

# **MOONBIRDS**

A Play In The Desert

By

Christopher Woods

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## SYNOPSIS

MOONBIRDS is a comic/drama for two characters. They are census-takers who work for an international relief agency. Their job is to count needy people in a Third World country. The play takes place in the desert of that country. The central problem is that there are no people left to count, only abandoned villages. There is also the uncomfortable knowledge that, of the census teams sent before, not one has returned alive. Finally, they find that they must deal with, of all things, large ghoulish birds.

Nevertheless, the work must go on. As one of the characters says, "Aren't we census-takers? Isn't it our duty to count?"

So they continue their mission. MOONBIRDS is about both duty and doom. It is like a meeting between Indiana Jones and Jean-Paul Sartre.

MOONBIRDS was produced in Fall 2003 in New York City by PERSONAL SPACE THEATRICALS ([personalspacetheatrics.org](http://personalspacetheatrics.org)).

MOONBIRDS received earlier staged readings at NEW JERSEY REP and PUBLIC THEATRE OF KENTUCKY. The play was first produced by STAGE TWO THEATRE COMPANY IN Illinois.

## **Bio. Notes**

Christopher Woods writes fiction, non-fiction, poetry and plays. He is the author of *THE DREAM PATCH*, a lyrical novel about a Texas family during the 1940's. His collection of prose poems and brief fictions, *UNDER A RIVERBED SKY*, was published by PANTHER CREEK PRESS. His collection of stage monologues for actors and actresses, *HEART SPEAK*, was published recently by STONE RIVER PRESS.

His work has appeared in over four hundred publications in the U.S. and in fourteen foreign countries. These publications include *COLUMBIA*, *THE SOUTHERN REVIEW*, *NEW ENGLAND REVIEW*, *CONFRONTATION*, *ROSEBUD* and *GLIMMER TRAIN*.

His plays have been produced in Houston, Ft. Worth, Memphis, Minneapolis, Providence, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Tampa, Fort Lauderdale and Santa Fe. They include *A WOMAN ON FIRE*, about a woman who survives a fire in which her husband and child perish; *MOONBIRDS*, about doomed census-takers at work in a Third World country; *INTERIM*, about souls in Purgatory; *PILLOW DREAMS*, a drama about Alzheimer's and matricide; *LA LOMA*, about a young American in a Mexican prison; *THIS WAY TO THE BEDS*, *LADIES AND GENTLEMEN*, monologues and duets on the theme of sheets, real and metaphorical. His monologue shows include *WOMEN ALONE*, for actresses, and *LOVER, KILLER, ANGEL, THIEF*, for actors.

He has received a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation. He has received residencies at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming and the Edward Albee Foundation in New York. He lives in Houston where he has taught creative writing workshops at Rice University Continuing Studies Program, The Women's Institute, and by correspondence.

*“What would history be without the dead? They put the meat on history’s bones.”*

**MOONBIRDS**

PLACE: A desert.

TIME: The present.

CHARACTERS:

IGNOTO

RIEN

*(Both are men in their twenties or thirties. They wear khakis, caps and boots.)*

Note: MOONBIRDS can be played without intermission. However, if one is so desired, there can be an intermission following Scene Eight.

MOONBIRDS

SCENE ONE

*DIM LIGHTS COME UP*

*(Night. The desert. Two men asleep, curled on the ground. One man mumbles, tosses in his sleep. The other continues to sleep and snore peacefully. The first mumbles some more. Then, half-awake, he sits up. He counts the fingers on one hand. He mumbles, really talking in his sleep.)*

IGNOTO

Four, five. Four, five. We're still alive.

*(His hands drop to his sides. HE turns over, goes back to sleep. The other man continues sleeping peacefully.)*

*LIGHTS BEGIN FADING*

*(Suddenly, the sound of a large bird shrieking nearby)*  
BLACKOUT

SCENE TWO

*(Night. The desert. As before. A little later. Two men asleep.)*

*(Suddenly, the sound of a very large bird shrieking nearby. Both men sit up quickly. Startled, they are fully awake.)*

IGNOTO

Rien?

RIEN

Ignoto?

IGNOTO

Yes, friend. Is that you?

RIEN

Ah, good. You're still here. We're still here.

