

Molds

Ideals and reality. Paragons and palpabilities. Utopia and dystopia. In America, where I can get harmed solely because of my race, utopia seems like a very distant dream.

As I watch the news, I see on the screen an old Thai man pushed to the floor and ultimately died from his injuries; an Asian man robbed at gunpoint outside of his own home; a 61-year-old Filipino man in New York slashed across the face on the subway, and so many more. I catch my reflection of me on the TV when the screen goes dark. A Vietnamese girl who may be seen as nothing more than another bothersome Asian harboring the virus. Who's to say that I won't be the next victim? That it won't be my picture on television as the latest victim of some hate crime?

We are not bat consumers or accent bearers. We are not harboring a harmful virus. We are Asians but we are not just Asians. We are Asian-Americans. We are Vietnamese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Thai-Americans, Korean-Americans. We value our culture and we have the right to be here in America.

Parallel to clay, we are able to be fashioned and molded. When people see me, a Vietnamese-American, my clay takes on a yellow-tinge. They give me small depressions for eyes and paint the back of my head brown, forming straight hair that reaches the middle of my back. My mouth a small, close-lipped, compliant smile. My average height and flat chest. A bowl of pho in my hand and a shirt that says "Kung-Flu." A smog of miniscule corona-shaped germs swarm me.

People don't get to mold me. **I shape myself.** I am more than some mud created to fiddle with. I stomp over and I say,

"I belong to myself, and myself only. Get your hands off me."

I snatch the model out of their hands, turn my back and walk away. I glare at the figure clenched in my fist. Then, I set to work.

I make my skin a bit lighter and form a fierce, grinning mouth, displaying all my teeth. I raise the arm with the bowl of pho, flaunting it proudly. I set the other hand on

my hip and blow away the cloud of germs hovering around me. I discard the shirt and put on an ao dai instead. I add some details, too. I carve a crease into my eyelids and forge round cheeks.

You see, I have control of myself and I have control of how I want people to perceive me. I'm not going to stand off to the side and watch as people sculpt me as they see fit.

I am the composer.

The commander.

The instructor.

I am going to mold myself as I see fit.

I place the clay figure of myself down and close my eyes. There, I can picture it. I stand on the Earth, but I am not alone. Races of all kinds are by my side. Myriads of traditions and foods and attire are all around me. I see dark skin and light skin; round bodies and slim bodies; green eyes and brown eyes; long, dazzling dresses and gaudy tops. I see rice noodles, bibimbap, empanadas, curries, lavash, sushi, spaghetti, couscous. Most importantly I see the smiles that light up everyone's faces. I hear the laughter that tinkles in the air. I see a place where diversity is embraced, not feared or hated. I see a vision of a possible future.

We take a step in the right path by accepting. By welcoming the differences and the things that set us apart. By empathizing and giving your all in understanding. Instead of viewing this pandemic as an obstacle in the way of peace and equality, view it as an intermission to reset oneself and one's way of thinking. Speak up. Let your voice be heard loud and clear. Support one another.

To a new era post-pandemic we need an open mind and all the love to offer. We need lessons of empathy and forgiveness. **Hate is a virus** and the only way to eliminate it is with compassion.

Maybe then will we reach utopia.