

ELASTIC WALLS

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*From Brooklyn to Texas and Points in
Between*

Eva Silverfine

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Elastic Walls: From Brooklyn to Texas and Points in Between

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*To all those I have found and all those I have lost
along the way.*

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PREFACE

I was perhaps eight years old, alone in the living room and dancing joyfully to Martha and the Vandellas' "Dancing in the Streets," when I said to myself, "I love this song, and I am never, ever going to forget how much I love dancing to it." This moment is the first I recall of being aware of the transitory nature of life's experiences. Perhaps this perspective is best reflected, many years later, by the animal I chose to research as a graduate student and to make the protagonist in my first attempt at a novel—the mayfly. Mayflies are known as ephemeropterans (ephemeral wings) because of their adult stage. They emerge from the water and shed their last aquatic skins to become winged insects in the terrestrial world for a day or less. Our life experiences are unique to each of us—occurring in our individual coordinates of time and place. Yet it is in these points that the essence of our lives

emerge; it is within that which is transitory that we find that which is enduring.

This collection of personal narratives was written over a span of twenty-five years. They are arranged thematically rather than chronologically. As points of reference, my young sons are now young men and I still live in the Hill Country of Texas, about one hundred yards from the now-gone dwelling described herein.

Some names have been changed to protect the innocent. Still, I ask pardon of the friends and family whose privacy I have invaded.

“The Last Bar Mitzvah,” “Pavane,” and “The Tree of Life” were published previously in *Tiny Lights: A Journal of Personal Narrative*.

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A HOUSE WITH TWO WINDOWS

I used to live in a house with two windows that looked out onto the elevated train tracks that ran above Broadway in Brooklyn. The tracks ran west to the Williamsburg Bridge, which spanned to the island of Manhattan, and east to a tangled junction known as East New York. Most of my world existed between the two closest train stations—Kosciusko Street and Gates Avenue—and the avenue that paralleled Broadway, Bushwick.

Broadway was the local shopping boulevard: around the corner was Syd, who sold us fruits and vegetables; at the corner was Marty, who once a year sold my parents wrist corsages to bestow on their

three daughters after our dance recital; next door was Eunice, who cut and coiffed my mother's hair; and across the street was Lucky, to whom we took our little bit of dry cleaning. From our block we radiated out as necessity dictated—to the big grocery store and the small one, to the shoe store, to the two large movie theaters, and, after our dance recital, to the ice cream parlor where I ate lemon sherbet, fruit of the gods.

My parents owned the paint and hardware store, an essential business at which patrons had windows repaired, pipes cut and threaded, locks set, keys made, and kerosene pumped in addition to purchasing washers, screws, nails, and hammers. Advice was free. The store was old; its wooden floors were smoothed by dirt, oil, and feet. A ladder rode a rail that circumnavigated the store to give access to hardware that resided in small drawers above head height. I loved the store, even in its characteristic messiness; a community existed there.

My family lived in the two-story dwelling above the store. There was quite a diversity of rooms in that compact space, and my father had used his handiness to make the most of it. He constructed closets with built-in storage racks and a window

bench for our toys; a cloths-drying rack was suspended from the ceiling by rope and pulley, as were our bikes.

I shared a large bedroom with my two sisters; our brother rated his own small bedroom. My younger sister and I slept in bunk beds; our older sister was afforded the privacy that a latticed partition provided. We each had a dresser and another personal piece of furniture nestled somewhere; mine was a vanity in the laundry alcove. It was there I kept my treasures and earliest writing.

My parents' room was separated from the girls' room by what we called the closet room—a dark, interior space I ran through with dread of the monsters that I imagined lived there. I was braver with company, but alone I could barely manage to retrieve a dress from the closet.

It was from both the girls' room upstairs and the living room below that two windows looked out onto the elevated tracks and street below. I grew up with the sound of trains in my sleep, in my play, in my homework, in my piano practice. But trains weren't the only source of street noise; there were whistles and shouts, cars, buses, and sirens.

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We lived in a neighborhood in transition—from working-class poor to out-and-out poor. My family gradually became an extreme minority, but as a kid this community defined the norm. However, our microcosm was not insulated from the larger world of the 1960s. There were riots in the streets, and although my parents' store wasn't vandalized, gates went up on the store's windows.

Eventually my parents became uneasy; the tone of the neighborhood had changed. In 1968, at the end of the school year, we moved. I cried to my friends that I would not leave them and the place I loved. But I did.

Many years later, when my father was hospitalized, I went back to my old neighborhood to check on the store for him. I was heartened to see that although the neighborhood was still extremely depressed, the store remained a vital part of the community. I went upstairs and found my first home just as I had remembered it, not one bit smaller. For all the places I have lived since, there has been none larger nor more contained. I used to live in a house with two windows that looked out; actually, I still live there.

THE THINGS THAT WILL FIT INTO A HOUSE

In 1984, thirteen years after my mother left our home in Rockaway, New York, she moved back in. Her return didn't signal reconciliation between her and my father, albeit they were on better terms than when they had separated. She moved back into the house to be useful.

A year earlier, my father had suffered nerve damage and had become quite limited in his dexterity and mobility. His lady friend of several years, Florence, saw his disability an opportunity to solidify their relationship—when he was released from the hospital, she immediately moved into the creaky, three-story bayside home. With some rearrangement of furniture, the first floor accommodated them comfortably.