*(RIEN reaches through the semi-darkness for IGNOTO, who does the same. In a few seconds, they touch each other. An awkward moment.)*

RIEN

Oh! Excuse me.

IGNOTO

Pardon me. I was only...

RIEN

Of course. So was I.

IGNOTO

So you were. *(beat)* Thank you, then. It's good to have a friend. Here. Now. In this uncivilized place.

RIEN

It's that.

IGNOTO

And so cold. So cold. And hot, too.

RIEN

All weathers in one. But we knew to expect it. Didn't we learn all about this country in orientation? The training films?

IGNOTO

We did, yes. But now that we're actually here, it's much more real than a lecture. *(beat)* Scarier.

RIEN

But it's good work. Census-taking. You'll get used to it.

IGNOTO

I'm sure I will. And it's such an advantage, being on a team with you, Rien. In fact, I'm honored. With someone so well-respected in the field.

RIEN

You needn't say that.

IGNOTO

But it's true! You're well known, a second generation census-taker. Not many can say that. Not many at all. *(pause)* Do you have a son, back home? In the wings?

RIEN

I do, yes. But he's very young. Two years old. I miss him. I don't see much of him, you know, being away on census trips.

IGNOTO

I've read all about you. Your travels.

RIEN

Counting is never finished. Why here, for example, there has been no census in ten years. If we weren't here now, there wouldn't be any counting. None at all. And no progress.

*(HE watches IGNOTO, who is counting his fingers)*

Tell me, Ignoto. What are you doing?

IGNOTO

Why, counting. Counting the meals I've missed.

RIEN

Yes, it's too bad about losing our food. Our supplies. But we're strong and healthy, aren't we? Things will get better.

IGNOTO

Yes, let's look on the bright side. Forgive me. This is only my first census. *(beat)* I do feel lucky, actually. Being with someone so knowledgeable. So experienced. Very lucky. There must have been hundreds of applicants.

RIEN

Well...

IGNOTO

And imagine, you picked me!

RIEN

Imagine, yes. *(beat)* We all have to start somewhere.

*(HE watches as IGNOTO counts his fingers again)*

At it again? Counting the lost meals?

IGNOTO

Only for the record. I'm not complaining.

RIEN

I see. *(crosses his legs)* But remember, it won't make you feel any less hungry.

IGNOTO

*(HE crosses his legs, imitating RIEN)*

Yes, I need to learn from your experience. Second generation.*(beat)* Tell me, Rien. Will your son follow in your footsteps? Will he be a census-taker too?

RIEN

I'd like that. It would be a tribute to me, and to my father.

IGNOTO

It would. *(slight pause)* I guess I'm a disappointment to my father. I didn't follow in his footsteps.

*(beat)* No, I ran a small dessert café.

RIEN

How do you know he was disappointed?

IGNOTO

He never came to my café. Not once. *(beat)* For me, it was a place to lose myself. I made wonderful desserts. Cakes, pies, so many delicious things. I loved it, but I was being selfish. I knew I could always have a café. But being here with you, doing this, is something important. A pie is not so important. No, this is my way to help the world.

RIEN

It's noble of you, Ignoto.

IGNOTO

Maybe.

RIEN

Don't you think it is?

IGNOTO

Yes, census-taking is noble. But sometimes, I feel like a traitor. I'll be honest with you, Rien. I don't always think just about counting. When I'm walking, when I'm asleep, I think about other things too. Mostly I think about food.

RIEN

It doesn't show. I would never have guessed. Don't worry about it.

IGNOTO

Thanks. That's very understanding of you.

RIEN

Because, you see, I have things on my mind too. Besides counting.

IGNOTO

No!

RIEN

I'm human too.

IGNOTO

Of course you are. *(beat)* What kinds of things?

RIEN

Nothing worth talking about. Private things, that's all. (*slight pause*) We should really try to get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us.

IGNOTO

That's a good idea. I'd like to sleep. (*beat*) But Rien, did you happen to hear a bird?

RIEN

Just now?

IGNOTO

A few minutes ago. It woke me. I thought you heard it too.

RIEN

(*nonchalant*) A bird? Yes, maybe I did. Close by, was it?

