NOEL PERRIN

Noel Perrin was born in 1927 in New York City. He received degrees from Williams College, Duke University, and Cambridge University. The author of many books dealing with themes of nature, ecology, and New England, Perrin is well known for Giving Up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543–1879 and four collections of essays in the "First Person Rural" series. Recent publications include an article in Vermont Life about electric cars; a guide, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, to colleges focused on environmental protection; and book reviews in the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. Perrin is a former chair of the English department at Dartmouth.

The Androgynous Man

"The Androgynous Man" first appeared in the New York Times Sunday magazine as part of a series called "About Men." In the essay Perrin explores his idea of "spiritual androgyny": a crossing over in spirit between the masculine and feminine realms, freeing the self from limiting expectations and roles.

The summer I was sixteen, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller then than now.

The one that held my undivided attention was called "How Masculine/Feminine Are You?" It consisted of a large number of inkblots. The reader was supposed to decide which of the four objects each blot most resembled. The choices might be a cloud, a steam engine, a caterpillar and a sofa.

When I finished the test, I was shocked to find that I was barely masculine at all. On a scale of 1 to 10, I was about a 1.2. Me, the horse wrangler? (And not just wrangler, either. That summer, I had to skin a couple of horses that died—the camp owner wanted the hides.)
The results of the test were so terrifying to me that for the first time in my life I did a piece of original analysis. Having unlimited time on the train, I looked at the “masculine” answers over and over, trying to find what it was that distinguished real men from people like me—and eventually I discovered two very simple patterns. It was “masculine” to think the blots looked like man-made objects and “feminine” to think they looked like natural objects. It was masculine to think they looked like things capable of causing harm, and feminine to think of innocent things.

Even at sixteen, I had the sense to see that the compilers of the test were using rather limited criteria—maleness and femaleness are both more complicated than that—and I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I wasn’t necessarily a wimp, after all.

That the test did reveal something other than the superficiality of its makers I realized only many years later. What it revealed was that there is a large class of men and women both, to which I belong, who are essentially androgynous. That doesn’t mean we’re gay, or low in the appropriate hormones, or uncomfortable performing the jobs traditionally assigned our sexes. (A few years after that summer, I was leading troops in combat and, unfashionable as it now is to admit this, having a very good time. War is exciting. What a pity the twentieth century went and spoiled it with high-tech weapons.)

What it does mean to be spiritually androgynous is a kind of freedom. Men who are all-male, or he-man, or 100 percent red-blooded Americans, have a little biological set that causes them to be attracted to physical power, and probably also to dominance. Maybe even to watching football. I don’t say this to criticize them. Completely masculine men are quite often wonderful people; good husbands, good (although sometimes overwhelming) fathers, good members of society. Furthermore, they are often so unselfconsciously at ease in the world that other men seek to imitate them. They just aren’t as free as us androgynes. They pretty nearly have to be what they are; we have a range of choices open.

The sad part is that many of us never discover that. Men who are not 100 percent red-blooded Americans—say, those who are only 75 percent red-blooded—often fail to notice their freedom. They are too busy trying to copy the he-men ever to realize that men, like women, come in a wide variety of acceptable types. Why this frantic imitation? My answer is mere speculation, but not casual. I have speculated on this for a long time.

Partly they’re just envious of the he-man’s unconscious ease. Mostly they’re terrified of finding that there may be something
wrong with them deep down, some weakness at the heart. To avoid discovering that, they spend their lives acting out the role that the he-man naturally lives. Sad.

One thing that men owe to the women's movement is that this kind of failure is less common than it used to be. In releasing themselves from the single ideal of the dependent woman, women have more or less incidentally released a lot of men from the single ideal of the dominant male. The one mistake the feminists have made, I think, is in supposing that all men need this release, or that the world would be a better place if all men achieved it. It wouldn't. It would just be duller.

