

LANA SPENDL

No Firm Ground

A FRIEND ASKED ME AND MY COLLEAGUE to speak at her son's school about the experience of being refugees. Her son's teacher was looking for volunteers. My coworker was from Poland, I from Bosnia. The kids had been studying immigration, my friend said. They had watched films. One girl had been disturbed by *Lost Boys of Sudan*. She now sat out parts of the class.

My coworker and I agreed to present. In preparation, I scoured the internet for photographs of Sarajevo—pictures of peace, pictures of war—and I pieced together a slideshow with a navy background that wouldn't distract. Sarajevo in shots. A panorama of city and mountains, a pigeon with tilted head by a famous bridge, rainy moods only locals would know.

When my coworker and I walked to the school in the morning chill, we shared childhood stories. Sunlight streamed through bare branches. My colleague is an animated man, and his voice rose loud with excitement and fell with nostalgia. We approached the back door of the school, and in a side field, boys stood lined up as if for a relay race. One boy turned to look at us and then, unperturbed, looked back to his friend and continued talking. Memories of Spain stirred up for me in the cold air—during the Bosnian War, my mother, my brother, and I had settled in Spain for some years—and I remembered standing in a field with girls at recess, in clusters, taking a break from jumping rope. Sweat, arms, legs, voices loud. Urgent children's voices, everything urgent, everything needing to be heard.

Inside the school, in the half-dark, lockers stood painted with cartoon characters. Little lockers, the size of a child. A soccer ball sat in one corner. This was a progressive school, I had heard, with grades K through 12 all in one building. Different than most schools in the Midwest. We passed the open gym door and yells echoed inside. Tennis shoes skidded polished floor. The feeling I had had as a child when I stayed home on school days came up—the feeling of being somewhere special and magical where I was not supposed to be at this time of day. Only now the feeling was elicited by being *in* a school, not by being outside.

We walked into the main office, signed in, and were taken upstairs to the fifth- and sixth-grade class. Inside, children sat in a circle—the walls covered in drawings and photographs and paintings and maps, light streaming from tall windows—and the teacher sat in an armchair in front, reading a book to the class. I looked into their faces, every face that gazed at me curious, every face in profile, the little boy in the corner in a bored slouch. And the teacher rose, closed her book, and asked the students to take a break while the guests set up. The children ran and walked everywhere, some left the class. An anthill of voices letting out.

The teacher approached us to introduce herself and to tell us about the novels they had been reading. She held up a book with a child in a field on the cover. She was in her fifties and wore loose khakis and a lime cotton shirt that had been splattered with paint near the neckline. She explained things emphatically, as if she were talking to the kids still. I nodded along. My colleague sat down at the computer to open up our slideshows. And the teacher said, face turned up to mine, that she did not want too much detail about the war, that she did not want the children to imagine things. But that due to her political views she of course wanted the children to know what refugees were facing. This was, after all, her class and they were going to hear her views.

This left me without ground. I did not know what *too much detail* meant. I had had little interaction with this age group, so I had no knowledge of where their line of understanding lay and consequently no knowledge of how to budge it forward just a bit. The kids came back and I was introduced—name in loud chalk on blackboard—and I decided to present a survey of my history and not delve too deep into what had remained inside.

I displayed a map of the former Yugoslavia, and I spoke of the Siege of Sarajevo. I pointed to Sarajevo on the map. A cartoon plane flew next to it. It was an old tourism map. I showed photographs of the old town part of Sarajevo, with its low rooftops and shops and narrow cobbled streets. People walking, sitting, talking. This was my hometown. I showed *ćevapčići* sausages that people ate in small restaurants. And copper pots of strong Bosnian coffee. And a shot of the River Miljacka with its steep banks. I lost a soccer ball in those waters as a child. Facts gushed up—facts I had forgotten until that moment—and they assembled Sarajevo in the air of the class. Sarajevo, with its restaurant terraces and gesticulating Balkan arms.

And then the war arrived, like a noisy military truck. A picture of city hall in flames.

Half-collapsed buildings. Black colors, grays, walls pockmarked by guns. People running down a street. I explained that people were afraid of being shot. They had to run. I said that my mother, my brother, and I left toward the beginning of the war, when I was seven. We were on the last bus to cross the River Sava safely. My dad stayed behind. We thought the conflicts would be over quickly—that we would be back to join him in no time—but the siege closed the city off and my dad ended up trapped. We, in the meantime, waited in Slovenia with family—different relatives’ homes—and then moved to Croatia to stay with my mom’s aunt for some time. I spoke of waiting, of never being certain where we would go next, of not knowing what was going on back home. When it was clear that there was no going back to Sarajevo, my mom was offered a chance to go to Spain as a refugee, and the three of us moved to the city of Avila.