IGNOTO

Frighteningly so. It sounded very large. Huge. To be so loud.

RIEN

Yes. (*beat*) Best to get some sleep now. We must have another hour before dawn.

(*RIEN settles down. then calls to IGNOTO*)

Ignoto, why would your father be disappointed in you for owning a café? What is his line of work?

IGNOTO

My father is a very depressed man. He's a diplomat. He negotiates peace treaties.

RIEN

Yes, I suppose that would break any man's spirit.

IGNOTO

A thankless, lonely job. No one cares. *(beat)* But in my café, there are customers. And always, desserts. Happiness. *(slight pause)* Even here, you can see the results. You count, and then you're done with it. You have a census to show for your efforts.

RIEN

Yes, that's how I see it.

*(RIEN settles down again)*

Let's get some sleep.

IGNOTO

*(HE watches RIEN fall asleep quickly)*

And try not to think about that bird.

*(HE settles down for a moment, then bolts back up)*

Rien?

*(RIEN doesn't answer)*

I wonder if it's a monster bird?

*(Arms around his knees, IGNOTO begins rocking)*

It must be. Here, it wouldn't come as a surprise. Maybe prehistoric. And hungry. A very hungry bird. *(beat)* Oh my.

*(HE settles into a fetal position)*

*(The sound of a very large bird shrieking)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE THREE

*(As before. The desert. Both men asleep. IGNOTO is the first to wake. HE sits up, begins to shiver. HE holds himself tightly. HE crawls over to the remnants of their campfire, but it has gone cold. HE shivers some more, begins to rock back and forth. HE sees RIEN a few feet away. IGNOTO cocks his head, thinks, then looks at RIEN in a longing fashion. Then, slowly but deliberately, IGNOTO slides over to RIEN. HE snuggles beside RIEN. RIEN, still asleep, stirs and rolls another foot away. IGNOTO, disappointed, slides towards RIEN once more. The same thing happens again. And again.*

*Frustrated, still shivering, IGNOTO reaches out and grabs RIEN by the shoulder. Holding HIM close, IGNOTO slides against RIEN at last. IGNOTO sighs happily with the warmth from another body.*

*After a few moments of this, RIEN, still asleep, reaches out, touching IGNOTO'S thigh. RIEN begins to smile, pulls closer to IGNOTO and begins to moan appreciatively. IGNOTO, taken aback, tries to move away. HE briefly considers removing RIEN'S hand, then decides against it. As HE tries to extricate HIMSELF, IGNOTO sees that RIEN has a very good grip on HIS thigh. In a one-sided struggle, IGNOTO makes several unsuccessful attempts to break away. In the end, HE is perplexed. HE is trapped. Finally, HE clears his throat loudly and speaks.)*

IGNOTO

Well, it's best we got started!

RIEN

*(HE wakes, startled)*

Yes, love. What is it?

*(RIEN discovers HIS hand on IGNOTO'S thigh and pulls it back immediately. HE recoils in shame)*

IGNOTO

*(Ignores this, looks at the sky) I do believe we overslept.*

RIEN

*(Flustered, HE sits up) My good man, I had no idea...*

IGNOTO

*(Waves a dismissing hand)* Please, there's no need to apologize.

RIEN

But I must!

IGNOTO

No, I'm the one to blame. I should have kept to myself.

RIEN

*(Starts to shiver)* Thank you, Ignoto. But it just isn't so.

IGNOTO

It is. Hear me out, Rien. Last night, when we went to sleep, it was so hot that I was sweating. The night was an inferno. Now, this morning, the air is icy. I'm so cold, I've been shaking.

RIEN

*(Still shivering)* Like this?

IGNOTO

*(Nods)* I thought, if I moved closer to you. I would be warm. I thought... well... we're furnaces of a kind, that's what we are. Inside, that's what I mean. I had only the highest of intentions. *(beat)* You believe me, don't you?

RIEN

Ignoto, please! There's no harm in what you did. In fact, it was noble. By keeping yourself warm, you'd be keeping me warm too. It would be good for us both.

IGNOTO

Even so...

RIEN

Enough of this. There's no need to defend your actions. Especially when the fault was mine. You see, I was dreaming. Oh, a fine dream. I was back home. In my country. In my city.