So far I have been pretty vague about just what the freedom of an androgynous man is. Obviously it varies with the case. In the case I know best, my own, I can be quite specific. It has freed me most as a parent. I am, among other things, a fairly good natural mother. I like the nurturing role. It makes me feel good to see a child eat—and it turns me to mush to see a four-year-old holding a glass with both small hands, in order to drink. I even enjoyed sewing patches on the knees of my daughter Amy's Dr. Dentons when she was at the crawling stage. All that pleasure I would have lost if I had made myself stick to the notion of the paternal role that I started with.

Or take a smaller and rather ridiculous example. I feel free to kiss cats. Until recently it never occurred to me that I would want to, though my daughters have been doing it all their lives. But my elder daughter is now twenty-two, and in London. Of course, I get to look after her cat while she is gone. He's a big, handsome farm cat named Petrushka, very unsentimental, though used from kittenhood to being kissed on the top of the head by Elizabeth. I've gotten very fond of him (he's the adventurous kind of cat who likes to climb hills with you), and one night I simply felt like kissing him on the top of the head, and did. Why did no one tell me sooner how silky cat fur is?

Then there's my relation to cars. I am completely unembarrassed by my inability to diagnose even minor problems in whatever object I happen to be driving, and don't have to make some insider's remark to mechanics to try to establish that I, too, am a "Man with His Machine."

The same ease extends to household maintenance. I do it, of course. Service people are expensive. But for the last decade my house has functioned better than it used to because I've had the aid of a volume called Home Repairs Any Woman Can Do, which is pitched just right for people at my technical level. As a youth, I'd as
soon have touched such a book as I would have become a transvestite. Even though common sense says there is really nothing sexual whatsoever about fixing sinks.

Or take public emotion. All my life I have easily been moved by certain kinds of voices. The actress Siobhan McKenna’s,¹ to take a notable case. Give her an emotional scene in a play, and within ten words my eyes are full of tears. In boyhood, my great dread was that someone might notice. I struggled manfully, you might say, to suppress this weakness. Now, of course, I don’t see it was a weakness at all, but as a kind of fulfillment. I even suspect that the true he-men feel the same way, or one kind of them does, at least, and it’s only the poor imitators who have to struggle to repress themselves.

Let me come back to the inkblots, with their assumption that masculine equates with machinery and science, and feminine with art and nature. I have no idea whether the right pronoun for God is He, She or It. But this I’m pretty sure of. If God could somehow be induced to take that test, God would not come out macho, and not feminism, either, but right in the middle. Fellow androgynes, it’s a nice thought.

Meaning

1. In paragraph 6 Perrin writes that “there is a large class of men and women both, to which I belong, who are essentially androgynous.” What does androgynous mean? Is Perrin at ease with his androgynous identity?

2. In paragraphs 7–9 Perrin defines manhood across a kind of range or spectrum. What is this spectrum, and how does it relate to the inkblot test he describes in his opening paragraphs?

3. In paragraph 10 Perrin claims that men owe a debt to the women’s movement. Explain what he believes feminists have contributed to society’s understanding of manhood.

Purpose and Audience

1. Why do you think Perrin wrote this essay? Was he trying to justify or come to terms with his own masculinity? If not, what was he trying to do?

2. In his conclusion (paragraph 16), Perrin speaks directly to his “Fellow androgynes.” What does this suggest about Perrin’s vision of his readers?

¹Siobhan McKenna (1923–86) was an Irish stage and movie actress. [Editor’s note.]
3. How do you think Perrin expects his audience to react to this essay? Does he seem to assume his audience’s agreement, does he write defensively to forestall criticism, or does he assume some other response? What in the essay makes you think as you do?

**Method and Structure**

1. Why is definition an appropriate method for Perrin to use in developing his ideas? What specific features of this method serve him?
2. In developing his definition, Perrin relies heavily on personal anecdotes. What do the anecdotes contribute to his essay? Do they weaken his case in any way?
3. **Other Methods** In what ways does Perrin use comparison and contrast as part of his definition? Why is this method important in developing his point?

**Language**

1. Perrin’s vocabulary in this essay ranges from relatively formal to highly informal. For example, in paragraph 5 he uses the phrase “rather limited criteria” as well as the word “wimp.” What does this range of vocabulary suggest about Perrin’s role as a writer here?
2. In paragraph 8 Perrin writes that the point he is making is “mere speculation, but not casual.” What does he mean?
3. Point out some examples that show Perrin appealing to his readers’ sense of humor. What is the effect of these examples?

