

Hair-Gel Halo

Winner of the 2009 Writers at Work Essay Contest

We were born in the 1970s and grew up in the 80s. We longed, we yearned, we wanted to buy, to get, to have given to us, to mash the world up into something we wished we could be. We went to bed at night dreaming of plastic that it turns out came from China, plastic molded and shaped into robots and soldiers and fake guns. Everyone had fake guns. We wanted to smash. We wanted Little Debbie Swiss Cake Rolls. We wanted Hi-C juice boxes. But I didn't get Hi-C juice boxes. I got this kind of juice box called Ssips. They were a little cheaper. And though I drank the Ssips, I did not want them. That difference—the space between what I had and what I wanted, the space between Hi-C and Ssips—felt like the whole world.

We wanted certain kinds of lunchboxes. We wanted the cartoons they'd made into toys and the toys they'd made into cartoons. We wanted to live in the cartoons we watched, that's how good they looked. My little brother Ryan and I watched them on TV every day after school. But after a while Ryan and I longed to be done with all that kid stuff because then we could finally be like our other brother, Jake, who was years older and effortlessly, thoughtlessly good at things. He threw no-hitters and made the front page of the sports section so often that Dad, after a while, stopped mounting and framing the game stories. Jake could dunk a basketball. It was a miniature ball, but still. Because we were hungry for knowledge, for anything that would add to what we already had, we believed him when he told us girls peed and pooped out of the same place. We wanted to shoot guns and have muscles that glistened in the sun. We wanted to be black and wear thick gold chains around our necks and we wanted to rap. Some of us tried to beat box because we heard it on MTV. We wanted to

run like Bo Jackson and fly like Michael Jordan. We were, all of us, all the time, trying to figure out ways to run, to get off the ground a little, and, finally, for a way to fly.

The girls wanted stuff, too, and from what I saw it had to do with ponies and smaller, plastic versions of themselves, only with more sparkles. They were quieter and they did their homework and didn't draw pictures of boobies in their textbooks. Later, in high school, we'd spend a lot of quiet summer nights thinking about those girls, the nights long and empty but hot and fast and manic, too, because we were figuring out that certain parts of us consisted of a hard, feverish wanting that never went away and which left us so dry-throated sometimes we thought we might die, or combust, or smash something using only our foreheads.

But before that, before we tried to dunk basketballs ourselves, before we found out about girls, the 80s were electric and we were, too. We wanted video games. We went to bed dreaming of games so good that to slip the cartridge into the system's plastic box meant a complete life, one that wanted for nothing and owned everything, the five-button controller our lifeline to the thing that would finally quench our thirsts. We wanted full color, eight-bit, sixteen-bit, whatever they had.

Everybody, in the 80s, still got at least one magazine. We got *Sports Illustrated*, *Readers Digest*, and *National Geographic*. I read some of the articles but also looked for pictures of naked women, the women with beads in their hair and piercings in their noses. My friends' parents got *Newsweek*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and, if you looked behind cupboards and inside drawers, *Playboy* and sometimes *Penthouse*. Jim Lawson's dad had stacks of *Penthouse Letters* and I found out where he hid them, though Jim didn't care much when I



showed him. Jim wasn't a big reader.

We wanted Transformers, GI Joes, or even Cabbage Patch Kids if we were younger or into that sort of thing. Some girls wanted those dolls so bad that their grandmothers stitched together fakes for them. We wanted Hypercolor T-shirts that changed a different hue of green when you touched them, and, at least at Bel Air Elementary in Cumberland, Maryland, we wanted the blue-and-black Air Jordans.

Television, which was everywhere, filled us up like a bellyful of bright sugar. We watched *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, and *Family Ties*. At sleepovers, we watched VHS copies of *The Goonies*, which made us want to go on big adventures. I tried going on adventures in the woods behind my house but all I found were stumps and thick logs decayed just enough to hack apart with Dad's hatchet. We could never make any of it look like it did on TV, though we kept trying. We looked for adventure, but next to what we saw on TV, it all somehow turned out gray and tasteless. The actual world, which is without plot, without movie stars, kept creeping in.