*(THEY are both still shivering)*

IGNOTO

*(Fondly)* I know that kind of dream.

RIEN

I was in bed. I dreamed I was sleeping with my mistress. In her bed. The kind of sleep that can only come from a happy sort of exhaustion.

IGNOTO

Oh yes. I know that kind of sleep.

RIEN

Such a lovely dream. Did I tell you, my mistress has a very narrow bed?

IGNOTO

At some time, you might have, yes.

RIEN

So narrow a bed, it's hardly there at all. So narrow we must share a dream. No more room than that, Ignoto. I was dreaming about her, about taking her in pleasure. I just naturally assumed that she was here now. That you were she. That she was you. *(beat)* God forgive me.

IGNOTO

How can you apologize for a dream? Can you tell me?

RIEN

*(Shrugs)* I don't know the answer to that.

IGNOTO

I do. *(beat)* You can't.

RIEN

Still, it's important to me that you know what was going on in my head. In that bed, in my dream.

IGNOTO

Fine. Good enough. Understood.

RIEN

All settled, then?

IGNOTO

Done. Certainly.

RIEN

And you aren't just saying that? To make me feel better?

IGNOTO

I speak from the heart, RIEN. Believe me.

*(RIEN reaches out and shakes hands with IGNOTO)*

RIEN

No hard feelings?

IGNOTO

Let's put it behind us. Let's get on with it. Once we start walking again, counting again, we'll feel better. And walking will warm us up, too. Like I said, we're furnaces of a kind.

RIEN

You're right.

IGNOTO

*(HE stands, then takes RIEN'S hand to help him up)*

Please, allow me.

RIEN

*(Remains seated) Oh...*

IGNOTO

*(Urging) Please.*

RIEN

*(Resisting) Ignoto?*

IGNOTO

What is it now?

RIEN

A moment, please, if you will.

IGNOTO

But what's the problem?

RIEN

*(Still seated, HE squirms a bit)* Just a few precious moments.

IGNOTO

*(HE bends over RIEN)* My friend, have you been injured in some way?

RIEN

Not exactly. Not so much an injury. *(Sheepishly, RIEN points to his crotch)* But blessed, perhaps.

IGNOTO

What's wrong with you?

RIEN

*(After a slight pause)* *Je suis raide.* Out of the blue.

IGNOTO

What?

RIEN

*(Louder)* *Je suis raide!* An erection, man.

IGNOTO

You mean...

RIEN

A hardon! Isn't that an international word?

IGNOTO

*Oh! (Embarrassed)* I had no idea. I ...

*(IGNOTO walks upstage, stops, facing away)*

RIEN

*(Calls to him)* How could you have known? I just found out about it myself.

IGNOTO

Well...

RIEN

Say no more. It will pass. Soon enough. *(slight pause)* But, for better or worse, my virility is such that these can sometimes last while.

IGNOTO

Oh my.

RIEN

However, given the circumstances, being here in the desert, I'm sure it will be shortlived. *(beat)* Yet I find it amazing. Dreaming of my mistress, so far away. And here *(HE points to crotch again)*, why, it's a kind of salute.

IGNOTO

*(Irritated)* I suppose it could be.

RIEN

A few more moments, Ignoto. Surely a few more moments won't play havoc with our schedule.

IGNOTO

Of course not. *(beat)* Let's see this through.

*(THEY wait it out. RIEN begins to whistle. IGNOTO also whistles, and kicks sand to busy HIMSELF. A lengthy pause)*

IGNOTO

Any report yet? *(Beat)* How are things going over there?

RIEN

Won't be long now. I am blocking my mistress from my thoughts.

IGNOTO

That's a logical plan. *(beat)*

RIEN

Yes, we're getting there now.

IGNOTO

I must say, I am feeling encouraged.

RIEN

I'll take that hand now, if the offer still holds.

*(IGNOTO walks over to RIEN. Still facing away, HE leans over and offers HIS hand. RIEN takes hold.)*

IGNOTO

Got it?

*(THEY are both standing now. RIEN rearranges HIS pants)*

RIEN

That should do it.

IGNOTO

Let's proceed, shall we?

RIEN

I think so, yes. So sorry about all that. It's not my idea of professionalism, you know.

