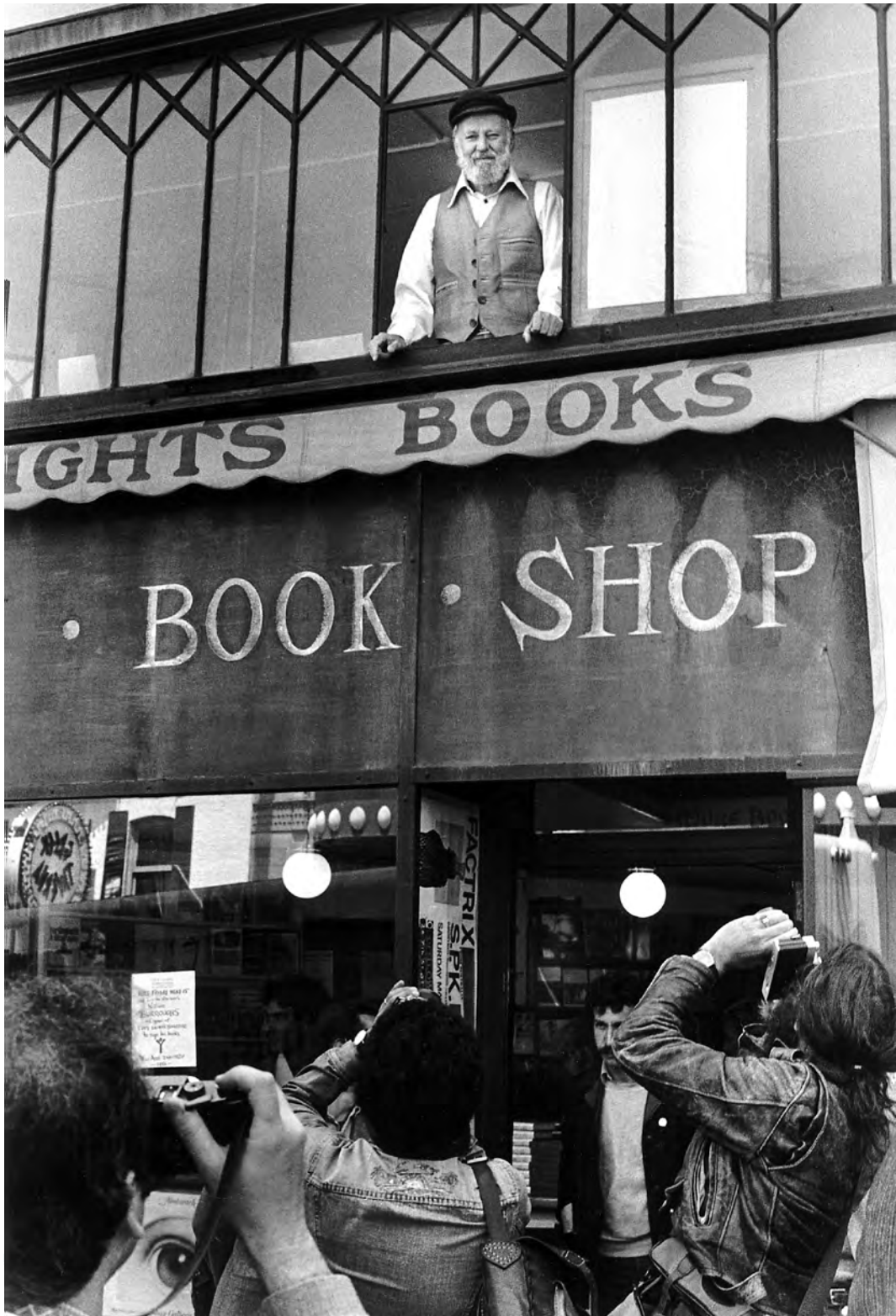


CHRISTOPHER FELVER

Ferlinghetti City Lights, 1981
archival photographic print



courtesy the artist

MARGARET
ELYSIA GARCIA

San Francisco
Weekend
An Authored Map
to the City
of My Youth

“I’m taking the kids to see *G.I. Joe*,” my husband says as he comes out of the motel shower. He never asks permission in the way many contemporary men do, and I like that. My eight-year-old daughter sits on the motel bed, bored as all get-out because Mommy has a couple hours’ work, and we haven’t gone to Japantown yet for unnecessary Japanese stationery products to pass her time. She doesn’t like superhero movies because the girls are never the ones with the capes and fanfare. She’s eight and she knows this.

