a relationship of mutual nourishment and care. When a body is buried, its decomposition nourishes the earth, and the earth, in turn, protects that body until it is found.



## A tree as witness

*We went to the desert to search, and the first two times we didn't find anything. We searched and searched and searched. I imagined myself as an animal looking for her young. We dug in the ground with our nails; we didn't find anything. Until the third time, when we found an entire young girl, but part of her body was already eaten by birds. We think it was birds because if it was wild animals they would have eaten all of her, but it was the birds.*

*Birds start with the eyes, the lips, the tongue. Birds eat the skull first. That was shocking. We found her on 14 February, the day we celebrate love and friendship. Later we learned that she'd been missing for a month and that she came from a ranch in the area.*

*Little by little, I've heard testimonies of what happened in this desert. They brought trucks with the people in them, they stuffed them in barrels, they burned them... Their burnt clothing was scattered across the desert, and their shoes were deformed by the sun.*

*When I walk through the desert, I stop, and I feel so sad. I stop to look, and I ask myself, 'Why? How did they even think to commit these atrocities on this beautiful land? And who were the witnesses? The sun? The open sky? Just the breeze? Were the birds that are singing witnesses to all of this?'*

*Who's to say my daughter isn't here among these bones? When we're here in the desert and stop searching, I sit down under a mesquite or another tree to cry. I say to it: 'You witnessed who was here, you saw who they killed: tell me.' I want to make them talk. I wish the trees could talk, I even hug and squeeze them and tell them, 'You know who they are, you know who was here, suffering.'*

Lucy López Castruita, Irma's mother. Searching in Torreón, Coahuila.



## A body embraced by roots

*From the moment you head down this path, you imagine how they brought them to these places, and when you start to dig, you begin to get an idea of how they executed them, how they died, you can imagine endless details.*

*That is part of being a searcher. Imagining it – as painful as it may be for us – imagining with all that pain what their death was like. How they got them up here... When I face a gravesite, I start to imagine, how did they do it? When I see the countryside and the trees, the rocks, all the natural features, it helps me to imagine it: let's see, they arrived – this way, if I were them, there's shade here... It helps me a lot to get a sense of the area, but you can't keep imagining in this much detail because you hurt yourself, it causes more damage.*

*Each body we find is different, each grave has its own distinct features, but one surprised me: the body was wrapped in roots. Simón, a searcher in Guerrero, says that we are all fertilizer for the earth. And the earth adopted the body. I felt like the earth was clinging to the body because it wouldn't let us remove it. The forensic anthropologists had to work really hard to get the body out. It was like the earth was embracing it with its roots.*

*In my mind, I said, 'Let yourself be freed, your family is looking for you; give them the chance to be at peace. We're working really hard to get you out, so give us a hand.' I think that always helps.*

Karla Guerrero. Searching for her husband, Herón, disappeared in Veracruz.



*My brother disappeared. He was my only sibling. If I had a problem, he would help me. He would always say, 'You're real crazy.' It was his way of telling me that I never gave up, I never gave in.*

*When we started to look for him, we started from zero. We didn't have the faintest idea about carrying out a search. I had figured I couldn't learn anything new at that point. I had gotten married, and in focusing so much on our home, on being a good wife and mother, I forgot I could keep studying. I'm not saying I'm studying for a degree, but I read books about anthropology, the chain of custody, that sort of thing, because they became part of my daily life.*

*The first searches weren't so difficult because I was ready to climb the hillside and deal with the exhaustion. I come from the countryside; my family has always climbed in the mountains. I really like climbing up the hillside, I enjoy that smell of grass – it takes me back to my childhood. My colleagues really have a hard time, but I love it. I like the hillside, I find arrowheads from the ancient indigenous people because, when I was little, my relatives taught me how to recognize them.*





## Hands that care for the earth

*When we got to the desert, the largest trees were mesquite trees about 50 centimetres high; there was nowhere to take cover and very little vegetation.*

*Like old Western movies, with tumbleweeds blowing in the wind, with that solitude, that cold that you feel or see in those movies, that's more or less the village of Patrocinio.*

*Patrocinio has changed a lot the last few times we've gone. There are starting to be taller trees, vegetation that at the time was destroyed. I think that happened because when the criminal groups that kidnapped people were there, they were using things like gasoline and diesel to burn the bodies, and those substances stayed in the earth, which damaged the subsoil. And since we came to search, those criminals don't come around any more, and the farmers and shepherds who used to come here can return to graze their animals and work the land.*

*Also, with time, the subsoil is recovering, and when we remove everything that doesn't belong there, everything that was once there starts to sprout. It can blossom again.*

Rocío Hernández Romero, searching for her brother, Felipe, disappeared in Coahuila.



