

Excerpt from “Offerings” by Sam Quên Huỳnh

Winner, 2025 Young Writers Award

It was a six-hour bus to their hometown; she'd arrive in the early hours of morning. Ngọc had no trouble booking the tickets. Mẹ had a stash of Vietnamese đồng in the drawer under her altar and Ngọc spoke passable Vietnamese. But even so, there must have been something about her that marked her as foreign-born, Việt kiều – a Western Sydney twang to her pronunciation, or the way she couldn't look the clerk in the eye. She sat all the way at the back on the bus and changed the CD. Maybe, Ngọc thought, she should sacrifice some CDs for Nguyệt to have in heaven too, so she could listen to them while browsing her porn.

The fluorescent lighting of the bus reflected off the silver surface of the CD player. Someone was singing in Japanese. She didn't understand Nguyệt's obsession with foreign language media. Music, movies, translated literature. Nguyệt never listened, watched, or read anything in Vietnamese. Once, Ngọc had tried to show her a song – one of the classic ones their parents used to duet late at night on the karaoke machine, when their father was still alive – and Nguyệt had recoiled from her. But once, Ngọc had walked past the bathroom and heard her singing the lyrics of that song. She sang both parts.