Everyone sees life differently. Our perceptions of the world are shaped by many factors, including the environment, our upbringing, religion, ethical beliefs, race, gender, abilities, and everyday experiences. Having different perspectives causes major conflicts amongst humans, but our differences also allow us to learn from each other and give us new understandings of the world and those whom we share it with.

You have been assigned three short readings: one essay and two short stories. You will be required to read each piece of literature and answer the questions that have been assigned. You are to type your responses in MLA Format and print your assignment (no emails). The readings are available on ACA’s website.

This three-part assignment is due the week we return to school, Friday, August 16th and will count as three quiz grades. No late work will be accepted. Please print—do not email your work. Also be sure to proofread your work for spelling, grammatical, and formatting errors.

ASSIGNMENT #1
In 1-2 pages, typed, address the following questions in complete sentences:

1. Yang’s parents are immigrants from which country? How does Yang feel towards his heritage?

2. What does Yang mean when he says, “Millions of Americans must feel estranged from their own faces”?

3. What are some of the stereotypes that Yang mentions about people who belong to his ethnic background? How does he feel about these stereotypes?

4. According to Yang, why are so many Asian Americans educationally, occupationally, and financially successful?
5. Yang asserts that, even though most Asians score significantly higher on tests than other racial groups, they do not believe in “intrinsic intelligence.” In your own words, explain what this concept means.

6. Jefferson Mao, an Asian-American, admits that trying to fit in socially was a struggle for him. Yang calls it “Asian alienation.” Daniel Chu, another Asian American, has also experienced “social deficiencies” and mentions his upbringing in a Chinese home. In a couple of sentences, explain how some people from Asian backgrounds have tried to “conform” to white social norms.

7. Yang writes about an Asian researcher who said, “They just see me as an Asian Ph.D., never management potential.” In your own words, explain the “Bamboo Ceiling” concept, and what it prevents Asian-Americans from doing—or becoming—in a white-collar workplace.

8. Yang proposes that the “Bamboo Ceiling” concept may not be a result of racism, but perhaps because of the traditional Asian upbringing. Explain how the traditional Asian culture may have made it challenging for Asian-Americans to become leaders in the workplace.

9. What is the “LEAP” organization? What does LEAP stand for and what is its objective?

10. Sach Takayasu, an Asian-American IBM employee, took the LEAP course. When the instructor of the course asked the students to identify some Asian qualities, what was her first reaction to the responses? How does she describe her upbringing being in an Asian household? After further consideration, what did Takayasu finally realize regarding the way she was raised and how that had impacted her?

11. While Yang agrees that the LEAP course is good at helping Asian workers become more self-aware, he does not believe it will be enough to get all Asian-Americans the success they crave. Why does he not believe this?

12. What does J.T. Tran help Asian male students with? What specific skills is he trying to teach them and why? In your explanation, name some exercises he does with his students.

13. Yang believes that if the Bamboo Ceiling is ever going to “break,” it will take the emergence of what type of people or personality type?
14. In order to become more self-assertive, how did Yang refuse both his Asian culture as well as the white culture where he lived?

15. Towards the end of his essay, Yang states, “If you are a woman who isn’t beautiful, it is a social reality that you will have to work twice as hard to hold anyone’s attention. You can either linger on the unfairness of this or you can get with the program.” How does he compare this example to what Asian-Americans are told to do while living in a predominantly white society? What are his attitudes towards this “advice” that is given to Asian-Americans?

ASSIGNMENT #2
Read the short story “Cathedral” by Raymond. Click on the PDF link: Cathedral_Carver.pdf. In 1-2 pages, typed, address the following questions in complete sentences:

1. What does the opening paragraph of the short story tell us about the narrator’s personality? What ideas does he have about blind people? Where did he get adopt these views?

2. Explain the relationship between Robert and the narrator’s wife. How did they meet? What was the narrator’s wife initially trying to do for Robert? How did their relationship grow?

3. What was in the poem that the narrator’s wife wrote? What is the narrator’s response to the poem?

4. After moving to a military base with her first husband, how did the narrator’s wife communicate with Robert? What does the narrator’s wife share with Robert despite his distance and his disability?

5. Give an example in the story (whether it is an action, a statement, or a description) demonstrates the narrator’s discomfort with emotional intimacy?

6. When narrator learns of Robert’s recently deceased wife, he thinks, “what a pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved.” What do these thoughts reveal about the narrator’s beliefs about visual perception?
7. When Robert finally arrives at the train station, what about Robert’s appearance and/or behaviors surprise the narrator?

8. When Robert tries to engage the narrator in conversation, how does the narrator respond?

9. In what point in the story is there a dramatic shift in the way the narrator perceives or responds to Robert differently?

10. What does Robert ask the narrator to draw for him? Why does Robert ask this of him?

11. What does the narrator’s reaction to the drawing indicate about his new perception of Robert and the world around him?

12. In a couple of sentences, explain how “blindness” applies not only to Robert, but also the narrator. How does blindness have a symbolic or double-meaning in this story?

ASSIGNMENT #3
Read the short story “Bread” by Margaret Atwood. Click on the PDF link: Bread_Atwood.pdf. In 1-2 pages, typed, address the following questions in complete sentences:

1. In the first paragraph of the short story “Bread,” what type of setting or household can we assume this bread has been placed in? What type of person might be eating this bread? How many types of bread are available to this person?

2. What is the overall mood in the first paragraph? Use specific words from the reading to support your point.
3. In the second paragraph, how does the mood shift with the setting? How many pieces of bread are there and why is this significant? Provide some specific examples of imagery that Atwood uses in this paragraph.

4. Explain how the mood shifts with the setting in the third paragraph. What predicament is the prisoner in? Why is this bread described as “subversive and treacherous”? What is the bread being used for and for what reason is it being given to the prisoner?

5. The fourth paragraph is inspired by The Brother Grimm’s fairytale “God’s Food.” Take a moment and read the fairytale below:

“There were once two sisters, one of whom had no children and was rich, and the other had five and was a widow, and so poor that she no longer had food enough to satisfy herself and her children. In her need, therefore, she went to her sister, and said, ‘My children and I are suffering the greatest hunger. You are rich, give me a mouthful of bread.’ The very rich sister was as hard as a stone, and lied to her poor sister, saying, ‘I myself have nothing in the house,’ and drove away the poor creature with harsh words. After some time, the husband of the rich sister came home, and was just going to cut himself a piece of bread, but when he made the first cut into the loaf, out flowed red blood. When the woman saw what had happened, she was terrified and told him what had occurred with her sister. He hurried away to help the widow and her children, but when he entered her room, he found her praying. She had her two youngest children in her arms, and the three eldest were lying dead. He offered her food, but she answered, ‘We no longer need earthly food; God has filled three already, and will hear our prayers as well.’ Scarcely had she uttered these words than the two little ones drew their last breath, whereupon her heart broke, and she sank down dead.”

What two types of women are described in this fairytale and in Atwood’s fourth paragraph? What does this tell us about people who have plenty and how they treat others? Read 2 Samuel 12:1-10. How does this story in the Bible relate to Atwood’s “theme” in the fourth paragraph?

6. In the last paragraph, why do you think Atwood makes the bread float above the reader and remain unattainable? What message might she wanting us to receive from her rhetorical questions?

7. Why do you think Atwood uses 2nd person (“you”) in her short story? What effect might this have on the reader? How is the repeated word “Imagine” used as a creative device?

8. Atwood uses five different scenarios to creatively get readers to consider new perspectives on something as simple as a piece of bread. If you could assign each of the five paragraphs with their own “theme,” “message,” or “perspective” what would those be?
If any form of plagiarism is detected on the assignment(s) submitted, the assignment(s) will not receive FULL credit or ANY credit, at the discretion of the teacher and the school. **The only borrowed material you are allowed to quote is the readings that have been assigned.**

Plagiarism is a very serious issue in the academic world. Sometimes labeled as “literary theft,” plagiarism is defined as follows:

*In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer…uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source. This definition applies to texts published in print or online, to manuscripts, and to the work of other student writers.*

- The Council of Writing Program Administrators, in affiliation with Purdue University’s On-Line Writing Lab, [http://www.wpacouncil.org/node/9](http://www.wpacouncil.org/node/9)

Plagiarism is the act of appropriating either the words or the ideas of any other writer without properly acknowledging the source of those words or ideas. It is cheating! God has given you much potential to be in this class, and I would encourage you to learn how to tap into this potential that God has given you throughout the school year.
BREAD
MARGARET ATWOOD

Reveries sur un morceau de pain. Suivant l’état d’esprit, la situation dans lesquels nous nous trouvons, nous réagissons différemment. Margaret Atwood imagine certaines attitudes possibles suivant un contexte donné.

IMAGINE a piece of bread. You don’t have to imagine it, it’s right here in the kitchen, on the bread board, in its plastic bag, lying beside the bread knife. The bread knife is an old one you picked up at an auction; it has the word BREAD carved into the wooden handle. You open the bag, pull back the wrapper, cut yourself a slice. You put butter on it, then peanut butter, then honey, and you fold it over. Some of the honey runs out onto your fingers and you lick it off. It takes you about a minute to eat the bread. This bread happens to be brown, but there is also white bread, in the refrigerator, and a heel of the rye you got last week, round as a full stomach then, now going mouldy. Occasionally you make bread. You think of it as something relaxing to do with your hands.