## The body in one's arms

The body of a partner, of a brother, of a father, of a daughter, of a friend. What do we do when that body is lifeless and yet held in our arms?

*Carrying a bone is like carrying a newborn baby, because they're delicate – little pieces that may be part of someone you are looking for, a newborn you don't know. These little bones may still have DNA; they may give you someone's identity... so fragile, so fragile that the only thing you can do is hold it gently so that it can be identified and have a name. Because a baby is the same, it doesn't have an identity, it's created by what you show it. A baby is life, and, just like life, it creates its own identity.*

Graciela Pérez, Milynali's mother



**What is the body held in one's arms?**

**What takes shape when we rock the body of a child?**

*We're so pleased when we see that there might be a body, it makes us very happy. But as we open the grave, when we discover the body, that's when our strength gives out, our happiness fades, because seeing them there... Some are handcuffed, their hands tied with cables, with rope, a 16-year-old girl was tied up and wrapped in a blanket, wrapped in a tarp and the tarp tied up with cables, she had her little gold jewellery, a little chain, her trainers, she was a little girl. ...*

*We told them that we were proud to have found them and that they should go rest now, that they're going to find peace... you sense that that body is no longer going to be suffering there.*

Mirna Medina, Roberto's mother



*Those bones speak to us and transmit the willingness to be found. They don't want to remain anonymous any longer, in that cold pit, where the last thing they felt was fear. I'm sure that my daughter, in the moment when she knew her life was in danger, cried 'Mummy'... We're here to take them back home.*

Araceli Salcedo, Rubí's mother. Searching in Veracruz.





## How to make room for the truth?

Juan is 27 years old and he disappeared for three weeks. They pulled him away from his work as a police officer in a town in Michoacán, in central Mexico. They tied him up. They beat him until he passed out. They tossed him out, perhaps thinking he was dead. His colleagues found him on the hillside. He was almost dead, covered in vomit and excrement. He was blind.

For a year, his mother has tried to bring him back home.

To bring him back from that place.





*My son is another man. I no longer know him. I don't know who he is, I lost him. He's entirely destroyed. Something died, something died inside of him. I always grew up thinking that men are strong, that the strength of humanity comes from men, that's what we believe. I think that something died in his soul ... he stayed there, he didn't evolve, he didn't return. We're no longer connected; his arm feels cold to my touch. Something died there. He no longer opens the window in his room, he has a mattress up against the window in case of gunshots. I'm not going to get him back now because they damaged him. He doesn't care about dying now because he already died once.*

María, Juan's mother





*I received the call when I was on the train on my way to Sinaloa to look for a job. I was short of breath, I felt ill and at the same time a sense of peace.*

*My brother had disappeared eight years earlier. We went to report his disappearance and they asked us for my mother's and father's DNA, for everything to be official, but my father didn't want to go, and my mother refused out of fear. In the end, I was the one to give blood. And it came back positive. They found him. I felt like I was deaf, I heard the voice at the other end of the line from far away, and the first thing I thought about was my mother, 'How am I going to tell her?'*

*They found my brother 15 days after he passed away. A worker on the ranch was looking for cows and found the burnt remains. They burned my brother; I don't know if he was alive or already dead. They gave me five, six pieces of bones. Of my brother. I saw them when they took them out of the bag. They removed them from the grave, the burial site, but they didn't let me touch them. Everyone had their gloves, their face masks. I always said I wanted to hug him, even if it was a fingernail, the bones didn't disgust me. Maybe they disgusted all of them with their masks and gloves, but not me. He was my blood, my little brother.*



*It was the most difficult thing in my life, the sanctuaries in the funeral homes full, entire families. In my sanctuary, me alone, the coffin alone. I knew what that coffin held. That coffin held five little bones from my brother. Later my mother arrived, and then other friends accompanied me. One of my uncles said: 'There could even be cow bones in there'. I didn't say anything; I keep to myself; my pain is mine.*

*A year has gone by since they returned him to me, I go to the cemetery frequently. I feel calm there because I talk to him, I know where he is and if I want to laugh, dance... I take refuge in him, it's the only thing I have. 'I'm here now, brother, to annoy you and talk to you.' Before, my brother gave me anguish; now he is my refuge.*

*I used to dream about him a lot, seeing him with his back to me, and I'd scream 'Brother, brother!' and he wouldn't turn around. And now, when I dream about him, I see him laughing and telling me, 'Alright, calm down', and now I do see him and can see him smiling. I feel like I kept my promise to him, that I was going to find him.*