IGNOTO

*(Shrugs)* It couldn't be helped. *(Beat)* Still, it's a marvel to me. Here, in this place. This ungracious land.

RIEN

*(Proud)* Yes, isn't it?

IGNOTO

*(HE spits)* Uncivilized.

RIEN

That too.

IGNOTO

And whatever else we don't know about yet.

RIEN

What we still have to learn.

IGNOTO

Right. What they didn't teach us in orientation.

*(Suddenly, the sound of several birds shrieking nearby. IGNOTO and RIEN both look around, then at each other, exchanging a knowing glance. THEY make no comment on the shrieks)*

RIEN

Let's be going, then. Best to keep moving. *(looks about)* Do we have everything, Ignoto?

*(THEY look around. Other than THEIR caps, THEY have nothing to carry.)*

IGNOTO

I think we do. *(beat)* We have only ourselves, don't we?

*(RIEN nods)*

*(THEY begin walking, RIEN leading, IGNOTO following. Suddenly RIEN halts, looks back where THEY had been. IGNOTO, not watching, bumps into RIEN)*

IGNOTO

What's the matter? Forget something?

RIEN

*(Wistfully)* No. Only a dream. That's all I leave here. *(beat)* We leave so much in our wake, don't you think?

IGNOTO

*(Sighs)* It's so true.

RIEN

*(HE looks at the place in the sand where HE dreamed)* So much. So much.

*(A slight pause. RIEN is lost in thought. Finally, IGNOTO taps his shoulder, indicating THEY need to be going.)*

RIEN

I'll be fine. Really.

*(THEY begin walking, shuffling really, in the sand)*

IGNOTO

I know.

*(IGNOTO puts HIS arm around RIEN'S shoulder)*

*LIGHTS BEGIN DIMMING*

RIEN

*(Looks back one last time)* Fine.

IGNOTO

Right.

*(THEY begin shuffling along)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE FOUR

*(A scene without words. It is daytime. Bright sunlight. RIEN and IGNOTO come walking, looking very tired and hot. THEY stop. IGNOTO takes a small swig from the canteen HE wears on HIS belt. HE offers it to RIEN, who waves it away. THEY continue walking, RIEN leading.)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE FIVE

*(A scene without words. As lights come up, we see both men facing upstage, presumably urinating. RIEN finishes first, zips HIS pants, steps back and waits for IGNOTO to finish.)*

*Suddenly, the sound of very large birds shrieking nearby. IGNOTO and RIE both look stage left. IGNOTO hurriedly finishes. Flustered, HE zips HIS pants as HE follows RIEN, heading quickly stage right. THEY exit.)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE SIX

*(A short time later. Lights bright to indicate intense heat. THEY come walking, RIEN leading. THEIR gait has slowed.)*

IGNOTO

I've had it for now. Let's rest. This seems as good a place as any.

RIEN

*(Waves his arms about, as if exercising)* Yes, let's rest a bit. I'm beat.

*(THEY remove their caps, wipe THEIR brows, RIEN first, then IGNOTO.)*

IGNOTO

I've been watching you. You're a funny kind of clock. Or bird.

RIEN

*(Puzzled)* Am I?

IGNOTO

Oh, yes. I think so. Haven't you noticed? The way you keep waving your arms?

RIEN

*(Waves HIS arms again)* Like this?

*(IGNOTO nods)*

It's for my circulation. Why are you calling me a clock. A bird?

IGNOTO

Don't you know?

RIEN

If I knew, I wouldn't need to ask.

IGNOTO

Come to think of it, I've never called a man a clock before. Or a bird. But after watching you all day, I'm sure of it.

RIEN

Sure of it? Which is it? Clock or bird?

IGNOTO

Who knows? I've been watching you, flapping about. And watching our shadows. My shadow, your shadow.

RIEN

*(RIEN flaps HIS arms again)*

Is this good or bad? What does this have to do with our census work?

IGNOTO

I can't say. *(slight pause)* Look, Rien. Watch me.

*(IGNOTO takes a step forward, lifts HIS arms at HIS sides. HE begins to flap HIS arms)*

There! Do you see it now?

RIEN

*(Unsure)* Why, yes.