IMAGINE a famine. Now imagine a piece of bread. Both of these things are real but you happen to be in the same room with only one of them. Put yourself into a different room, that’s what the mind is for. You are now lying on a thin mattress in a hot room. The walls are made of dried earth and your sister, who is younger than you are, is in the room with you. She is starving, her belly is bloated, flies land on her eyes; you brush them off with your hand. You have a cloth too, filthy but damp, and you press it to her lips and forehead. The piece of bread is the bread you’ve been saving, for days it seems. You are as hungry as she is, but not yet as weak. How long does this take? When will someone come with more bread? You think of going out to see if you might find something that could be eaten, but outside the streets are infested with scavengers and the stink of corpses is everywhere.

Should you share the bread or give the whole piece to your sister? Should you eat the piece of bread yourself? After all, you have a better chance of living, you’re stronger. How long does it take to decide?

IMAGINE a prison. There is something you know that you have not yet told. Those in control of the prison know that you know. So do those not in control. If you tell, thirty or forty or a hundred of your friends, your comrades, will be caught and will die. If you refuse to tell, tonight will be like last night. They always choose the night. You don’t think about the night however, but about the piece of bread they offered you. How long does it take? The piece of bread was brown and fresh and reminded you of sunlight falling across a wooden floor. It reminded you of a bowl, a yellow bowl that was once in your home. It held apples and pears; it stood on a table you can also remember. It’s not the hunger or the pain that is killing you but the absence of the yellow bowl. If you could only hold the bowl in your hands, right here, you could withstand anything, you tell yourself. The bread they offered you is subversive, it’s treacherous, it does not mean life.

THERE were once two sisters. One was rich and had no children, the other had five children and was a widow, so poor that she no longer had any food left. She went to her sister and asked her for a mouthful of bread. ‘My children are dying,’ she said. The rich sister said, ‘I do not have enough for myself,’ and drove her away from the door. Then the husband of the rich sister came home and wanted to cut himself a piece of bread; but when he made the first cut, out flowed red blood.

Everyone knew what that meant.
This is a traditional German fairy-tale.

THE LOAF of bread I have conjured for you floats about a foot above your kitchen table. The table is normal, there are no trap doors in it. A blue tea towel floats beneath the bread, and there are no strings attaching the cloth to the bread or the bread to the ceiling or the table to the cloth, you’ve proved it by passing your hand above and below. You didn’t touch the bread though. What stopped you? You don’t want to know whether the bread is real or whether it’s just a hallucination I’ve somehow duped you into seeing. There’s no doubt that you can see the bread, you can even smell it, it smells like yeast, and it looks solid enough, solid as your own arm. But can you trust it? Can you eat it? You don’t want to know, imagine that.

This Magazine, V15 N1, Feb. 1981
This blind man, an old friend of my wife’s, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife’s relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-law’s. Arrangements were made. He would come by train, a five-hour trip, and my wife would meet him at the station. She hadn’t seen him since she worked for him one summer in Seattle ten years ago. But she and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn’t enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to.

That summer in Seattle she had needed a job. She didn’t have any money. The man she was going to marry at the end of the summer was in officers’ training school. He didn’t have any money, either. But she was in love with the guy, and he was in love with her, etc. She’d seen something in the paper: HELP WANTED—Reading to Blind Man, and a telephone number. She phoned and went over, was hired on the spot. She worked with this blind man all summer. She read stuff to him, case studies, reports, that sort of thing. She helped him organize his little office in the county social-service department. They’d become good friends, my wife and the blind man. On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose—even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it. She was always trying to write a poem. She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important had happened to her.

When we first started going out together, she showed me the poem. In the poem, she recalled his fingers and the way they had moved around over her face. In the poem, she talked about what she had felt at the time, about what went through her mind when the blind man touched her nose and lips. I can remember I didn’t think much of the poem. Of course, I didn’t tell her that. Maybe I just don’t understand poetry. I admit it’s not the first thing I reach for when I pick up something to read.

Anyway, this man who’d first enjoyed her favors, this officer-to-be, he’d been her childhood sweetheart. So okay. I’m saying that at the end of the summer she let the blind man run his hands over her face, said good-bye.
to him, married her childhood etc., who was now a commissioned officer, and she moved away from Seattle. But they’d keep in touch, she and the blind man. She made the first contact after a year or so. She called him up one night from an Air Force base in Alabama. She wanted to talk. They talked. He asked her to send him a tape and tell him about her life. She did this. She sent the tape. On the tape, she told the blind man she loved her husband but she didn’t like it where they lived and she didn’t like it that he was a part of the military-industrial thing. She told the blind man she’d written a poem and he was in it. She told him that she was writing a poem about what it was like to be an Air Force officer’s wife. The poem wasn’t finished yet. She was still writing it. The blind man made a tape. He sent her the tape. She made a tape. This went on for years. My wife’s officer was posted to one base and then another. She sent tapes from Moody AFB, McGuire, McConnell, and finally Travis, near Sacramento, where one night she got to feeling lonely and cut off from people she kept losing in that moving-around life. She got to feeling she couldn’t go it another step. She went in and swallowed all the pills and capsules in the medicine chest and washed them down with a bottle of gin. Then she got into a hot bath and passed out.

But instead of dying, she got sick. She threw up. Her officer—why should he have a name? he was the childhood sweetheart, and what more does he want?—came home from somewhere, found her, and called the ambulance. In time, she put it all on tape and sent the tape to the blind man. Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on tapes and sent the tapes off lickety-split. Next to writing a poem every year, I think it was her chief means of recreation. On one tape, she told the blind man she’d decided to live away from her officer for a time. On another tape, she told him about her divorce. She and I began going out, and of course she told her blind man about it. She told him everything, or so it seemed to me. Once she asked me if I’d like to hear the latest tape from the blind man. This was a year ago. I was on the tape, she said. So I said okay, I’d listen to it. I got us drinks and we settled down in the living room. We made ready to listen. First she inserted the tape into the player and adjusted a couple of dials. Then she pushed a lever. The tape squeaked and someone began to talk in this loud voice. She lowered the volume. After a few minutes of harmless chitchat, I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn’t even know! And then this: “From all you’ve said about him, I can only conclude—“ But we were interrupted, a knock at the door, something, and we didn’t ever get back to the tape. Maybe it was just as well. I’d heard all I wanted to.
Now this same blind man was coming over to sleep in my house.

“Maybe I could take him bowling,” I said to my wife. She was at the draining board doing scalloped potatoes. She put down the knife she was using and turned around.

“If you love me,” she said, “you can do this for me. If you don’t love me, okay. But if you had a friend, any friend, and the friend came to visit, I’d make him feel comfortable.” She wiped her hands with the dish towel.

“I don’t have any blind friends,” I said.

“You don’t have any friends,” she said. “Period. Besides,” she said, “goddamn it, his wife’s just died! Don’t you understand that? The man’s lost his wife!”

I didn’t answer. She’d told me a little about the blind man’s wife. Her name was Beulah. Beulah! That’s a name for a colored woman.

“Was his wife a Negro?” I asked.

“Are you crazy?” my wife said. “Have you just flipped or something?” She picked up a potato. I saw it hit the floor, then roll under the stove. “What’s wrong with you?” she said. “Are you drunk?”

“I’m just asking,” I said.

Right then my wife filled me in with more detail than I cared to know. I made a drink and sat at the kitchen table to listen. Pieces of the story began to fall into place.

Beulah had gone to work for the blind man the summer after my wife had stopped working for him. Pretty soon Beulah and the blind man had themselves a church wedding. It was a little wedding—who’d want to go to such a wedding in the first place?—just the two of them, plus the minister and the minister’s wife. But it was a church wedding just the same. It was what Beulah had wanted, he’d said. But even then Beulah must have been carrying the cancer in her glands. After they had been inseparable for eight years—my wife’s word, inseparable—Beulah’s health went into a rapid decline. She died in a Seattle hospital room, the blind man sitting beside the bed and holding on to her hand. They’d married, lived and worked together, slept together—had sex, sure—and then the blind man had to bury her. All this without his having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding. Hearing this, I felt sorry for the blind man for a little bit. And then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved. A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. Someone who could wear makeup or not—what difference
to him? She could if she wanted, wear green eye-shadow around one eye, a straight pin in her nostril, yellow slacks, and purple shoes, no matter. And then to slip off into death, the blind man’s hand on her hand, his blind eyes streaming tears—I’m imagining now—her last thought maybe this: that he never even knew what she looked like, and she on an express to the grave. Robert was left with a small insurance policy and half of a twenty-peso Mexican coin. The other half of the coin went into the box with her. Pathetic.

So when the time rolled around, my wife went to the depot to pick him up. With nothing to do but wait—sure, I blamed him for that—I was having a drink and watching the TV when I heard the car pull into the drive. I got up from the sofa with my drink and went to the window to have a look.

I saw my wife laughing as she parked the car. I saw her get out of the car and shut the door. She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing. She went around to the other side of the car to where the blind man was already starting to get out. This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man! Too much, I say. The blind man reached into the backseat and dragged out a suitcase. My wife took his arm, shut the car door, and, talking all the way, moved him down the drive and then up the steps to the front porch. I turned off the TV. I finished my drink, rinsed the glass, dried my hands. Then I went to the door.

My wife said, “I want you to meet Robert. Robert, this is my husband. I’ve told you all about him.” She was beaming. She had this blind man by his coat sleeve.

The blind man let go of his suitcase and up came his hand.

I took it. He squeezed hard, held my hand, and then he let it go.

“I feel like we’ve already met,” he boomed.

“Likewise,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say. Then I said, “Welcome. I’ve heard a lot about you.” We began to move then, a little group, from the porch into the living room, my wife guiding him by the arm. The blind man was carrying his suitcase in his other hand. My wife said things like, “To your left here, Robert. That’s right. Now watch it, there’s a chair. That’s it. Sit down right here. This is the sofa. We just bought this sofa two weeks ago.”