**Writing Topics**

1. In an essay, define manhood or womanhood. Does your definition correspond to traditional assumptions about gender or is it more like Perrin’s? What characteristics does your definition not include?
2. Based on your own experience, write an essay in which you define a stereotype you have encountered, not necessarily a gender stereotype. Examples include assumptions about jocks, techies, persons in wheelchairs, persons who are thin or heavy or have other physical characteristics, or racial differences.
3. Despite the societal changes Perrin refers to, many gender-related issues continue to be a source of controversy and debate: coeducation versus gender-specific classrooms, discrepancies between men’s and women’s earnings, what constitutes sexual harassment, parental roles within the family, gender stereotypes in the media, and so on. Choose one such controversy that interests you, and in an essay explore its various sides as well as your own position.
GLORIA NAYLOR

An American novelist and essayist, Gloria Naylor was born in 1950 in New York City. She served as a missionary for Jehovah’s Witnesses from 1967 to 1975 and then worked as a hotel telephone operator until 1981. That year she graduated from Brooklyn College of the City of New York with a BA and went on to do graduate work in African American studies at Yale University. Since receiving an MA from Yale, Naylor has published five novels dealing with the varied histories and life-styles often lumped together as “the black experience”: The Women of Brewster Place (1982), about the lives of eight black women, which won the American Book Award for fiction and was made into a television movie; Linden Hills (1985), about a black middle-class neighborhood; Mama Day (1988), about a Georgian woman with visionary powers; Bailey’s Cafe (1992), about a group of people whose lives are at crossroads; and The Men of Brewster Place (1997), about the men whose lives intersect those of the women of Brewster Place.

The Meanings of a Word

Recalling an experience as a third-grader leads Naylor to probe the meanings of a highly sensitive word. At the same time she explores how words acquire their meanings from use. This essay first appeared in the New York Times in 1986.

Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I’ve managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

I’m not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. The battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds
or letters without a consensus that assigns "meaning." And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.

I remember the first time I heard the word *nigger*. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a "bad" word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face—"Mommy, what does *nigger* mean?"

And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel, or referee the ongoing checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyards of New York.

Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions—two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby's crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street—there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about "you-know-who" up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself "p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!" But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word *nigger* was...
used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else.

In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive:

“Did Johnny really do that?”

“I’m telling you, that nigger pulled in $6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house.”

When used with a possessive adjective by a woman—“my nigger”—it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood—a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: “Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough—you don’t mess with a nigger.”

In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it. Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all “trifling niggers.” This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression—they had gone through all of that themselves—but the unforgivable sin was a lack of self-respect.

A woman could never be a “nigger” in the singular, with its connotation of confirming worth. The noun girl was its closest equivalent in that sense, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. Girl was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit, nerve, or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion.

“G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?”

But if the word was used in a third-person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element of communal disapproval. And age became an important factor in these exchanges. It was only between individuals of the same generation, or from any older person to a younger (but never the other way around), that girl would be considered a compliment.

I don’t agree with the argument that use of the word nigger at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: the people in my grandmother’s living room took a word that whites used to signify
worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naive enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

So there must have been dozens of times that *nigger* was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn’t “hear” it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.

**Meaning**

1. Naylor writes that “the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns ‘meaning’” (paragraph 2). Explain this statement in your own words. How did this statement apply to the word *nigger* for the young Naylor?

2. What is Naylor’s main idea? Where does she express it?

3. In paragraph 14 Naylor disagrees with those who claim that the African American community’s use of the term *nigger* constitutes “an internalization of racism.” What alternative explanation does she offer? Do you agree with her interpretation? Why, or why not?

**Purpose and Audience**

1. What is Naylor’s purpose or purposes in writing this essay: to express herself? to explain something? to convince readers of something? Support your answer by referring to passages from the essay.

2. Naylor’s essay first appeared in the *New York Times*, a daily newspaper whose readers are largely middle-class whites. In what ways does she seem to consider and address this audience?