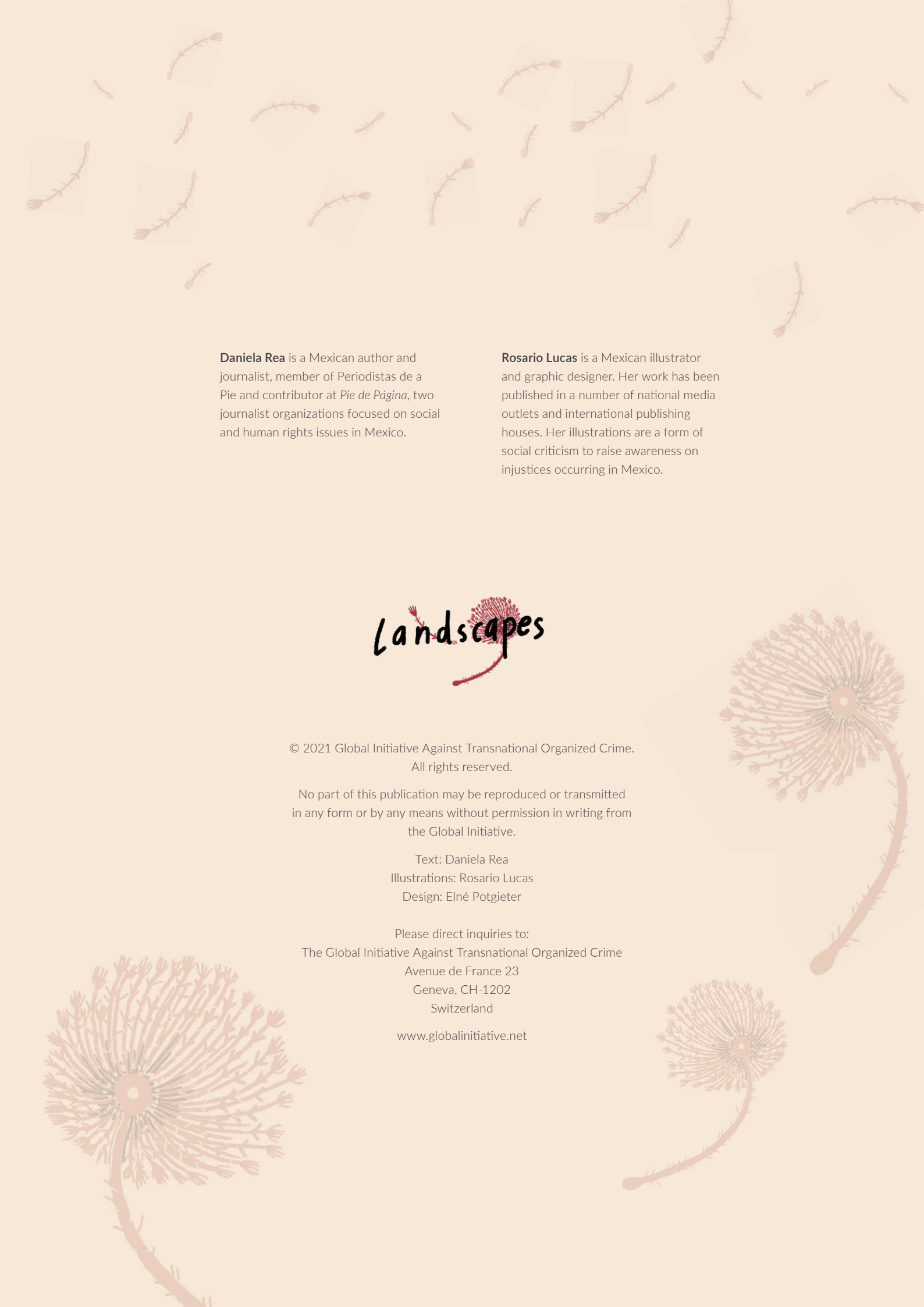
*But the truth is that sometimes it hurts a lot. It's not like people think, that truth brings peace. We used to have bonfires, we'd burn tyres, we'd play with the fire. Now I don't even want to cook. I turn the stove on, the oil spits and I think about him, I imagine what they did to him, if he was alive or not... Now I can't cook ground meat, I can't. It scares me.*

Carolina Astorga, Roberto's sister. She searched in Chihuahua.



*How do we speak of fire now?  
How do we inhabit these landscapes?*





**Daniela Rea** is a Mexican author and journalist, member of Periodistas de a Pie and contributor at *Pie de Página*, two journalist organizations focused on social and human rights issues in Mexico.

**Rosario Lucas** is a Mexican illustrator and graphic designer. Her work has been published in a number of national media outlets and international publishing houses. Her illustrations are a form of social criticism to raise awareness on injustices occurring in Mexico.

## Landscapes

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Text: Daniela Rea  
Illustrations: Rosario Lucas  
Design: Elné Potgieter

Please direct inquiries to:  
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime  
Avenue de France 23  
Geneva, CH-1202  
Switzerland

[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)

