Treasure Hunting in Hanoi
In 1995, I moved to Hanoi with a thirteen year old son, four suitcases and a manuscript. We lived in the Old Quarter, in a tiny house which opened onto a common courtyard. Our front door was a metal grate, which opened accordion-style to accommodate visiting bicycles, and we breakfasted on the sidewalk along with our neighbors, sitting on tiny stools and sipping fragrant bowls of beef pho with noodles.

I had taken a sabbatical to write. Every morning, after the rickety school bus collected Jack, I wrote for four hours straight. And then I was free to do as I pleased, until Jack’s return in the late afternoon.

At first, I spent every free moment exploring Hanoi’s magical alleys and markets. Only when the days fell into a routine did I realize that I was without my bookshelves, or a library, or even a bookstore. Of the four suitcases we had brought, one was packed with books. Within a month, I had read them all.

I combed embassies, cultural centers, even hotel lobbies, but found only faded photocopies and technical handbooks. I was irritable and frustrated. Jack complained my withdrawal symptoms were driving him crazy, and would I please keep my hands off his schoolbooks.

And then I discovered the Green Bamboo.

A typical Asian backpacker cafe, the Green Bamboo in Hanoi offered soothing fruitshakes and banana pancakes. Backpackers lolled for days, writing postcards and reading. And before moving on, these international wanderers would sell the books they had read, now dead weight in their packs.

The Green Bamboo had a whole wall of used paperbacks, arranged on wooden shelves behind dirty glass doors - familiar books I was thrilled to reread, and new authors I discovered. And best of all, every week meant new backpackers and new books.

Every Sunday, I strolled down busy Hang Bong Street, past the camera shops and clothing stalls, the stationery stores and noodle restaurants. Ignoring the art galleries, the uniformed schoolchildren and the dance hall, I burst into the Green Bamboo, lured by the seductive call of books, more books, new books. The young Vietnamese who worked in the cafe would point out the latest acquisitions. When the books were too many to carry, I rode home by cyclo. Seated in the small rickshaw with my stack of books, the driver cycling behind, my happiness was complete.

A decade later, back in the Western world, it is easy for me to buy books. I can walk two blocks to the nearest bookstore, or order books online. But nothing is quite as exciting as hunting for treasure among the grimy bookshelves of the Green Bamboo.

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Azran has been widely published. Some of her accomplishments include her short story ‘By the Roadblock of Bethlehem’ which was awarded honorable mention and published in the International Herald Tribune literary supplement of the Middle East edition (2002). Her work has also appeared in publications such as The Writing Group Book (Chicago Review Press, 2003), Aunties:Thirty Five Writers Celebrate Their Other Mother (Ballantine Books, 2004), the Culture supplement of the Haaretz/International Herald Tribune, Yuan Yang, a Hong Kong based literary journal and the 2009 Tel Aviv Short Stories anthology.