I started to say something about the old sofa. I’d liked that old sofa. But I didn’t say anything. Then I wanted to say something else, small-talk, about the scenic ride along the Hudson. How going to New York, you should sit on the right-hand side of the train, and coming from New York, the left-hand side.

“Did you have a good train ride?” I said. “Which side of the train did
you sit on, by the way?”

“What a question, which side!” my wife said. “What’s it matter which side?” she said.

“I just asked,” I said.

“Right side,” the blind man said. “I hadn’t been on a train in nearly forty years. Not since I was a kid. With my folks. That’s been a long time. I’d nearly forgotten the sensation. I have winter in my beard now,” he said. “So I’ve been told, anyway. Do I look distinguished, my dear?” the blind man said to my wife.

“You look distinguished, Robert,” she said. “Robert,” she said. “Robert, it’s just so good to see you.”

My wife finally took her eyes off the blind man and looked at me. I had the feeling she didn’t like what she saw. I shrugged.

I’ve never met, or personally known, anyone who was blind. This blind man was late forties, a heavy-set, balding man with stooped shoulders, as if he carried a great weight there. He wore brown slacks, brown shoes, a light-brown shirt, a tie, a sports coat. Spiffy. He also had this full beard. But he didn’t use a cane and he didn’t wear dark glasses. I’d always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind. Fact was, I wish he had a pair. At first glance, his eyes looked like anyone else’s eyes. But if you looked close, there was something different about them. Too much white in the iris, for one thing, and the pupils seemed to move around in the sockets without his knowing it or being able to stop it. Creepy. As I stared at his face, I saw the left pupil turn in toward his nose while the other made an effort to keep in one place. But it was only an effort, for that one eye was on the roam without his knowing it or wanting it to be.

I said, “Let me get you a drink. What’s your pleasure? We have a little bit of everything. It’s one of our pastimes.”

“Bub, I’m a Scotch man myself,” he said fast enough in this big voice.

“Right,” I said. Bub! “Sure you are. I knew it.”

He let his fingers touch his suitcase, which was sitting alongside the sofa. He was taking his bearings. I didn’t blame him for that.

“I’ll move that up to your room,” my wife said.

“No, that’s fine,” the blind man said loudly. “It can go up when I go up.”

“A little water with the Scotch?” I said.

“Very little,” he said.

“I knew it, “ I said.

He said, “Just a tad. The Irish actor, Barry Fitzgerald? I’m like that fellow. When I drink water, Fitzgerald said, I drink water. When I drink
whiskey, I drink whiskey.” My wife laughed. The blind man brought his hand up under his beard. He lifted his beard slowly and let it drop.

I did the drinks, three big glasses of Scotch with a splash of water in each. Then we made ourselves comfortable and talked about Robert’s travels. First the long flight from the West Coast to Connecticut, we covered that. Then from Connecticut up here by train. We had another drink concerning that leg of the trip.

I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn’t smoke because, as speculation had it, they couldn’t see the smoke they exhaled. I though I knew that much and that much only about blind people. But this blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one. This blind man filled his ashtray and my wife emptied it.

When we sat down at the table for dinner, we had another drink. My wife heaped Robert’s plate with cube steak, scalloped potatoes, green beans. I buttered him up two slices of bread. I said, “Here’s bread and butter for you.” I swallowed some of my drink. “Now let us pray,” I said, and the blind man lowered his head. My wife looked at me, her mouth agape. “Pray the phone won’t ring and the food doesn’t get cold,” I said.

We dug in. We ate everything there was to eat on the table. We ate like there was no tomorrow. We didn’t talk. We ate. We scarfed. We grazed the table. We were into serious eating. The blind man had right away located his foods, he knew just where everything was on his plate. I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat. He’d cut two pieces of the meat, fork the meat into his mouth, and then go all out for the scalloped potatoes, the beans next, and then he’d tear off a hunk of buttered bread and eat that. He’d follow this up with a big drink of milk. It didn’t seem to bother him to use his fingers once in a while, either.

We finished everything, including half a strawberry pie. For a few moments, we sat as if stunned. Swear beaded on our faces. Finally, we got up from the table and left the dirty plates. We didn’t look back. We took ourselves into the living room and sank into our places again. Robert and my wife sat on the sofa. I took the big chair. We had us two or three more drinks while they talked about the major things that had come to pass for them in the past ten years. For the most part, I just listened. Now and then I joined in. I didn’t want him to think I’d left the room, and I didn’t want her to think I was feeling left out. They talked of things that had happened to them—to them!—these past ten years. I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife’s sweet lips: “And then my dear husband came into my life”—something like that. But I heard nothing of the sort. More talk of Robert. Robert had done a little of everything, it seemed, a regular blind jack-of-all-trades. But most
recently he and his wife had had an Amway distributorship, from which, I
gathered, they’d earned a living, such as it was. The blind man was also a
ham radio operator. He talked in his loud voice about conversations he’d had
with fellow operators in Guam, in the Philippines, in Alaska, and even in
Tahiti. He said he’d have a lot of friends there if her ever wanted to go visit
those places. From time to time, he’d turn his blind face toward me, put his
hand under his beard, ask me something. How long had I been in my present
position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn’t.) Was I going to stay
with it? (What were the options?) Finally, when I thought he was beginning
to run down, I got up and turned on the TV.

My wife looked at me with irritation. She was heading toward a boil.
Then she looked at the blind man and said, “Robert, do you have a TV?”

The blind man said, “My dear, I have two TVs. I have a color set and
a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It’s funny, but if I turn the TV on, and
I’m always turning it on, I turn on the color set. It’s funny, don’t you think?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I had absolutely nothing to say to
that. No opinion. So I watched the news program and tried to listen to what
the announcer was saying.

“This is a color TV,” the blind man said. “Don’t ask me how, but I
can tell.”

“We traded up a while ago,” I said.

The blind man had another taste of his drink. He lifted his beard,
sniffed it, and let it fall. He leaned forward on the sofa. He positioned his
ashtray on the coffee table, then put the lighter to his cigarette. He leaned
back on the sofa and crossed his legs at the ankles.

My wife covered her mouth, and then she yawned. She stretched. She
said, “I think I’ll go upstairs and put on my robe. I think I’ll change into
something else. Robert, you make yourself comfortable,” she said.

“I’m comfortable,” the blind man said.

“I want you to feel comfortable in this house,” she said.

“I am comfortable,” the blind man said.

After she’d left the room, he and I listened to the weather report and
then to the sports roundup. By that time, she’d been gone so long I didn’t
know if she was going to come back. I thought she might have gone to bed. I
wished she’d come back downstairs. I didn’t want to be left alone with a
blind man. I asked him if he wanted another drink, and he said sure. Then I
asked if he wanted to smoke some dope with me. I said I’d just rolled a
number. I hadn’t, but I planned to do so in about two shakes.
“I’ll try some with you,” he said.
“Damn right,” I said. “That’s the stuff.”
I got our drinks and sat down on the sofa with him. Then I rolled us two fat numbers. I lit one and passed it. I brought it to his fingers. He took it and inhaled.
“Hold it as long as you can,” I said. I could tell he didn’t know the first thing.
My wife came back downstairs wearing her pink robe and her pink slippers.
“What do I smell?” she said.
“We thought we’d have us some cannabis,” I said.
My wife gave me a savage look. Then she looked at the blind man and said, “Robert, I didn’t know you smoked.”
He said, “I do now, my dear. There’s a first time for everything. But I don’t feel anything yet.”
“This stuff is pretty mellow,” I said. “This stuff is mild. It’s dope you can reason with,” I said. “It doesn’t mess you up.”
“Not much it doesn’t, bub,” he said, and laughed.
My wife sat on the sofa between the blind man and me. I passed her the number. She took it and toked and then passed it back to me. “Which way is this going?” she said. Then she said, “I shouldn’t be smoking this. I can hardly keep my eyes open as it is. That dinner did me in. I shouldn’t have eaten so much.”
“It was the strawberry pie,” the blind man said. “That’s what did it,” he said, and he laughed his big laugh. Then he shook his head.
“There’s more strawberry pie,” I said.
“Do you want some more, Robert?” my wife said.
“Maybe in a little while,” he said.
We gave our attention to the TV. My wife yawned again. She said, “Your bed is made up when you feel like going to bed, Robert. I know you must have had a long day. When you’re ready to go to bed, say so.”
She pulled his arm. “Robert?”
He came to and said, “I’ve had a real nice time. This beats tapes, doesn’t it?”
I said, “Coming at you,” and I put the number between his fingers. He inhaled, held the smoke, and then let it go. It was like he’d been doing this since he was nine years old.
“Thanks, bub,” he said. “But I think this is all for me. I think I’m beginning to feel it,” he said. He held the burning roach out for my wife.
“Same here,” she said. “Ditto. Me, too.” She took the roach and
passed it to me. “I may just sit here for a while between you two guys with my eyes closed. But don’t let me bother you, okay? Either one of you. If it bothers you, say so. Otherwise, I may just sit here with my eyes closed until you’re ready to go to bed,” she said. “Your bed’s made up, Robert, when you’re ready. It’s right next to our room at the top of the stairs. We’ll show you up when you’re ready. You wake me up now, you guys, if I fall asleep.” She said that and then she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

The news program ended. I got up and changed the channel. I sat back down on the sofa. I wished my wife hadn’t pooped out. Her head lay across the back of the sofa, her mouth open. She’d turned so that her robe had slipped away from her legs, exposing a juicy thigh. I reached to draw her robe back over her, and it was then that I glanced at the blind man. What the hell! I flipped the robe open again.