**Method and Structure**

1. Why is Naylor’s choice of the method of definition especially appropriate given the point she is trying to make about language?

2. Naylor supports her main idea by defining two words, *nigger* and *girl*. What factors influence the various meanings of each word?
3. Naylor’s essay is divided into sections, each contributing something different to the whole. Identify the sections and their functions.

4. **Other Methods**  Like many writers of definition, Naylor employs a number of other methods of development: for instance, in paragraphs 4 and 5 she describes the atmosphere of her grandparents’ apartment; in 8, 9, and 12 she cites examples of speech; and in 11–13 she compares and contrasts the two uses of *girl*. At two points in the essay Naylor relies on a narrative of the same incident. Where, and for what purpose?

**Language**

1. How would you describe the tone of Naylor’s essay? Steady and reasoned, or impassioned? Is the style more academic or more informal? Do you find Naylor’s tone and style appropriate given her subject matter? Why?

2. In paragraph 3 Naylor uses language to convey a child’s perspective. For example, she seems to become the arrogant little girl who “remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did.” Locate three or four other uses of language in the essay that emphasize her separation from the world of adults. How does this perspective contribute to the effect of the essay?

3. In paragraph 14 Naylor concludes that her family used *nigger* “to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be.” This variety and complexity is demonstrated through the words and expressions she uses to describe life in her grandparents’ home—“a weekend mecca,” “a bustling and open house” (4). Cite five or six other examples of concrete, vivid language in this description.

**Writing Topics**

1. Using your own experiences for examples, write an essay modeled on Naylor’s in which you define “the meanings of a word” (or words). The word you choose might be a stereotype based on ethnicity, gender, appearance, or income, for example. Have you found, like Naylor, that meaning varies with context? If so, make the variations clear.

2. A recent grassroots movement tried but failed to have the word *nigger* removed from dictionaries. Are there some words so hateful that they should be banned from the language? Or is such an attempt to control language even more objectionable? Write an essay that states and supports your answers, giving plenty of examples.

3. About African Americans’ use of the word *nigger*, Naylor writes that “the people in my grandmother’s living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent”
Write an essay in which you discuss a symbol, a trait, or another word that has been used negatively by one group toward another but has been transformed by the targeted group into a positive meaning. Examples include the gay community's use of the word *queer* and the Jewish community's reclaiming of the Star of David after the Nazis used the symbol to stigmatize Jews. How did the definition of the symbol, trait, or word change from one community to another? Like Naylor, provide readers with examples that clarify your definitions.
AMY TAN

Amy Tan was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. She grew up in northern California and majored in English and linguistics at San Jose State University, where she received a BA and an MA. Tan's first career was as a business writer, crafting corporate reports and executives' speeches. Dissatisfied with her work, she began writing fiction. Her first book, The Joy Luck Club (1989), a critical and popular success, is a series of interrelated stories about the bonds between immigrant Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. Since The Joy Luck Club was published, she has written three more novels: The Kitchen God's Wife (1991), The Hundred Secret Senses (1995), and The Bonesetter's Daughter (2001).

Mother Tongue

In this essay, Tan defines her sense of a mother tongue, exploring the versions of English that she has used as a daughter, a student, and a writer. The essay was first published in Three Penny Review in 1990.

I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others.

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, The Joy Luck Club. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her.
I was saying things like, "The intersection of memory upon imagina-
tion" and "There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to this-
and-thus"—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical
phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized
forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of
Standard English that I had learned in school and through books,
the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and
I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, and the
English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new
and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: "Not waste money
that way." My husband was with us as well, and he didn't notice any
switch in my English. And then I realized why. It's because over the
twenty years we've been together I've often used that same kind of
English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has
become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that
relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

So you'll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds
like, I'll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation
which I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation,
my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who
had the same last name as her family's, Du, and how the gangster in
his early years wanted to be adopted by her family, which was rich
by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer
than my mother's family, and one day showed up at my mother's
wedding to pay his respects. Here's what she said in part:

"Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street
kind. He is like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming Island people. The
local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side
local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like
become own family. Du Zong father wasn't look down on him, but
didn't take seriously, until that man big like become a malia. Now
important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only
to show respect, don't stay for dinner. Respect for making big cele-
buration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom.
Chinese social life that way. If too important won't have to stay too
long. He come to my wedding. I didn't see, I heard it. I gone to boy's
side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen."