She also still has bad dreams from watching movie explosions or listening to NPR on a Monday morning on the way to school. We don’t live in San Francisco anymore; we live in the Sierra mountains where it’s not uncommon for kids to raise pigs and goats for 4-H and learn to shoot at age five. I like living there, in space, in air.

My best friend lives in Redondo Beach. Her kids once had to hike two miles on a field trip before they could find a single tree that changed color in autumn. When her family visits, they stop every few feet amazed at our generic deer and squirrels. Haven’t they ever seen animals before? Don’t they know turkeys in the middle of the road are nuisances?

But this weekend, we have come to the city so that my kids are not swallowed up by bad country western music and religion. We come for bookstores and museums. We come for things made with lemongrass or a chili pepper. And sometimes we come for movies.

My ten-year-old son’s eyes are wide and happy at the prospect of seeing two solid hours of CGI violence. He gives me that look that only the child of a writer gives his mother. “Yes, I know they probably started shooting without a decent script because they were too cheap to pay a writer, but I just want to watch things explode.” At least that’s what I think he’s saying. I’ve walked in on him in the loft plenty of times to him holding up his hand to my face so I can’t see the screen: “Bad script, Mom. You don’t want to see this.”

My husband and son move closer to the plastic key-card and the cash on the table with the dining guide that only the most hopeless of SF tourists would use.

“Don’t be a Helicopter Mom.” My son points like there are propellers coming out of my head. Because we had no TV for ten years, he is drawn into commercials and shows

I’ve been food-consoling myself in North Beach since way before she was born.

with equal amounts of amazement. All of his friends have seen everything PG-13; why am I such a holdout?

“Fine. You can take the ten-year-old to the PG-13 *G.I. Joe* save-the-world bullshit nonsense, but you aren’t taking our daughter,” I say to my husband. My daughter eyes me wearily. They don’t stay to argue with me. They’re halfway out the door. My son has a sweet soul. Why feed it emptiness? What’s wrong with being the one family that shuns fake intentional violence? They shake their heads, ignoring me, and wave.

“Fine, then. At least Paloma will have a wholesome upbringing. At least I have control over this.” Paloma raises an eyebrow at me.

“So, Mommy, what are we going to do when you finish working?” This is always a hard one for me. I lived in San Francisco in my twenties. Single. Child- and car-free. I know which bars aren’t quite closed yet. I know where to eat at midnight. I don’t know where to take a kid on a Sunday night in San Francisco, and my hometown pride won’t allow for me to do something touristy. I navigate the city awkwardly, married with children and car.

“We should go to Caffè Greco for desserts, Mom. They have good desserts,” my daughter offers, interrupting my thoughts of dive bars I have known.

“I know they have good desserts.” I’ve been food-consoling myself in North Beach since way before she was born. We take the Broadway Tunnel route because my brakes need to last a couple of more months and because she loves tunnels. But as we arrive in North Beach, I remember that there’s nowhere to make a left turn onto Columbus from the safety of the Broadway Tunnel. I have to cross Columbus and make three rights to go left.

“What’s topless dancing?!” I hear from the back seat. I’m jolted alert. The eight-year-old and I are stopped directly across from that strip where the Hungry I is. There’s a woman standing out there with a whip pretending to lash another with a collar, and the sign above in giant letters reads TOPLESS DANCING.

Now the dilemma begins, because I imagine the normal, suburban parent that I sometimes long to be would say something like, “Don’t look at that! People are doing bad things in there. It’s a sin.” But my heart wouldn’t be in it, and she’d see right through me. I like whips and chains and have nothing against people who also like them. I would never be against sex work as a general rule. The only guy from grad school to pay off his student loan was the one that went into the sex industry. All the rest of us are still dying in debt.