All of this wanting I'm talking about, it had a cost. I found out later that in the months before Christmas, my mom skipped lunch, on weekends eating cans of butter beans with salt and pepper. At school, we fought with each other over who had the better Swatch watch: the one with the surfboard on it, or the one with the checkerboard pattern. After school, my friends and I competed at sleepovers: who had the coolest rap tape? Tommy Newman had Run DMC. Shawn Setterwhite had the Beastie Boys. Jason Wendell had Young MC and I had the Fat Boys. The Fat Boys came out of my mom's paycheck and the Swatch watch came out of several paychecks. Still, we wanted. I wanted. It went on and on.

My brothers also wanted, but they wanted slightly different things and sometimes I wanted that stuff, too. All over the country, kids were like me. The Cold War was on. Reagan versus Gorbachev, Americans versus the

Commys. We, born in the 70s and raised in the 80s, were fighting already but didn't know it. We had the summer Olympics in 1984 and we won just about everything there was to win. We got used to winning, to having it our way. We wanted to beat the other kid, even the quiet kid who sat next to me on Bus 77 and who let me copy his homework when I could've done it the night before but didn't bother to. We wanted to stand out. We wanted to feel like somebody. We wanted to be like Rambo and Rocky even though—precisely because—all we had was a dog-eared Sears Wish Book, a toy wallet, and a five-dollar bill we'd tucked into the back of our sock drawers. Our wants consumed us. We were one and the same as our wants. We equaled our desires. We walked around with our hands open.

I, as it turns out, wasn't one of the pushy ones, but maybe I should have been. I wanted, of course, to figure out just what kind of plastics, what kind of imported materials and homegrown grains, just what kind of stuff I was made of. I was figuring out, that whole time, just how far the wanting would go, how far I could dig until I got to something that was beyond wanting, something that was none of that other stuff but that was, at its bones, just, and only, me.

When I was little, my idea about babies was that they came from an assembly line. Trying to go to sleep at night, I'd lie awake for hours, head centered on pillow, body completely still, and focus on this picture I had in my head. My best guess, at six or seven, was that workers in powder-blue hospital scrubs and white surgical masks stood along either side of this great belt-driven assembly line, snapping arms and legs and then hands and feet onto little baby torsos. The babies, spaced evenly on the belt, came at the workers all day, slow and steady, forever. These people worked efficiently, attaching limbs with soft clicks to the bodies of my friends, my teachers, and at one point way back, even my parents. It was a clean, bright



room, and orderly.

God was the foreman. He sat in a high, glass-fronted office, out of sight. God may have propped his sandaled feet on a desk, may have stroked his beard with his calm and strong God fingers. In my notion of how babies were made, God was a quiet boss, reasonable, never yelling or raising his voice. He ran a pretty tight ship, but if his assembly workers followed the rules and kept up the pace, he was an all right guy.

God, in this role, had just one job, really. But it was a big decision and he made it over and over. When babies came to the end of the line, after getting their arms, legs, hands, and feet, God told that last worker what kind of head—and therefore what kind of face—to pop onto the top of each baby. That last worker reached into a bag of heads, selected the right one, and pop, that baby was done. Maybe the new baby cried or peed over its shoulder onto a nurse, like my parents said I did when I was born. Some babies got dark-brown faces with wide noses. Some got Asian faces with narrow eyes. Some got freckles and a mole in the middle of a cheek. Some girls got pretty faces and they were destined to a lifelong blessedness because everyone knows that pretty girls are something special. Some boys got the handsome faces. Some, like my brother Ryan, got weird eyebrows. Some, I suppose, were fat, or ugly. Some had problems.

But what God gave me, I thought as a kid, was a standard-issue head with a standard-issue face. I was convinced that, face-wise, I'd gotten vanilla ice cream.

When I looked in the mirror in the morning, I saw a thin face, kind of pale. My nose was long, pointy at the end. My eyes were light-brown, the color of my mom's coffee after she put milk in it. But lots of kids had that color of eyes and so mine were nothing special. I had thin lips and baby teeth with ridges on the ends. In the mirror, I saw the third-grade equivalent of sugar water, baked chicken breasts with the skin taken off, which we ate at home

all the time because they were always on sale. My face had absences. I had no freckles. I had no cool scars. My hair was brown. My hair was limp.