“You say you when you want some strawberry pie,” I said.
“Will,” he said.
I said, “Are you tired? Do you want me to take you up to your bed? Are you ready to hit the hay?”
“Not yet,” he said. “No, I’ll stay up with you, bub. If that’s all right. I’ll stay up until you’re ready to turn in. We haven’t had a chance to talk. Know what I mean? I feel like me and her monopolized the evening. “ He lifted his beard and he let it fall. He picked up his cigarettes and his lighter.

“That’s all right,” I said. Then I said, “I’m glad for the company.”

And I guess I was. Every night I smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before I fell asleep. My wife and I hardly ever went to bed at the same time. When I did go to sleep, I had these dreams. Sometimes I’d wake up from one of them, my heart going crazy.

Something about the church and the Middle Ages was on the TV. Not your run-of-the-mill TV fare. I wanted to watch something else. I turned to the other channels. But there was nothing on them, either. So I turned back to the first channel and apologized.

“Bub, it’s all right,” the blind man said. “It’s fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I’m always learning something. Learning never ends. It won’t hurt me to learn something tonight. I got ears,” he said.

We didn’t say anything for a time. He was leaning forward with his head turned at me, his right ear aimed in the direction of the set. Very disconcerting. Now and then his eyelids drooped and then they snapped open again. Now and then he put his fingers into his beard and tugged, like he was thinking about something he was hearing on the television.
On the screen, a group of men wearing cowls was being set upon and tormented by men dressed in skeleton costumes and men dressed as devils. The men dressed as devils wore devil masks, horns, and long tails. This pageant was part of a procession. The Englishman who was narrating the thing said it took place in Spain once a year. I tried to explain to the blind man what was happening.

“Skeletons,” he said. “I know about skeletons,” he said, and he nodded.

The TV showed this one cathedral. Then there was a long, slow look at another one. Finally, the picture switched to the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up to the clouds. The camera pulled away to show the whole of the cathedral rising above the skyline.

There were times when the Englishman who was telling the thing would shut up, would simply let the camera move around over the cathedrals. Or else the camera would tour the countryside, men in fields walking behind oxen. I waited as long as I could. Then I felt I had to say something. I said, “They’re showing the outside of this cathedral now. Gargoyles. Little statues carved to look like monsters. Now I guess they’re in Italy. Yeah, they’re in Italy. There’s paintings on the walls of this one church.”

“Are those fresco painting, bub?” he asked, and he sipped from his drink.

I reached for my glass. But it was empty. I tried to remember what I could remember. “You’re asking me are those frescoes?” I said. “That’s a good question. I don’t know.”

The camera moved to a cathedral outside Lisbon. The difference in the Portugese cathedral compared with the French and Italian were not that great. But they were there. Mostly the interior stuff. Then something occurred to me, and I said, “Something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion what they’re talking about? Do you the difference between that and a Baptist church, say?”

He let the smoke dribble from his mouth. “I know they took hundreds of workers fifty or a hundred years to build,” he said. “I just heard the man say that, of course. I know generations of the same families worked on a cathedral. I heard him say that, too. The men who began their life’s work on them, they never lived to see the completion of their work. In that wise, bub, they’re no different from the rest of us, right?” He laughed. Then his eyelids drooped again. His head nodded. He seemed to be snoozing. Maybe he was
imagining himself in Portugal. The TV was showing another cathedral now. This one was in Germany. The Englishman’s voice droned on. “Cathedrals,” the blind man said. He sat up and rolled his head back and forth. “If you want the truth, bub, that’s about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I wish you’d do it. I’d like that. If you want to know, I really don’t have a good idea.”

I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.

I stared some more at the cathedral before the picture flipped off into the countryside. There was no use. I turned to the blind man and said, “To begin with, they’re very tall.” I was looking around the room for clues. “They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky. They’re so big, some of them, they have to have these supports. To help hold them up, so to speak. These supports are called buttresses. They remind of viaducts, for some reason. But maybe you don’t know viaducts, either? Sometimes the cathedrals have devils and such carved into the front. Sometimes lords and ladies. Don’t ask me why this is,” I said.

He was nodding. The whole upper part of his body seemed to be moving back and forth. “I’m not doing so good, am I?” I said.

He stopped nodding and leaned forward on the edge of the sofa. As he listened to me, he was running his fingers through his beard. I wasn’t getting through to him, I could see that. But he waited for me to go on just the same. He nodded, like he was trying to encourage me. I tried to think what else to say. “They’re really big,” I said. They’re massive. They’re built of stone. Marble, too, sometimes. In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone’s life. You could tell this from their cathedral-building. I’m sorry,” I said, “but it looks like that’s the best I can do for you. I’m just no good at it.”

“That’s all right, bub,” the blind man said. “Hey, listen. I hope you don’t mind my asking you. Can I ask you something? Let me ask you a simple question, yes or no. I’m just curious and there’s no offense. You’re my host. But let me ask if you are in any way religious? You don’t mind my asking?”

I shook my head. He couldn’t see that, though. A wink is the same as a nod to a blind man. “I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard. You know what I’m saying?”

“Sure, I do,” he said.
“Right,” I said.
The Englishman was still holding forth. My wife sighed in her sleep. She drew a long breath and went on with her sleeping.
“You’ll have to forgive me,” I said. “But I can’t tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it. I can’t do any more than I’ve done.”

The blind man sat very still, his head down, as he listened to me.
I said, “The truth is, cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They’re something to look at on late-night TV. That’s all they are.”

It was then that the blind man cleared his throat. He brought something up. He took a handkerchief from his back pocket. Then he said, “I get it, bub. It’s okay. It happens. Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Hey, listen to me. Will you do me a favor? I got an idea. Why don’t you find us some heavy paper? And a pen. We’ll do something. We’ll draw one together. Get us a pen and some heavy paper. Go on, bub, get the stuff,” he said.

So I went upstairs. My legs felt like they didn’t have any strength in them. They felt like they did after I’d done some running. In my wife’s room, I looked around. I found some ballpoints in a little basket on her table. And then I tried to think where to look for the kind of paper he was talking about.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, I found a shopping bag with onion skins in the bottom of the bag. I emptied the bag and shook it. I brought it into the living room and sat down with it near his legs. I moved some things, smoothed the wrinkles from the bag, spread it out on the coffee table.

The blind man got down from the sofa and sat next to me on the carpet.

He ran his fingers over the paper. He went up and down the sides of the paper. The edges, even the edges. He fingered the corners.
“All right,” he said. “All right, let’s do her.”

He found my hand, the hand with the pen. He closed his hand over my hand. “Go ahead, bub, draw,” he said. “Draw. You’ll see. I’ll follow along with you. It’ll be okay. Just begin now like I’m telling you. You’ll see. Draw,” the blind man said.

So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a hose. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy.
“Swell,” he said. “Terrific. You’re doing fine,” he said. “Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it’s a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up.”
I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great
doors. I couldn’t stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen
and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper.
He moved the tips of the fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn,
and he nodded.

“Doing fine,” the blind man said.
I took up the pen again, and he found my hand. I kept at it. I’m no
artist. But I kept drawing just the same.
My wife opened up her eyes and gazed at us. She sat up on the sofa,
her robe hanging open. She said, “What are you doing? Tell me, I want to
know.”
I didn’t answer her.
The blind man said, “We’re drawing a cathedral. Me and him are
working on it. Press hard,” he said to me. “That’s right. That’s good,” he
said. “Sure. You got it, bub. I can tell. You didn’t think you could. But you
can, can’t you? You’re cooking with gas now. You know what I’m saying?
We’re going to really have us something here in a minute. How’s the old
arm?” he said. “Put some people in there now. What’s a cathedral without
people?”
My wife said, “What’s going on? Robert, what are you doing? What’s
going on?”
“It’s all right,” he said to her. “Close your eyes now,” the blind man
said to me.
I did it. I closed them just like he said.
“Are they closed?” he said. “Don’t fudge.”
“They’re closed,” I said.
“Keep them that way,” he said. He said, “Don’t stop now. Draw.”
So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went
over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.
Then he said, “I think that’s it. I think you got it,” he said. “Take a
look. What do you think?”
But I had my eyes closed. I thought I’d keep them that way for a little
longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.
“Well?” he said. “Are you looking?”
My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t
feel like I was inside anything.
“It’s really something,” I said.
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Paper Tigers

What happens to all the Asian-American overachievers when the test-taking ends?

By Wesley Yang  Published May 8, 2011

Sometimes I’ll glimpse my reflection in a window and feel astonished by what I see. Jet-black hair. Slanted eyes. A pancake-flat surface of yellow-and-green-toned skin. An expression that is nearly reptilian in its impassivity. I’ve contrived to think of this face as the equal in beauty to any other. But what I feel in these moments is its strangeness to me. It’s my face. I can’t disclaim it. But what does it have to do with me?

Millions of Americans must feel estranged from their own faces. But every self-estranged individual is estranged in his own way. I, for instance, am the child of Korean immigrants, but I do not speak my parents’ native tongue. I have never called my elders by the proper honorific, “big brother” or “big sister.” I have never dated a Korean woman. I don’t have a Korean friend. Though I am an immigrant, I have never wanted to strive like one.

You could say that I am, in the gently derisive parlance of Asian-Americans, a banana or a Twinkie (yellow on the outside, white on the inside). But while I don’t believe our roots necessarily define us, I do believe there are racially inflected assumptions wired into our neural circuitry that we use to sort through the sea of faces we confront. And although I am in most respects devoid of Asian characteristics, I do have an Asian face.

Here is what I sometimes suspect my face signifies to other Americans: an invisible person, barely distinguishable from a mass of faces that resemble it. A conspicuous person standing apart from the crowd and yet devoid of any individuality. An icon of so much that the culture pretends to honor but that it in fact patronizes and exploits. Not just people “who are good at math” and play the violin, but a mass of stifled, repressed, abused, conformist quasi-robots who simply do not matter, socially or culturally.

