

As they came close, “Herbert” yelled through his cupped hands, “It returns! It returns!” The happiness upon rejoining with him almost recalls to mind a sunny day, but it was just another murky sky around us. I caught up to meet them and straight away I saw “Herbert” to be a very old man now. For when he took the child off his back, it turned out that he was crouched over and his arms wouldn’t go into the praying mantis position as easily. They tilted to the sides, the elbow looked beyond frail.

I put my hands on both sides of him, to steady him, “Herbert! Herbert! Look at you. You’re so old. How did you get so old?”

He said, “No, it’s fine.” He put his hands on my shoulders. “Thank you for holding me up. It’s a heavy boy.”

“No,” I said, grasping him firmly. “You’re dying. You need to eat. You’re all dying of starvation.” I set my suitcase on the ground and got out the bread and hummus again. “Another man died about an hour or two back on the trail. And the man with the pith helmet died. I’m also wondering if I’m getting older, too.”

I handed him some bread smeared with a giant gob of hummus.

“Is this food?” he said. “That’s fine.”

“Eat it,” I said.

I took a bite off and put it on his tongue and slid it into his mouth. He chewed at it, mashing it against his teeth with his tongue, then he spit it on the ground.

“No,” I said. “Eat it or you’re going to die!”

“That’s not very fine,” he said. “It is food?”

“Yes!” I cried.