I was, I knew in my gut, no Shawn Setterwhite. Shawn was in the third grade with me and he wasn't baked chicken with the skin taken off. He was the coolest kid in Mrs. Shoup's class and one of the coolest kids in all of Bel Air Elementary. He had really cool hair. Gelled hair, 1980s hair, hair to be envied. I wasn't allowed to put gel in my hair, but Shawn was. Shawn Setterwhite, in the third grade at Bel Air Elementary School outside of Cumberland, Maryland, came to school with his short hair clumped into two-inch spikes, his head, with that hair, pointed and stiff and angry and confident. Every morning before school he went at it with comb, fingers, and gobs of thick, radioactive gel, transforming a normal third-grade cut into something meant for attacking. Some mornings, maybe when he was tired, he'd sort of miss when he worked the gel into his hair and get it all over the band of his forehead just below the hairline. Days he did that, when he'd tilt his head a certain way or when the classroom lights caught the dried gel just right, Shawn's forehead shone, like a halo.

Shawn's dad was a big deal at the tire company in Cumberland and so Shawn had the best shoes, the best toys, the newest cassette tape in his Walkman. The pretty girls liked Shawn. One girl or another always had his name written, in white-out, on her Trapper Keeper. He looked good, had a nice smile, and was, for nine years old, cool. He would come back to school after Christmas breaks and say things like, "You have to be careful not to get sunburned when you ride the lifts."

Shawn was the goal, the aim, the thing that all boys everywhere wanted to be. Shawn was also a real piece of shit. He started a fight with my little brother Ryan one afternoon before the Super Bowl and scratched up his face. No punches, just scratching. One rainy recess, stuck in Mrs. Shoup's classroom, Shawn



started a board game with three other boys. The game was *Payday*, a game I liked and played at home all the time. There were five tokens in this game, which meant that I could have been the fifth player, but Shawn wouldn't let me play because he said he didn't like my shirt. Even that young, he had charisma and that made him a leader, and so the other boys, though they were my friends too, joined him. I had no chance. They all turned on me and for that, I hated Shawn.

He started fads. One day he wore a sweatband under his watch and the next day three more boys wore sweatbands under their watches and then five more and then ten. Shawn Setterwhite had dimples and was always nice to the teachers. Shawn also lived just down the street from me and was, when he wanted to be, when he found it necessary or convenient or when he wanted to not be bored, my friend. Those moments, coming weeks apart from each other, made it hard for me to hate him all the time.

Shawn was the first kid in the third grade or, for all I knew, the whole of Bel Air Elementary, to own a Nintendo Entertainment System. He got it for Christmas. He talked about it all the time. Even when Shawn wasn't around, the rest of us talked about it, as if to play it for an hour was the same as seeing a dead body or a naked woman who wasn't your mom. At first, Shawn talked about *Super Mario Brothers* and Mike Tyson's *Punch-Out*. I'd played those, but I'd never played *The Legend of Zelda*. I remember him, waiting in line for recess one day, turning and facing me. He had a tan in his face, even though it was February. And his hair still stuck up in spikes, even though it was the afternoon. He had a halo this particular day. I lay my palm across the crown of his head once. It felt like a cactus.

"The thing about shooting arrows," he said, "is that each one takes away one of your jewels. So it's not like you can go around shooting arrows all over the place. Shooting arrows like crazy is a beginner's mistake."

I nodded, acknowledging that, yes, it

was true, only beginners did stupid things like shoot lots of arrows. Though I'd never played it, or even seen it played, I could picture *The Legend of Zelda*. In my head, it looked like the best movie ever made, the thing that might make me whole.

By ones and twos, Shawn invited us over to play Nintendo. Shawn's house was similar to mine, but bigger and, in all ways, nicer. His house had greener grass, nicer stuff on the inside, more comfortable couches, a whole closet for just board games. The kitchen had saloon-style swinging doors. The *Setterwhites* had a two-car garage and a basketball hoop in the driveway.

Months went by and Shawn hadn't invited me down to his house to play Nintendo, even though the other boys in our little group lived much farther away. Shawn and I would shoot hoops sometimes or throw a football around, but if I asked about video games, he'd say he was tired of it or that it was too close to dinner time. Those days, I'd walk home thinking of arrows that cost a jewel to shoot. I'd dream of right hooks and *Soda Popinski* and *Mr. Sandman* and finally getting all the way to *Mike Tyson*.