I’ve always been of two minds about this sequence of stereotypes. On the one hand, it offends me greatly that anyone would think to apply them to me, or to anyone else, simply on the basis of facial characteristics. On the other hand, it also seems to me that there are a lot of Asian people to whom they apply.

I understand the reasons Asian parents have raised a generation of children this way. Doctor, lawyer, accountant, engineer: These are good jobs open to whoever works hard enough. What could be wrong with that pursuit? Asians graduate from college at a rate higher than any other ethnic group in America, including whites. They earn a higher median family income than any other ethnic group in America, including whites. This is a stage in a triumphal narrative, and it is a narrative that is much shorter than many remember. Two thirds of the roughly 14 million Asian-Americans are foreign-born. There were less than 39,000 people of Korean descent living in America in 1970, when my elder brother was born. There are around 1 million today.
Asian-American success is typically taken to ratify the American Dream and to prove that minorities can make it in this country without handouts. Still, an undercurrent of racial panic always accompanies the consideration of Asians, and all the more so as China becomes the destination for our industrial base and the banker controlling our burgeoning debt. But if the armies of Chinese factory workers who make our fast fashion and iPads terrify us, and if the collective mass of high-achieving Asian-American students arouse an anxiety about the laxity of American parenting, what of the Asian-American who obeyed everything his parents told him? Does this person really scare anyone?

Earlier this year, the publication of Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* incited a collective airing out of many varieties of race-based hysteria. But absent from the millions of words written in response to the book was any serious consideration of whether Asian-Americans were in fact taking over this country. If it is true that they are collectively dominating in elite high schools and universities, is it also true that Asian-Americans are dominating in the real world? My strong suspicion was that this was not so, and that the reasons would not be hard to find. If we are a collective juggernaut that inspires such awe and fear, why does it seem that so many Asians are so readily perceived to be, as I myself have felt most of my life, the products of a timid culture, easily pushed around by more assertive people, and thus basically invisible?

A few months ago, I received an e-mail from a young man named Jefferson Mao, who after attending Stuyvesant High School had recently graduated from the University of Chicago. He wanted my advice about “being an Asian writer.” This is how he described himself: “I got good grades and I love literature and I want to be a writer and an intellectual; at the same time, I’m the first person in my family to go to college, my parents don’t speak English very well, and we don’t own the apartment in Flushing that we live in. I mean, I’m proud of my parents and my neighborhood and what I perceive to be my artistic potential or whatever, but sometimes I feel like I’m jumping the gun a generation or two too early.”

One bright, cold Sunday afternoon, I ride the 7 train to its last stop in Flushing, where the storefront signs are all written in Chinese and the sidewalks are a slow-moving river of impassive faces. Mao is waiting for me at the entrance of the Main Street subway station, and together we walk to a nearby Vietnamese restaurant.

Mao has a round face, with eyes behind rectangular wire-frame glasses. Since graduating, he has been living with his parents, who emigrated from China when Mao was 8 years old. His mother is a manicurist; his father is a physical therapist’s aide. Lately, Mao has been making the familiar hour-and-a-half ride from Flushing to downtown Manhattan to tutor a white Stuyvesant freshman who lives in Tribeca. And what he feels, sometimes, in the presence of that amiable young man is a pang of regret. Now he understands better what he ought to have done back when he was a Stuyvesant freshman: “Worked half as hard and been twenty times more successful.”

Entrance to Stuyvesant, one of the most competitive public high schools in the country, is determined solely by performance on a test: The top 3.7 percent of all New York City students who take the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test hoping to go to Stuyvesant are accepted. There are no set-asides for the underprivileged or, conversely, for alumni or other privileged groups. There is no formula to encourage “diversity” or any nebulous concept of “well-roundedness” or “character.” Here we have something like pure meritocracy. This is what it looks like: Asian-Americans, who make up 12.6 percent of New York City, make up 72 percent of the high school.
This year, 569 Asian-Americans scored high enough to earn a slot at Stuyvesant, along with 179 whites, 13 Hispanics, and 12 blacks. Such dramatic overrepresentation, and what it may be read to imply about the intelligence of different groups of New Yorkers, has a way of making people uneasy. But intrinsic intelligence, of course, is precisely what Asians don’t believe in. They believe—and have proved—that the constant practice of test-taking will improve the scores of whoever commits to it. All throughout Flushing, as well as in Bayside, one can find “cram schools,” or storefront academies, that drill students in test preparation after school, on weekends, and during summer break. “Learning math is not about learning math,” an instructor at one called Ivy Prep was quoted in the New York Times as saying, “It’s about weightlifting. You are pumping the iron of math.” Mao puts it more specifically: “You learn quite simply to nail any standardized test you take.”

And so there is an additional concern accompanying the rise of the Tiger Children, one focused more on the narrowness of the educational experience a non-Asian child might receive in the company of fanatically preprofessional Asian students. Jenny Tsai, a student who was elected president of her class at the equally competitive New York public school Hunter College High І, remembers frequently hearing that “the school was becoming too Asian, that they would be the downfall of our school.” A couple of years ago, she revisited this issue in her senior thesis at Harvard, where she interviewed graduates of elite public schools and found that the white students regarded the Asians students with wariness. (She quotes a music teacher at Stuyvesant describing the dominance of Asians: “They were mediocre kids, but they got in because they were coached.”) In 2005, The Wall Street Journal reported on “white flight” from a high school in Cupertino, California, that began soon after the children of Asian software engineers had made the place so brutally competitive that a B average could place you in the bottom third of the class.

Colleges have a way of correcting for this imbalance: The Princeton sociologist Thomas Espenshade has calculated that an Asian applicant must, in practice, score 140 points higher on the SAT than a comparable white applicant to have the same chance of admission. This is obviously unfair to the many qualified Asian individuals who are punished for the success of others with similar faces. Upper-middle-class white kids, after all, have their own elite private schools, and their own private tutors, far more expensive than the cram schools, to help them game the education system.

You could frame it, as some aggrieved Asian-Americans do, as a simple issue of equality and press for race-blind quantitative admissions standards. In 2006, a decade after California passed a voter initiative outlawing any racial engineering at the public universities, Asians composed 46 percent of UC-Berkeley’s entering class; one could imagine a similar demographic reshuffling in the Ivy League, where Asian-Americans currently make up about 17 percent of undergraduates. But the Ivies, as we all know, have their own private institutional interests at stake in their admissions choices, including some that are arguably defensible. Who can seriously claim that a Harvard University that was 72 percent Asian would deliver the same grooming for elite status its students had gone there to receive?

Somewhere near the middle of his time at Stuyvesant, a vague sense of discontent started to emerge within Mao. He had always felt himself a part of a mob of “nameless, faceless Asian kids,” who were “like a part of the décor of the place.” He had been content to keep his head down and work toward the goal shared by everyone at
Stuyvesant: Harvard. But around the beginning of his senior year, he began to wonder whether this march toward academic success was the only, or best, path.

“You can’t help but feel like there must be another way,” he explains over a bowl of pho. “It’s like, we’re being pitted against each other while there are kids out there in the Midwest who can do way less work and be in a garage band or something—and if they’re decently intelligent and work decently hard in school…”

Mao began to study the racially inflected social hierarchies at Stuyvesant, where, in a survey undertaken by the student newspaper this year, slightly more than half of the respondents reported that their friends came from within their own ethnic group. His attention focused on the mostly white (and Manhattan-dwelling) group whose members seemed able to manage the crushing workload while still remaining socially active. “The general gist of most high-school movies is that the pretty cheerleader gets with the big dumb jock, and the nerd is left to bide his time in loneliness. But at some point in the future,” he says, “the nerd is going to rule the world, and the dumb jock is going to work in a carwash.

“At Stuy, it’s completely different: If you looked at the pinnacle, the girls and the guys are not only good-looking and socially affable, they also get the best grades and star in the school plays and win election to student government. It all converges at the top. It’s like training for high society. It was jarring for us Chinese kids. You got the sense that you had to study hard, but it wasn’t enough.”

Mao was becoming clued in to the fact that there was another hierarchy behind the official one that explained why others were getting what he never had—“a high-school sweetheart” figured prominently on this list—and that this mysterious hierarchy was going to determine what happened to him in life. “You realize there are things you really don’t understand about courtship or just acting in a certain way. Things that somehow come naturally to people who go to school in the suburbs and have parents who are culturally assimilated.” I pressed him for specifics, and he mentioned that he had visited his white girlfriend’s parents’ house the past Christmas, where the family had “sat around cooking together and playing Scrabble.” This ordinary vision of suburban-American domesticity lingered with Mao: Here, at last, was the setting in which all that implicit knowledge “about social norms and propriety” had been transmitted. There was no cram school that taught these lessons.

Before having heard from Mao, I had considered myself at worst lightly singed by the last embers of Asian alienation. Indeed, given all the incredibly hip Asian artists and fashion designers and so forth you can find in New York, it seemed that this feeling was destined to die out altogether. And yet here it was in a New Yorker more than a dozen years my junior. While it may be true that sections of the Asian-American world are devoid of alienation, there are large swaths where it is as alive as it has ever been.

A few weeks after we meet, Mao puts me in touch with Daniel Chu, his close friend from Stuyvesant. Chu graduated from Williams College last year, having won a creative-writing award for his poetry. He had spent a portion of the $18,000 prize on a trip to China, but now he is back living with his parents in Brooklyn Chinatown.