I displayed Avila, the walled-in city, on the screen. I showed a picture of me in a polka dot *sevillanas* dress. I took dance classes after school, I said. I spoke of having to jump into classes in Spanish and attempting to give the teachers what they wanted, but for language reasons, not ever knowing what that was. Casting sideways glances to other kids’ desks to understand what the assignment was.

A tall girl by the window asked how long it took me to learn Spanish and English. With Spanish, I was fluent within a year. English took longer. I was twelve when I came to the States. And even when I had learned to speak it, I had an accent that left me self-conscious. And all I wanted as a middle-schooler in the States was not to stick out. But whenever I spoke to someone new, they asked me where I was from. And I always had to disclose that I was a refugee. I felt without home every time I said it, like someone who had to beg for necessities. A boy asked if my father had survived. I said yes. He managed to leave Sarajevo in a convoy to Slovenia, then made it to Croatia, and then took a military plane and joined us in Spain. I had not seen him in three years. Then we all came to the States together.

When the presentation was over, the teacher told the students to take a break before my colleague presented—*be back in three minutes*—and again they walked and ran. One boy climbed a ladder up to a kind of loft that hung over one side of the class. I noticed this part of the room with wonder for the first time. The teacher came up. She stopped before me, tilted her head to one side, and said, “So you *weren’t* traumatized?”

My insides buckled. She said it as if she were confused, as if the presentation had not been enough, as if this hadn’t been the trauma show she had intended her kids to watch. I

revved up in an urge to prove myself, to substantiate things, and I said yes, well, yes, I *had* been traumatized. I explained that I was the primary support for my mother, that we did not know if my father was okay at times. I said it all as if it were empty facts. The way someone rattles off skills at a job interview.

And she said, “Well, when the students come back, could you close up with some details like that?” Disoriented, I said yes. Yes, I could. And the kids came back. And I stood before them and spoke of moments when I comforted my mother crying on the bed, about hometown deaths my mother, alone with us in a foreign country, was hearing about. I said that now I was afraid of settling into things, into spaces, I was afraid of having a family and a child. I was always afraid that loss would come. I was not even sure if I wanted to talk about all this—my feet were out from under me the whole time—and I was not sure how the kids were taking it. One girl, blue-eyed, slighter than the rest, shot up her arm. She said, “The good thing about impermanence is that the bad things are impermanent, too.” I softened—I loved her earnest little eyes—but something inside me felt wrapped-up tight. As if I couldn’t let in light.

When I finished, my colleague went up. I watched his changing expressions from the side of the room and eyed the black-and-white pictures of his family. I could not open to the smile I had worn when I had entered the class. I tried, in thought, to dismiss the teacher’s question. When I couldn’t, I even tried to dismiss her as a person. What did she, a white woman born in the States, know of the experiences I had had? But a blockage inside me did not allow me to write her off. I was too aware of the fact that I did not know the scope of her life, the scope of her history and her mind. My attempt to dismiss her was merely me patching myself up.

And I think now that the words she had uttered would not have bothered my colleague as much. He would have explained his position and been firm in himself, and the experience would have dissipated by the time we exited the school. But it stayed with me. And I tend, I know, to merge with the thoughts and feelings of others so instantaneously sometimes that it is hard to know whether a judgment about myself is coming from them or whether it’s been there all along in my own mind. This tendency runs deep—it is what I performed over and over again as a child when I adjusted myself to new languages and cultures. I was never an authority on anything. Other people were. They were *from* here. And here and here and here and here. And they were right. Of course they were right. When I noticed the slightest shift in

their faces, a change in their tone of voice, I instantly pulled my hand back. I cast down my eyes. And despite my confident persona now, I still feel like that child. The teacher was an American in her house and an authority in her class, and her words moved into the space of my trauma, pushed it back as if it were not enough, as if it were disappointing, and I shrunk back like a hurt animal and closed myself up.

Lana Spendl's chapbook of flash fiction, *We Cradled Each Other in the Air*, was published by Blue Lyra Press in 2017. Her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *The Baltimore Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Hobart*, *The Cortland Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Zone 3*, and other journals. Lana resides in Bloomington, Indiana, where she is working on a collection of short stories that take place in her native Bosnia.