At school, on Monday mornings, I'd hear about video game nights. At our table in Mrs. Shoup's classroom, the other kids—*Tommy Newman*, *Jason Wendell*, and *Matt Mueller*—talked about it. I suspected those other boys were somehow, vaguely, cooler than me, but I couldn't have said why or how. It was as if they were playing little league and I was stuck in tee-ball. Was it their clothes? I didn't wear the most expensive stuff, but I didn't smell bad, either. Was it sports? I was in the middle of the pack. Was it my face, my normal face? I didn't think boys worked like that, making judgments based on faces, but I couldn't be sure.

I wanted to play *Zelda*. I wanted to feel the controller in my hands, my thumbs working the buttons until they ached. When they talked about level eight and how hard it was or about how the silver sword worked so



much better than the other one, I nodded along as if I knew what they were talking about. But I didn't. Third grade wore on. The snow melted. Basketball season ended. Baseball practice started.

And then, one Sunday that spring of the third grade, Shawn called. He said to come down and did I want to play Zelda? I said sure I did, but let me check with my parents. I knew I didn't have to ask anyone about going down to Shawn's, so after I hung up the phone I threw on a jacket and pair of shoes and raced out the front door. "Have fun," my mom yelled, but I'd slammed the door before I could say anything back. I was breathing hard when I got to the Setterwhites.'

Shawn answered, wearing white socks because they had the kind of house where you had to take off your shoes. "Hey," he said. I followed him into the living room.

I rounded the corner and saw Tommy Newman sitting on the couch, no shoes on his feet either. I liked Tommy. We were good friends. He was nice and funny and could draw anything. His dad was a Presbyterian minister. But I didn't know Tommy was going to be there. Also, there were two big, empty bowls on the coffee table, where Tommy's feet were. A spoon rested in each and at the bottoms rested a small pool of melted ice cream. It looked like Neopolitan.

Shawn sat on the couch, beside Tommy, in a way that took up all the space. They were watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie on HBO. We didn't have HBO at my house. The Nintendo controllers sat on the coffee table. I didn't know if I was supposed to ask about *The Legend of Zelda*. I wondered if the controllers were still warm.

"Tommy just beat level six," Shawn said, not taking his eyes away from the TV. "I've already beat the whole thing twice." I sat on a chair in the corner of the big living room. Shawn's mom called down from upstairs. "Boys," she yelled. "You done?"

"We're done," Shawn said.

She walked downstairs. "Oh," she said when she saw me. "I didn't know you

were here. You want some ice cream?"

I did want some and was about to say so but Shawn said, "No, we're about to go play basketball."

"What about Zelda?" I asked.

Shawn looked at me and when he said, "We're done with it," he might have smiled, just a little, and that greasy halo around his forehead might have glinted, just a little, in the living room lights.

Shawn and Tommy put their shoes on and walked outside. Tommy smiled at me as they walked past. He wasn't the one I hated just then. I followed them out.

I had no heart for basketball just then, so I said, "See you guys," and started on the walk up the hill. The breeze picked up and as I walked, I wondered what it would be like to be Shawn Setterwhite, to be able to play *Zelda* in the middle of the night, to eat bowls of Neopolitan ice cream with your shoes off, to get what you wanted and invite certain friends over for HBO movies but not others.

Thinking about Shawn Setterwhite, about all of it, made my stomach turn hard and small. There was all this stuff out in the world, acres and miles of it, all this stuff piled up on top of itself like a huge, breathing, blinking mountain, and you could touch some of it but not all of it and some people had more of this stuff than you did and it wasn't fair, not for a single second. You wanted and you wanted and you kept on wanting but all you could really hope for was to get asked inside for a level of *Zelda*, all you could count on was a taste now and then.

Halfway home, the breeze turned into a gale and then a storm. I walked faster. It was raining by the time I got through the front door, the sound of the wind against the house sounding like a thousand faraway voices, each one telling me that I'd come a ways, that there was a long way still to go, and that if I was worth anything good at all, I'd stop trembling long enough to stand still a moment, take a big breath, and let it, all of it, try as hard as it could to knock me over.