Chu remembers that during his first semester at Williams, his junior adviser would periodically take him aside. Was he feeling all right? Was something the matter? “I was acclimating myself to the place,” he says. “I wasn’t totally happy, but I wasn’t depressed.” But then his new white friends made similar remarks. “They would say, ‘Dan, it’s kind of hard, sometimes, to tell what you’re thinking.’ ”

Chu has a pleasant face, but it would not be wrong to characterize his demeanor as reserved. He speaks in a quiet, unemphatic voice. He doesn’t move his features much. He attributes these traits to the
atmosphere in his household. “When you grow up in a Chinese home,” he says, “you don’t talk. You shut up and listen to what your parents tell you to do.”

At Stuyvesant, he had hung out in an exclusively Asian world in which friends were determined by which subway lines you traveled. But when he arrived at Williams, Chu slowly became aware of something strange: The white people in the New England wilderness walked around smiling at each other. “When you’re in a place like that, everyone is friendly.”

He made a point to start smiling more. “It was something that I had to actively practice,” he says. “Like, when you have a transaction at a business, you hand over the money—and then you smile.” He says that he’s made some progress but that there’s still plenty of work that remains. “I’m trying to undo eighteen years of a Chinese upbringing. Four years at Williams helps, but only so much.” He is conscious of how his father, an IT manager, is treated at work. “He’s the best programmer at his office,” he says, “but because he doesn’t speak English well, he is always passed over.”

Though Chu is not merely fluent in English but is officially the most distinguished poet of his class at Williams, he still worries that other aspects of his demeanor might attract the same kind of treatment his father received. “I’m really glad we’re having this conversation,” he says at one point—it is helpful to be remembering these lessons in self-presentation just as he prepares for job interviews.

It is a part of the bitter undercurrent of Asian-American life that meritocracy comes to an abrupt end after graduation.

“I guess what I would like is to become so good at something that my social deficiencies no longer matter,” he tells me. Chu is a bright, diligent, impeccably credentialed young man born in the United States. He is optimistic about his ability to earn respect in the world. But he doubts he will ever feel the same comfort in his skin that he glimpsed in the people he met at Williams. That kind of comfort, he says—“I think it’s generations away.”

While he was still an electrical-engineering student at Berkeley in the nineties, James Hong visited the IBM campus for a series of interviews. An older Asian researcher looked over Hong’s résumé and asked him some standard questions. Then he got up without saying a word and closed the door to his office.

“Listen,” he told Hong. “I’m going to be honest with you. My generation came to this country because we wanted better for you kids. We did the best we could, leaving our homes and going to graduate school not speaking much English. If you take this job, you are just going to hit the same ceiling we did. They just see me as an Asian Ph.D., never management potential. You are going to get a job offer, but don’t take it. Your generation has to go farther than we did, otherwise we did everything for nothing.”

The researcher was talking about what some refer to as the “Bamboo Ceiling”—an invisible barrier that maintains a pyramidal racial structure throughout corporate America, with lots of Asians at junior levels, quite a few in middle management, and virtually none in the higher reaches of leadership.

The failure of Asian-Americans to become leaders in the white-collar workplace does not qualify as one of the burning social issues of our time. But it is a part of the bitter undercurrent of Asian-American life that so many Asian graduates of elite universities find that meritocracy as they have understood it comes to an abrupt end after graduation. If between 15 and 20 percent of every Ivy League class is Asian, and if the Ivy Leagues are incubators for the country’s leaders, it would stand to reason that Asians would make up some corresponding portion of the leadership class.
And yet the numbers tell a different story. According to a recent study, Asian-Americans represent roughly 5 percent of the population but only 0.3 percent of corporate officers, less than 1 percent of corporate board members, and around 2 percent of college presidents. There are nine Asian-American CEOs in the Fortune 500. In specific fields where Asian-Americans are heavily represented, there is a similar asymmetry. A third of all software engineers in Silicon Valley are Asian, and yet they make up only 6 percent of board members and about 10 percent of corporate officers of the Bay Area’s 25 largest companies. At the National Institutes of Health, where 21.5 percent of tenure-track scientists are Asians, only 4.7 percent of the lab or branch directors are, according to a study conducted in 2005. One succinct evocation of the situation appeared in the comments section of a website called Yellowworld: “If you’re East Asian, you need to attend a top-tier university to land a good high-paying gig. Even if you land that good high-paying gig, the white guy with the pedigree from a mediocre state university will somehow move ahead of you in the ranks simply because he’s white.”

Jennifer W. Allyn, a managing director for diversity at PricewaterhouseCoopers, works to ensure that “all of the groups feel welcomed and supported and able to thrive and to go as far as their talents will take them.” I posed to her the following definition of parity in the corporate workforce: If the current crop of associates is 17 percent Asian, then in fourteen years, when they have all been up for partner review, 17 percent of those who are offered partner will be Asian. Allyn conceded that PricewaterhouseCoopers was not close to reaching that benchmark anytime soon—and that “nobody else is either.”

Part of the insidious nature of the Bamboo Ceiling is that it does not seem to be caused by overt racism. A survey of Asian-Pacific-American employees of Fortune 500 companies found that 80 percent reported they were judged not as Asians but as individuals. But only 51 percent reported the existence of Asians in key positions, and only 55 percent agreed that their firms were fully capitalizing on the talents and perspectives of Asians.

More likely, the discrepancy in these numbers is a matter of unconscious bias. Nobody would affirm the proposition that tall men are intrinsically better leaders, for instance. And yet while only 15 percent of the male population is at least six feet tall, 58 percent of all corporate CEOs are. Similarly, nobody would say that Asian people are unfit to be leaders. But subjects in a recently published psychological experiment consistently rated hypothetical employees with Caucasian-sounding names higher in leadership potential than identical ones with Asian names.

Maybe it is simply the case that a traditionally Asian upbringing is the problem. As Allyn points out, in order to be a leader, you must have followers. Associates at PricewaterhouseCoopers are initially judged on how well they do the work they are assigned. “You have to be a doer,” as she puts it. They are expected to distinguish themselves with their diligence, at which point they become “super-doers.” But being a leader requires different skill sets. “The traits that got you to where you are won’t necessarily take you to the next level,” says the diversity consultant Jane Hyun, who wrote a book called Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling. To become a leader requires taking personal initiative and thinking about how an organization can work differently. It also requires networking, self-promotion, and self-assertion. It’s racist to think that any given Asian individual is unlikely to be creative or risk-taking. It’s simple cultural observation to say that a group whose education has historically focused on rote memorization and “pumping the iron of math” is, on aggregate, unlikely to yield many people inclined to challenge authority or break with inherited ways of doing things.

Sach Takayasu had been one of the fastest-rising members of her cohort in the marketing department at IBM in New York. But about seven years ago, she felt her progress begin to slow. “I had gotten to the point where I was overdelivering, working really long hours, and where doing more of the same wasn’t getting me anywhere,” she says. It was around this time that she attended a seminar being offered by an organization called Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics.
LEAP has parsed the complicated social dynamics responsible for the dearth of Asian-American leaders and has designed training programs that flatter Asian people even as it teaches them to change their behavior to suit white-American expectations. Asians who enter a LEAP program are constantly assured that they will be able to “keep your values, while acquiring new skills,” along the way to becoming “culturally competent leaders.”

In a presentation to 1,500 Asian-American employees of Microsoft, LEAP president and CEO J. D. Hokoyama laid out his grand synthesis of the Asian predicament in the workplace. “Sometimes people have perceptions about us and our communities which may or may not be true,” Hokoyama told the audience. “But they put those perceptions onto us, and then they do something that can be very devastating: They make decisions about us not based on the truth but based on those perceptions.” Hokoyama argued that it was not sufficient to rail at these unjust perceptions. In the end, Asian people themselves would have to assume responsibility for unmaking them. This was both a practical matter, he argued, and, in its own way, fair.

Aspiring Asian leaders had to become aware of “the relationship between values, behaviors, and perceptions.” He offered the example of Asians who don’t speak up at meetings. “So let’s say I go to meetings with you and I notice you never say anything. And I ask myself, ‘Hmm, I wonder why you’re not saying anything. Maybe it’s because you don’t know what we’re talking about. That would be a good reason for not saying anything. Or maybe it’s because you’re not even interested in the subject matter. Or maybe you think the conversation is beneath you.’ So here I’m thinking, because you never say anything at meetings, that you’re either dumb, you don’t care, or you’re arrogant. When maybe it’s because you were taught when you were growing up that when the boss is talking, what are you supposed to be doing? Listening.”

Takayasu took the weeklong course in 2006. One of the first exercises she encountered involved the group instructor asking for a list of some qualities that they identify with Asians. The students responded: upholding family honor, filial piety, self-restraint. Then the instructor solicited a list of the qualities the members identify with leadership, and invited the students to notice how little overlap there is between the two lists.

At first, Takayasu didn’t relate to the others in attendance, who were listing typical Asian values their parents had taught them. “They were all saying things like ‘Study hard,’ ‘Become a doctor or lawyer,’ blah, blah, blah. That’s not how my parents were. They would worry if they saw me working too hard.” Takayasu had spent her childhood shuttling between New York and Tokyo. Her father was an executive at Mitsubishi; her mother was a concert pianist. She was highly assimilated into American culture, fluent in English, poised and confident. “But the more we got into it, as we moved away from the obvious things to the deeper, more fundamental values, I began to see that my upbringing had been very Asian after all. My parents would say, ‘Don’t create problems. Don’t trouble other people.’ How Asian is that? It helped to explain why I don’t reach out to other people for help.” It occurred to Takayasu that she was a little bit “heads down” after all. She was willing to take on difficult assignments without seeking credit for herself. She was reluctant to “toot her own horn.”