You should know that my mother's expressive command of En-
glish belies how much she actually understands. She reads the
Forbes report, listens to Wall Street Week, converses daily with her
stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine's books with ease—all
kinds of things I can't begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I've been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as "broken" or "fractured" English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. Once it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money."

And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to
calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, “I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week.” And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English—lo and behold—we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved As and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience.
Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was ____, Mary thought he was ____." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming," with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous." Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship—for example, "Sunset is to nightfall as ____ is to ____." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: red is to stoplight, bus is to arrival, chills is to fever, yawn is to boring. Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair; "sunset is to nightfall"—and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words—red, bus, stoplight, boring—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: "A sunset precedes nightfall" is the same as "a chill precedes a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an associative situation, for example, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs. Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can't begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as "broken" or "limited." And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.
Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn't until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here's an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*, but without this line: "That was my mental quandary in its nascent state." A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won't get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as "simple"; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as "broken"; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as "watered down"; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure, I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech, and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded when it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: "So easy to read."

*Meaning*

1. For Tan the phrase "mother tongue" has a special meaning. How would you summarize this meaning? Why does Tan feel so deeply about her "mother tongue"?

2. In what ways do the English that Tan's mother speaks affect how people outside the Chinese American community think of her? What examples does Tan give to demonstrate this fact of her mother's life?
3. In paragraph 15, Tan writes, "[M]y mother’s English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well." What does she mean? Why does she use the qualifier "almost"?

**Purpose and Audience**

1. Why do you suppose Tan wrote this essay? Does she have a purpose beyond changing readers’ perceptions of her mother’s “broken” English? What passages support your answer?
2. How can you tell that Tan is not writing primarily to an audience of Asian Americans? If Asian Americans were her primary audience, how might the essay be different?

**Method and Structure**

1. How does Tan develop her definition of her "mother tongue"? That is, how does she best help readers understand her mother’s speech?
2. Tan divides her essay into three sections, the second beginning in paragraph 8 and the third beginning in paragraph 18. What is the focus of each section? Why do you think she divided the essay like this?
3. **Other Methods** In paragraph 2 and again in paragraph 21, Tan refers to "all the Englishes I grew up with." How does she classify these various "Englishes"?

**Language**

1. What troubles Tan about the labels "broken," "fractured," and "limited" for her mother’s English (paragraph 8)? How do these labels contrast with the way she views her mother’s speech?
2. In paragraphs 16 and 17, Tan writes about the kinds of vocabulary items that appear on standardized English tests. In contrast to the precision of the answers to mathematical questions, why were the answers to vocabulary questions "always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience" for her?

**Writing Topics**

1. Think about the language you speak with close friends or family members. What are some characteristics of this language that outsiders might find difficult to understand? Write an essay that focuses on the idea of "personal" language—that is, language that creates or reflects closeness among people. In developing your essay, you may call on your own experiences, your observations of others, and your
reading (of both fiction and nonfiction). Be sure to provide as many specific examples of language use as you can.

2. How do you define "standard English"? To what extent do you believe that nonstandard English marks people as "limited"? On what occasions is standard English absolutely required? Are there any occasions when nonstandard English is entirely appropriate? In an essay, explain and illustrate both the drawbacks and the benefits of standard and nonstandard English. (If necessary, consult the Glossary under nonstandard English.)

3. Tan writes that as a student she didn't do well on standardized English tests. In recent years, such standardized testing has grown increasingly prominent in evaluating students' achievement. In an essay, discuss your ideas about standardized tests. How accurately do you think they assess students’ academic abilities? How do you respond to the claim that many such tests are biased in favor of affluent white students? How, in your experience, have they affected classroom teaching strategies? You can consider any of these questions or other related ones that interest you.