Meanwhile my younger sister, with a new baby and problems of her own, also had seen the need for someone to care for our father. So she and her partner had terminated their lease and moved onto the second floor. They had more space than in their

rented apartment, and there was still an intact kitchen from earlier days when the house had been divided to lodge mostly summertime residents. They even had a quasi-separate entrance.

As was characteristic, my father allowed others to make decisions for him and then claimed his innocence. The price, at least in part, was his having to listen to endless grievances from Florence against his daughter and her partner: “Why do they have to slam the door? Why do they have to run up and down the stairs all day? Why isn’t he working?”

Before these rearrangements, my visits home had been welcomed respites from whatever the circumstances of my own life: I had a big house in which to roam with all the privacy I wanted; I had my family and old friends close by; and I had the ocean. Now I had to exercise constant diplomacy with Florence, and I walked on eggshells not to interfere in my sister’s life. Still, I had the third floor, left almost untouched from the time it was home to three adolescent girls. And I had the ocean.

Then my mother decided to retire early and attend law school. After years of letting my father slide on compensating her for her share of the house, she decided she wanted her money. Perhaps she

distrusted Florence. In any case, she pressed my father to sell the house, and he agreed—he could no longer maintain it financially or physically. My mother returned to help with the upkeep, find a realtor, and clean out the house. Other circumstances had changed too—my sister was on her own with her child now and needed help. My mother could babysit while my sister returned to work. So my mother moved onto the third floor. There were remnants of a kitchen there too.

When I went home to visit, my mother, who had been using my old bedroom as her own, graciously returned it to me. If I closed the door, I could pretend to find some peace. It was illusory. I bounced between my mother's floor, my sister's floor, and my father and Florence's floor. Every dinner was a tactical decision. "Florence put in some turkey legs and made fresh (canned) fruit salad" meant I was to eat with my father and Florence. Before my first sip of morning coffee I had to announce, "Sarah asked me to eat with her tonight"; or, more cryptically for dining with my mother, "Don't worry about me for dinner." Every hour home I had my choice of insanity. I was there for just a week or so at a time. My sister was there for the duration.

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Seemingly fixed, the walls of a house are really elastic, accommodating all sorts of things inside. There must be a limit to their elasticity, though—a tensile strength—when the house becomes a place of stress instead of refuge; when there is discord between the first, second, and third floors; when there are three kitchens in which to eat.

Within eight months my mother went on to law school, my father sat uneasy with his decision to sell the house but held he had no choice, and my sister found an apartment in the neighborhood. Now my visits home were to help clean out closets, sort things, and move furniture.

I miss that seaside house. Through all its history, it was the place of family. I carry its remnants around with me from dwelling to dwelling. Like a hermit crab transferring its anemones from old shell to new, I arrange my old possessions in new places. I am still waiting, though, for a house that fits me as well.

DUMP WITH A VIEW

“Isn’t that a stitch?” laughed one old friend when we told her of our new, modest home. “Bring it along when you come to visit,” suggested another. Swallowing East Coast pride and prejudices, my husband and I bought a doublewide when we moved to Texas in 1994.

There are some real fine features to our doublewide: space is used efficiently and there are plenty of electrical outlets. We even have two bathrooms for the first time in our married life. On the other hand, in our fifteen-year-old Pinewood every faucet drips, not every door closes, and squirrels have made the crawl space their own.

With the same prescience with which I had declared when we moved to urban Maryland, “I don’t want to live anywhere near this intersection”—and soon ended up only blocks away—so I asked my husband when we happened to drive by what became our home, “Why can’t we find a dump like that?”

Our dump, you see, has a view. From our moderately level perch the land falls away at a forty-

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five-degree angle into one of the many canyons that characterize the area known as the Devil's Backbone. Our vista includes some of the yet uncluttered slopes of the Texas Hill Country. They are dry hills. Clumps of dark trees, mostly junipers, contrast with the lighter green of the often-parched herbaceous growth. The ground is accented with the gray of Late Cretaceous limestone. The sky, of course, is big.

Vultures and ravens ride the air currents above the canyons, and wrens nest under the house. I have heard the raw call of a male roadrunner and watch turkeys court in the yard. My son has held an injured male painted bunting in his hands, and the endangered golden-cheeked warbler comes to our birdbath. We stop for Texas alligator lizards lumbering across the gravel road with their thick, heavy tails and bright blue tongues and take joy in every fence lizard, skink, and anole we see. Snakes are viewed with thrill and caution. Besides the rather pedestrian foxes, raccoons, possums, armadillos, and deer in the yard, we have had two spotted skunks try to move in, and a truly treasured ringtail spent a fat winter subsidized by a sack of cat food left in the shed. Garden spiders weave their intricate orbs under the doublewide's eaves, butterflies search for

nectar among the wildflowers, tarantulas are sighted infrequently, scorpions are encountered frequently. Only fire ants are looked upon with scorn.

We are fifteen miles out of town—about a twenty-minute drive unless I got stuck behind a horse trailer. In Maryland, a twenty-minute drive might have gotten me the four miles to work; now it has given me the quiet for which I always have longed.

Moving into my new home wasn't only about city versus country living, or East versus West. The transition was more about those laughs I heard when I told my friends about our doublewide. The transition was about my internalized sense of home—a multistoried, old house with delightful nooks and crannies. It was that quaint old house, full of nuances, which breathes a history, that I always imagined as me, as my home.