Takayasu has put her new self-awareness to work at IBM, and she now exhibits a newfound ability for horn tooting. “The things I could write on my résumé as my team’s accomplishments: They’re really impressive,” she says.

The law professor and writer Tim Wu grew up in Canada with a white mother and a Taiwanese father, which allows him an interesting perspective on how whites and Asians perceive each other. After graduating from law school, he took a series of clerkships, and he remembers the subtle ways in which hierarchies were developed among the other young lawyers. “There is this automatic assumption in any legal environment that Asians will have a particular talent for bitter labor,” he says, and then goes on to
define the word *coolie*, a Chinese term for “bitter labor.” "There was this weird self-selection where the Asians would migrate toward the most brutal part of the labor."

By contrast, the white lawyers he encountered had a knack for portraying themselves as above all that. "White people have this instinct that is really important: to give off the impression that they're only going to do the really important work. You’re a quarterback. It’s a kind of arrogance that Asians are trained not to have. Someone told me not long after I moved to New York that in order to succeed, you have to understand which rules you’re supposed to break. If you break the wrong rules, you’re finished. And so the easiest thing to do is follow all the rules. But then you consign yourself to a lower status. The real trick is understanding what rules are not meant for you."

This idea of a kind of rule-governed rule-breaking—where the rule book was unwritten but passed along in an innate cultural sense—is perhaps the best explanation I have heard of how the Bamboo Ceiling functions in practice. LEAP appears to be very good at helping Asian workers who are already culturally competent become more self-aware of how their culture and appearance impose barriers to advancement. But I am not sure that a LEAP course is going to be enough to get Jefferson Mao or Daniel Chu the respect and success they crave. The issue is more fundamental, the social dynamics at work more deeply embedded, and the remedial work required may be at a more basic level of comportment.

What if you missed out on the lessons in masculinity taught in the gyms and locker rooms of America’s high schools? What if life has failed to make you a socially dominant alpha male who runs the American boardroom and prevails in the American bedroom? What if no one ever taught you how to greet white people and make them comfortable? What if, despite these deficiencies, you no longer possess an immigrant’s dutiful forbearance for a secondary position in the American narrative and want to be a player in the scrimmage of American appetite right now, in the present?

How do you undo eighteen years of a Chinese upbringing?

This is the implicit question that J.T. Tran has posed to a roomful of Yale undergraduates at a master’s tea at Silliman College. His answer is typically Asian: practice. Tran is a pickup artist who goes by the handle Asian Playboy. He travels the globe running “boot camps,” mostly for Asian male students, in the art of attraction. Today, he has been invited to Yale by the Asian-American Students Alliance.

“Creepy can be fixed,” Tran explains to the standing-room-only crowd. "Many guys just don’t realize how to project themselves.” These are the people whom Tran spends his days with, a new batch in a new city every week: nice guys, intelligent guys, motivated guys, who never figured out how to be successful with women. Their mothers had kept them at home to study rather than let them date or socialize. Now Tran’s company, ABCs of Attraction, offers a remedial education that consists of three four-hour seminars, followed by a supervised night out “in the field,” in which J.T., his assistant Gareth Jones, and a tall blonde wing-girl named Sarah force them to approach women. Tuition costs $1,450.

“One of the big things I see with Asian students is what I call the Asian poker face—the lack of range when it comes to facial expressions,” Tran says. "How many times has this happened to you?” he asks the crowd. “You’ll be out at a party with your white friends, and they will be like—’Dude, are you angry?”’Laughter fills the room. Part of it is psychological, he explains. He recalls one Korean-American student he was teaching. The student was a very dedicated schoolteacher who cared a lot about his students. But none of this was visible. “Sarah was trying to help him, and she was like, ‘C’mon, smile, smile,’ and he was like …” And here Tran mimics the unbearable tension of a face trying to contort itself into a simulacrum of mirth. "He was so completely unpracticed at smiling that he literally could not do it.” Eventually, though, the student fought through it, “and when he finally got to smiling he was, like, really cool.”
Tran continues to lay out a story of Asian-American male distress that must be relevant to the lives of at least some of those who have packed Master Krauss’s living room. The story he tells is one of Asian-American disadvantage in the sexual marketplace, a disadvantage that he has devoted his life to overturning. Yes, it is about picking up women. Yes, it is about picking up white women. Yes, it is about attracting those women whose hair is the color of the midday sun and eyes are the color of the ocean, and it is about having sex with them. He is not going to apologize for the images of blonde women plastered all over his website. This is what he prefers, what he stands for, and what he is selling: the courage to pursue anyone you want, and the skills to make the person you desire desire you back. White guys do what they want; he is going to do the same.

But it is about much more than this, too. It is about altering the perceptions of Asian men—perceptions that are rooted in the way they behave, which are in turn rooted in the way they were raised—through a course of behavior modification intended to teach them how to be the socially dominant figures that they are not perceived to be. It is a program of, as he puts it to me later, “social change through pickup.”

Tran offers his own story as an exemplary Asian underdog. Short, not good-looking, socially inept, sexually null. “If I got a B, I would be whipped,” he remembers of his childhood. After college, he worked as an aerospace engineer at Boeing and Raytheon, but internal politics disfavored him. Five years into his career, his entire white cohort had been promoted above him. “I knew I needed to learn about social dynamics, because just working hard wasn’t cutting it.”

His efforts at dating were likewise “a miserable failure.” It was then that he turned to “the seduction community,” a group of men on Internet message boards like alt.seduction.fast. It began as a “support group for losers” and later turned into a program of self-improvement. Was charisma something you could teach? Could confidence be reduced to a formula? Was it merely something that you either possessed or did not possess, as a function of the experiences you had been through in life, or did it emerge from specific forms of behavior? The members of the group turned their computer-science and engineering brains to the question. They wrote long accounts of their dates and subjected them to collective scrutiny. They searched for patterns in the raw material and filtered these experiences through social-psychological research. They eventually built a model.

This past Valentine’s Day, during a weekend boot camp in New York City sponsored by ABCs of Attraction, the model is being played out. Tran and Jones are teaching their students how an alpha male stands (shoulders thrown back, neck fully extended, legs planted slightly wider than the shoulders). “This is going to feel very strange to you if you’re used to slouching, but this is actually right,” Jones says. They explain how an alpha male walks (no shuffling; pick your feet up entirely off the ground; a slight sway in the shoulders). They identify the proper distance to stand from “targets” (a slightly bent arm’s length). They explain the importance of “kino escalation.” (You must touch her. You must not be afraid to do this.) They are teaching the importance of sub-communication: what you convey about yourself before a single word has been spoken. They explain the importance of intonation. They explain what intonation is. “Your voice moves up and down in pitch to convey a variety of different emotions.”

All of this is taught through a series of exercises. “This is going to feel completely artificial,” says Jones on the first day of training. “But I need you to do the biggest grin you’ve ever made in your life.” Sarah is standing in the corner with her back to the students—three Indian guys, including one in a turban, three Chinese guys, and one Cambodian. The students have to cross the room, walking as an alpha male walks, and then place their hands on her shoulder—firmly but gently—and turn her around. Big smile. Bigger than you’ve ever smiled before. Raise your glass in a toast. Make eye contact and hold it. Speak loudly and clearly. Take up space without apology. This is what an alpha male does.
Before each student crosses the floor of that bare white cubicle in midtown, Tran asks him a question. “What is good in life?” Tran shouts.

The student then replies, in the loudest, most emphatic voice he can muster: “To crush my enemies, see them driven before me, and to hear the lamentation of their women—in my bed!”

For the intonation exercise, students repeat the phrase “I do what I want” with a variety of different moods.

“Say it like you’re happy!” Jones shouts. (“I do what I want.”) Say it like you’re sad! (“I do what I want.”) Say it like you’ve just won $5 million! (“I do what I want.”)

“She was trying to help him. ‘C’mon, smile, smile, and he was like …” And here Tran mimes the unbearable tension of a face trying to contort itself into a simulacrum of mirth.

Raj, a 26-year-old Indian virgin, can barely get his voice to alter during intonation exercise. But on Sunday night, on the last evening of the boot camp, I watch him cold-approach a set of women at the Hotel Gansevoort and engage them in conversation for a half-hour. He does not manage to “number close” or “kiss close.” But he had done something that not very many people can do.

Of the dozens of Asian-Americans I spoke with for this story, many were successful artists and scientists; or good-looking and socially integrated leaders; or tough, brassy, risk-taking, street-smart entrepreneurs. Of course, there are lots of such people around—do I even have to point that out? They are no more morally worthy than any other kind of Asian person. But they have figured out some useful things.

The lesson about the Bamboo Ceiling that James Hong learned from his interviewer at IBM stuck, and after working for a few years at Hewlett-Packard, he decided to strike off on his own. His first attempts at entrepreneurialism failed, but he finally struck pay dirt with a simple, not terribly refined idea that had a strong primal appeal: hotornot.com. Hong and his co-founder eventually sold the site for roughly $20 million.

Hong ran hotornot.com partly as a kind of incubator to seed in his employees the habits that had served him well. “We used to hire engineers from Berkeley—almost all Asian—who were on the cusp of being entrepreneurial but were instead headed toward jobs at big companies,” he says. “We would train them in how to take risk, how to run things themselves. I remember encouraging one employee to read The Game”—the infamous pickup-artist textbook—“because I figured growing the cojones to take risk was applicable to being an entrepreneur.”