“Some girls like to dance without a bra on.”

“Who would want to watch that? They make money doing that?”

“Yes, they do.”

“It’s men who watch them do that, right, Mommy?” she says in a not-shocked, matter-of-fact sort of way. How do I get out of this?

“I don’t know. Girls sometimes do things to pay rent when they don’t have a lot of choices. For some, it really is their choice, and they like their work.”

That’s my honest answer, but it’s a shitty one.

“Did you do that when you lived here?”

“No, not quite.”

“Because you’re too big?”

“No. I don’t know. Be quiet, I need to find parking.”

We park on the other side of Union and walk up to Greco. We order tiramisu to split, coffee for me and steamed milk for her. I look at her across the marble table. I feel warm and sweet and motherly. I love it when she lets me have alone time with her.

“Did you know tiramisu has rum in it, Mom? You are feeding me alcohol. You aren’t supposed to do that with minors.”

“The alcohol burns out in cooking. No one is forcing you to eat my tiramisu.”

“It’s good. I like the rum taste and, besides, it has coffee in it.” As long as she keeps her voice low, I think, I’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not a Friday or a Saturday. The bridge

and tunnel people are gone, and it’s just the Europeans and the few residents left with rent-controlled apartments.

I hype us up on caffeine, rum, and sugar, and my daughter suggests walking to City Lights Bookstore as a small bit of exercise. We walk up the street together hand in hand. I love it when she holds my hand. It’s so infrequent now. I have her walk on the inside of every sidewalk in the city, and I take the street side, just in case of Muni jumping curbs.

But in the last block I see a waiting ambulance, a cop car, and a woman in her twenties clearly drugged up on something, going limp and noncooperative in the arms of the cops as they try to take her away. For a moment I think I can go around the building, but then it occurs to me that I’ve never once been behind City Lights and I don’t know what’s there.

I push my daughter gently into the street side of our walk, and have her round the trash cans and the hurdles of spit the girl spews forth indiscriminately, hitting the fire hydrant, my jacket, the policemen’s chests.

“Is she on drugs?” my daughter asks.

“Probably. Not very good ones,” I say.

“What are they going to do with her?”

“I don’t know.”

“You never know anything when we come here.” She has me. It’s true. I can no longer explain things right in front of me for an eight-year-old. I almost always make it worse.

We do have family traditions when we visit San Francisco. We usually do the Hagiwara Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park. We go to my old neighborhood. We go to the poetry room on the top floor of City Lights and the children’s section in the basement. This time, though, I’m far too nostalgic for my days as a zine girl, in the nineties.

“Paloma. See that shelf under the stairs? People write little chapbooks and publish them, often by themselves, and City Lights sells them. It used to be my favorite section of the bookstore. My first chapbooks were there.” I am trying to share myself. I’m trying to give her what I can in the most age-appropriate way possible.

Paloma picks a chapbook up off the shelf at random and thumbs through it. I can see she’s reading something. She puts it down and grimaces.

“What?”

“Fucking assholes, Mom.”

“What?!”

“That’s what it said, Mom. I opened the page and the first line was ‘fucking assholes.’”

“Children’s section?” I offer, in the hopes of erasing the suggestion of stopping at the chapbook shelf.

We get back to the motel room with three nice new books with illustrations and without curse words. My husband admits the movie kind of sucked, but my son is happy and planning out the next morning. My daughter spreads her new books on the kids’ bed. My husband asks her what we did.

“Mommy took me to see inappropriate things and let me read books with bad words in them, Papa.”

Yeah, kid. Bad script.

Margaret Elysia Garcia writes essays, fiction, memoir, and poetry. She’s a contributing editor for the newly relaunched. *HipMama* magazine. She lives in the remote northeastern corner of the Sierra Nevadas, where she teaches at Feather River College and hosts *Milkshake & Honey*—a women’s music radio show on Plumas Community Radio at www.kqny919.org. She’s also a regional director for the national *Listen to Your Mother* show.