

# Little House in a Small City

By Lydia Gingerich

Every year, students in RBC's composition class write five papers. The first paper is a literacy narrative, a piece that describes how reading or writing has had an impact on the writer's life. Here is a fine example:

For two years during my early childhood, my family lived in Batangas City, a small city on the coast of the main island of the Philippines. We lived in a white house with a green roof at the top of a hill, surrounded by a grid work of other colorful little houses. For my sister and me, every afternoon was spent with the younger female inhabitants of these houses, running down the cracked cement streets, advancing our Chinese garter skills (a game involving a long elastic band and much jumping), and avoiding the dogs with sharp brown teeth and half of their fur missing. We often took breaks from our play to sprawl out on the cold white tile of my front porch and eat mangoes. With the sticky yellow nectar running down our chins and necks, we made plans to sabotage the group of shirtless slingshot-wielders, which included most of our older brothers.

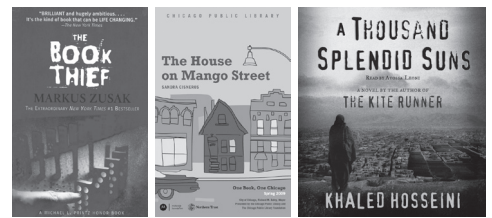
As the enormous mountains behind our houses began to hide the hot sun, my siblings and I found our way to the top of the hill and followed the smell of fresh-cooked rice into the little white house. After dinner, Mom boiled a kettle full of water for our bucket showers, and Dad told us elaborate stories about raccoons and little boys in space, as he helped us wash off a day's worth of sweat and dust.

Bedtime was difficult because I was one of those children who became squeamish when all of the lights were turned off. But before I had to face the darkness, I knew that Mom would read to us. I loved to watch her through the green mesh mosquito net. Seeing Mom sit still for any amount of time was rare. My mother was the type of woman who woke up before the sun, and in the time between her awakening and that of the rest of the household, she managed to take a shower, read, walk our dog, purchase meat and fruit from the nearby street market, tidy up the house, read and reply to emails, make breakfast, and sing us children a little German song to wake us up. Her tanned face was so peaceful as she read the story of two sisters growing up in the woods of Wisconsin.

“My mother's steady voice slowly carried me away from my little world of scary dogs, sweat, and the giggling of my friends.”

My mother's steady voice slowly carried me away from my little world of scary dogs, sweat, and the giggling of my friends. I could smell Ma making all the bread and pies for the week. I could hear Jack barking happily outside at Pa's return from a day of hunting. And even though my Mom used her T-shirt to wipe sweat from her upper lip as she read, I could see the frost on the small windows in the little log cabin. Laura's world mesmerized me; it was so different from my own, and yet I was given a chance to experience it vividly. The fact that both Laura and I were young girls growing up was enough for me to be able to see things from her eyes, to expand what I had smelled, seen, and heard—and this, to me, was the gift of reading.

After my experience with Laura, I could not wait to read more. We did not have many books while we lived in Batangas City, but the ones that we did have, I read over and over again, taking in each new circumstance that became mine through the reading of the book. Later, when we moved to the capital city, there was a massive library at the international school that I attended, and I continued to expand my mind through the reading of books. Over the years, my favorite books continued to be ones about little girls growing up in a place that I would never be able to, books such as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Books like these continue to transport me every time I read them, and the authors inspire me to write about my own childhood, so that one day others can experience the world of colorful houses, bucket showers, and mangoes.





Filipino girls playing Chinese garter. (Credit: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/70556379>)

# In the Waiting Room

By Lydia Gingerich

The poem “In the Waiting Room” by Elizabeth Bishop uses the pages of a *National Geographic* magazine to explore the depth of human connection—a connection so great that it can be seen and felt by a six-year-old girl.

The first moment that we see a spark of this realization is when young Elizabeth hears her aunt cry out from inside the dentist’s office, but soon identifies the cry as coming from herself. After looking through the shocking pages of the magazine, Elizabeth is struck by a sense of human oneness. At first, she does not realize what she is feeling, but slowly she begins to see connections between herself and the rest of humanity—beginning with her aunt. The sound made by her aunt is one of pain, presumably having to do with the dentist working on her teeth. Elizabeth resonates with that pain and associates herself with the cry by saying that it actually came from her own mouth. This is a profound thought for a young girl, but Elizabeth does not stop with this one correlation. After this, she continues to expand on this singular connection by linking herself to even more people.

She starts with those physically closest to her—the people in the waiting room. Not only is she her aunt, but she is also “one of *them*” (62). She feels the weight of this thought, and yet cannot help but think it anyway. As she looks around the room, she notices the similarities in bodies and clothing. At first, the reader may perceive this as a normal experience for young Elizabeth. It is not incredibly uncommon for a six-year-old girl to look at those around her and pick out what may or may not be similar to her own image. Upon further inspection, though, the reader begins to see that this is bigger than a simple observation of her surroundings. Elizabeth goes on to ask what all of the differences and similarities mean, and even ponders what it is that “[holds] us all together /

*Students in the composition class also write a literary analysis, in which they discuss different aspects of a poem, play or short story. Lydia chose the poem “In the Waiting Room” by Elizabeth Bishop. Unfortunately, we cannot reprint it here, but you can read it at <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/waiting-room>. You might want to look at it before reading Lydia’s analysis.*



A painting of the Pahiyas Festival by Filipino artist Manuel Baldemor.

“While the oneness of humanity is something difficult to talk about and explain, it is not difficult to feel.”

or [makes] us all just one?” (82-83). She quickly expands this inspection towards all of humanity through what she has just seen in the magazine.

After Elizabeth notes the differences between her choice of clothing versus that of those around her, she remembers the lack of clothing on the “black, naked women” (28). And even though the women in the *National Geographic* have a different way of living, they are alive. The revelation of all these people being alive right now overwhelms Elizabeth. She has filled her mind with images of many different types of people in many different places and she feels a connection between all of them. She is not quite sure what it is that causes this connection, but she understands that there is a deep relationship between her and the rest of the people living on earth.

The connection with all of humanity is deep. We have very different lives, but are all participating in life. It is not easy to put words to this relationship or even try to explain why it exists. It becomes intense when we think about the fact that right now there are so many people making decisions, speaking languages, and having interactions. And Bishop captures that intensity by having these enormous ideas arise out of the mind of a little girl. While the oneness of humanity is something difficult to talk about and explain, it is not difficult to feel—even a six-year-old can feel it.

Bishop is telling her readers that one does not have to read a lot of books or travel the world to be able to realize the deep connection of life that they share with their fellow humans. Simply seeing a few pictures in a magazine can bring on this sense of connection. It can be felt even by a young girl in the confines of the waiting room of a dentist’s office on a cold day in Worcester, Massachusetts.

*I spent five weeks in Nepal this summer, helping with earthquake relief and leading conferences in remote villages. Last year at Rosedale I was the Resident Director of the women's dorm, and I'm excited to continue in that position this year, while I figure out what to do next.*