If the Bamboo Ceiling is ever going to break, it’s probably going to have less to do with any form of behavior assimilation than with the emergence of risk-takers whose success obviates the need for Asians to meet someone else’s behavioral standard. People like Steve Chen, who was one of the creators of YouTube, or Kai and Charles Huang, who created Guitar Hero. Or Tony Hsieh, the founder of Zappos.com, the online shoe retailer that he sold to Amazon for about a billion dollars in 2009. Hsieh is a short Asian man who speaks tersely and is devoid of obvious charisma. One cannot imagine him being promoted in an American corporation. And yet he has proved that an awkward Asian guy can be a formidable CEO and the unlikeliest of management gurus.

Hsieh didn’t have to conform to Western standards of comportment because he adopted early on the Western value of risk-taking. Growing up, he would play recordings of himself in the morning practicing the violin, in lieu of actually practicing. He credits the experience he had running a pizza business at Harvard
as more important than anything he learned in class. He had an instinctive sense of what the real world would require of him, and he knew that nothing his parents were teaching him would get him there.

Huang had a rough twenties, bumping repeatedly against the Bamboo Ceiling. In college, editors at the Orlando Sentinel invited him to write about sports for the paper. But when he visited the offices, “the editor came in and goes, ‘Oh, no.’ And his exact words: ‘You can’t write with that face.’ ” Later, in film class at Columbia, he wrote a script about an Asian-American hot-dog vendor

“The screenwriting teacher was like, ‘I love this. You have a lot of Woody Allen in you. But do you think you could change it to Jewish characters?’ ” Still later, after graduating from Cardozo School of Law, he took a corporate job, where other associates would frequently say, “You have a lot of opinions for an Asian guy.”

Finally, Huang decided to open a restaurant. Selling food was precisely the fate his parents wanted their son to avoid, and they didn’t talk to him for months after he quit lawyering. But Huang understood instinctively that he couldn’t make it work in the professional world his parents wanted him to join. “I’ve realized that food is one of the only places in America where we are the top dogs,” he says. “Guys like David Chang or me—we can hang. There’s a younger generation that grew up eating Chinese fast food. They respect our food. They may not respect anything else, but they respect our food.”

Rather than strive to make himself acceptable to the world, Huang has chosen to buy his way back in, on his own terms. “What I’ve learned is that America is about money, and if you can make your culture commodifiable, then you’re relevant,” he says. “I don’t believe anybody agrees with what I say or supports what I do because they truly want to love Asian people. They like my fucking pork buns, and I don’t get it twisted.”

Sometime during the hundreds of hours he spent among the mostly untouched English-language novels at the Flushing branch of the public library, Jefferson Mao discovered literature’s special power of transcendence, a freedom of imagination that can send you beyond the world’s hierarchies. He had written to me seeking permission to swerve off the traditional path of professional striving—to devote himself to becoming an artist—but he was unsure of what risks he was willing to take. My answer was highly ambivalent. I recognized in him something of my own youthful ambition. And I knew where that had taken me.

Unlike Mao, I was not a poor, first-generation immigrant. I finished school alienated both from Asian culture (which, in my hometown, was barely visible) and the manners and mores of my white peers. But like Mao, I wanted to be an individual. I had refused both cultures as an act of self-assertion. An education spent dutifully acquiring credentials through relentless drilling seemed to me an obscenity. So did adopting the manipulative cheeriness that seemed to secure the popularity of white Americans.

Instead, I set about contriving to live beyond both poles. I wanted what James Baldwin sought as a writer—“a power which outlasts kingdoms.” Anything short of that seemed a humiliating compromise. I would become an aristocrat of the spirit, who prides himself on his incompetence in the middling tasks that are the world’s business. Who does not seek after material gain. Who is his own law.
This, of course, was madness. A child of Asian immigrants born into the suburbs of New Jersey and educated at Rutgers cannot be a law unto himself. The only way to approximate this is to refuse employment, because you will not be bossed around by people beneath you, and shave your expenses to the bone, because you cannot afford more, and move into a decaying Victorian mansion in Jersey City, so that your sense of eccentric distinction can be preserved in the midst of poverty, and cut yourself free of every form of bourgeois discipline, because these are precisely the habits that will keep you chained to the mediocre fate you consider worse than death.

Throughout my twenties, I proudly turned away from one institution of American life after another (for instance, a steady job), though they had already long since turned away from me. Academe seemed another kind of death—but then again, I had a transcript marred by as many F’s as A’s. I had come from a culture that was the middle path incarnate. And yet for some people, there can be no middle path, only transcendence or descent into the abyss.

I was descending into the abyss.

All this was well deserved. No one had any reason to think I was anything or anyone. And yet I felt entitled to demand this recognition. I knew this was wrong and impermissible; therefore I had to double down on it. The world brings low such people. It brought me low. I haven’t had health insurance in ten years. I didn’t earn more than $12,000 for eight consecutive years. I went three years in the prime of my adulthood without touching a woman. I did not produce a masterpiece.

I recall one of the strangest conversations I had in the city. A woman came up to me at a party and said she had been moved by a piece of writing I had published. She confessed that prior to reading it, she had never wanted to talk to me, and had always been sure, on the basis of what she could see from across the room, that I was nobody worth talking to, that I was in fact someone to avoid.

But she had been wrong about this, she told me: It was now plain to her that I was a person with great reserves of feeling and insight. She did not ask my forgiveness for this brutal misjudgment. Instead, what she wanted to know was—why had I kept that person she had glimpsed in my essay so well hidden? She confessed something of her own hidden sorrow: She had never been beautiful and had decided, early on, that it therefore fell to her to “love the world twice as hard.” Why hadn’t I done that?

Here was a drunk white lady speaking what so many others over the years must have been insufficiently drunk to tell me. It was the key to many things that had, and had not, happened. I understood this encounter better after learning about LEAP, and visiting Asian Playboy’s boot camp. If you are a woman who isn’t beautiful, it is a social reality that you will have to work twice as hard to hold anyone’s attention. You can either linger on the unfairness of this or you can get with the program. If you are an Asian person who holds himself proudly aloof, nobody will respect that, or find it intriguing, or wonder if that challenging façade hides someone worth getting to know. They will simply write you off as someone not worth the trouble of talking to.

Having glimpsed just how unacceptable the world judges my demeanor, could I too strive to make up for my shortcomings?

I see the appeal of getting with the program. But this is not my choice. Striving to meet others’ expectations may be a necessary cost of assimilation, but I am not going to do it.

So this is what I told Mao: In lieu of loving the world twice as hard, I care, in the end, about expressing my obdurate singularity at any cost. I love this hard and unyielding part of myself more than any
other reward the world has to offer a newly brightened and ingratiating demeanor, and I will bear any costs associated with it.

The first step toward self-reform is to admit your deficiencies. Though my early adulthood has been a protracted education in them, I do not admit mine. I’m fine. It’s the rest of you who have a problem.

Amy Chua returned to Yale from a long, exhausting book tour in which one television interviewer had led off by noting that Internet commenters were calling her a monster. By that point, she had become practiced at the special kind of self-presentation required of a person under public siege. “I do not think that Chinese parents are superior,” she declared at the annual gathering of the Asian-American Students Alliance. “I think there are many ways to be a good parent.”

Much of her talk to the students, and indeed much of the conversation surrounding the book, was focused on her own parenting decisions. But just as interesting is how her parents parented her. Chua was plainly the product of a brute-force Chinese education. Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother includes many lessons she was taught by her parents—lessons any LEAP student would recognize. “Be modest, be humble, be simple,” her mother told her. “Never complain or make excuses,” her father instructed. “If something seems unfair at school, just prove yourself by working twice as hard and being twice as good.”

In the book, Chua portrays her distaste for corporate law, which she practiced before going into academe. “My entire three years at the firm, I always felt like I was playacting, ridiculous in my suit,” she writes. This malaise extended even earlier, to her time as a student. “I didn’t care about the rights of criminals the way others did, and I froze whenever a professor called on me. I also wasn’t naturally skeptical and questioning; I just wanted to write down everything the professor said and memorize it.”

At the AASA gathering at Yale, Chua made the connection between her upbringing and her adult dissatisfaction. “My parents didn’t sit around talking about politics and philosophy at the dinner table,” she told the students. Even after she had escaped from corporate law and made it onto a law faculty, “I was kind of lost. I just didn’t feel the passion.” Eventually, she made a name for herself as the author of popular books about foreign policy and became an award-winning teacher. But it’s plain that she was no better prepared for legal scholarship than she had been for corporate law. “It took me a long, long time,” she said. “And I went through lots and lots of rejection.” She recalled her extended search for an academic post, in which she was “just not able to do a good interview, just not able to present myself well.”

In other words, Battle Hymn provides all the material needed to refute the very cultural polemic for which it was made to stand. Chua’s Chinese education had gotten her through an elite schooling, but it left her unprepared for the real world. She does not hide any of this. She had set out, she explained, to write a memoir that was “defiantly self-incriminating”—and the result was a messy jumble of conflicting impulses, part provocation, part self-critique. Western readers rode roughshod over this paradox and made of Chua a kind of Asian minstrel figure. But more than anything else, Battle Hymn is a very American project—one no traditional Chinese person would think to undertake. “Even if you hate the book,” Chua pointed out, “the one thing it is not is meek.”

“The loudest duck gets shot” is a Chinese proverb. “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” is a Japanese one. Its Western correlative: “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Chua had told her story and been hammered down. Yet here she was, fresh from her hammering, completely unbowed.

There is something satirical in that proud defiance. And though the debate she sparked about Asian-American life has been of questionable value, we will need more people with the same kind of defiance, willing to push themselves into the spotlight and to make some noise, to beat people up, to seduce women, to make mistakes, to become entrepreneurs, to stop doggedly pursuing official paper emblems attesting to
their worthiness, to stop thinking those scraps of paper will secure anyone’s happiness, and to dare to be interesting.