IGNOTO

Good. Now, tell me. What do I look like?

RIEN

*(Scratches HIS head)* Some kind of bird? Yes, that's it! A khaki bird!

IGNOTO

This bothers me greatly. *(beat)* Watch me again.

*(IGNOTO begins flapping again, then waits for a response)*

RIEN

*(Undecided)* Does this have anything to do with those bird sounds we keep hearing?

IGNOTO

I hope not. *((flaps again))*

RIEN

It's certainly a crude kind of pantomime.

IGNOTO

*(Impatient)* No! No! No! Can't you see what I am? What I'm trying to represent? Look at my shadow? Am I not a clock? That my arms are the hands of a wild clock?

*(RIEN earnestly tries to see it)*

You must admit it's true. How could you not?

RIEN

*(HE shrugs, walks in a circle, kicks the sand)*

If you want to be a clock, go ahead. I don't have a problem with that. *((Beat))* But why?

IGNOTO

Because it is a kind of prophecy. It must be.

*(RIEN looks, sees nothing)*

Flap your arms like me!

*(RIEN flaps a bit in weak imitation)*

IGNOTO

Now, do you see it? How could you not? Oh, I knew you would. See it my way.

RIEN

Frankly, I don't see it. *(Beat)* This isn't meant to hurt you, Ignoto, but I think the heat has gotten the best of you. Are you delirious?

IGNOTO

*(Considers it)* Do you think I am? Don't you think the clock hands are an omen?

RIEN

How could I know? I'm so weak from heat and hunger, I might be delirious myself. How can I judge your own delirium?

IGNOTO

I do feel a little dizzy, now that I think about it. I'm going to sit down now. We should rest. Conserve our strength. Whatever's left of it.

RIEN

Let's do that. Let's take a short rest.

*(THEY sit, pass the canteen back and forth, drinking sparingly)*

*(A long pause)*

IGNOTO

*(Counting HIS fingers)* Four, five. We're still alive.

RIEN

What is it?

IGNOTO

Just remarking on the heat. It's extraordinary.

RIEN

Intolerable, yes. *(Beat)* But then, we knew to expect it, didn't we?

IGNOTO

Did we?

RIEN

Don't you remember our training? Didn't they teach us about the heat, and the cold? Of course they did.

IGNOTO

Yes, but expecting and experiencing are two very different birds. Why, when I thought of coming here, I imagined tall, frosty drinks. Elephant riding. Maybe even a bit of zebra polo.

RIEN

Come now, Ignoto. Doesn't all that sound a tad colonial? You must have watched an old training film. *(slight pause)* Black and white?

IGNOTO

There was no film at all. It's more like I imagined it would be. A film, all inside my head, if you will.

RIEN

Oh boy.

*(A pause)*

IGNOTO

Seven, eight. Seal a fate.

RIEN

Losing hope, Ignoto? Is that what you're doing? I hope not.

IGNOTO

I'm tired, Rien. I'm hot. And I'm very, very hungry. I know it's the hunger making me melancholy. It's the story of my life. Oh, maybe you won't understand this, but I live for food. The very idea of food. It's my entire life. Now, without food, there's no hope. That's how I feel. I can't help it.

RIEN

Don't give up so easily. Soon, we'll arrive in a village. They'll take care of us. We'll stock up on supplies there. Until then, we just have to pace ourselves.

IGNOTO

I know. You're right. Forgive me.

RIEN

Just remember, I know a thing or two about this country. My father knew it well. He told us all about it in his dispatches home. He'd write a few pages and then send them to us. They were better than letters. (*beat*) For a long time, they kept us informed.

IGNOTO

And then?

RIEN

As I told you, he died.

(*THEY both make the sign of the cross*)

IGNOTO

God rest his soul.

RIEN

Thank you.

IGNOTO

And the souls of those who traveled with him.

RIEN

Bless them all, yes.

(*RIEN crosses HIMSELF again. IGNOTO, watching, follows suit*)

All of them good census-takers, keeping alive the very flame of civilization. Gone now, all of them. Into history.

(*A pause. THEY mop THEIR brows with THEIR caps*)

IGNOTO

Seven, eight. Seal a fate.

(*A slight pause*)

Rien?

RIEN

Yes?

IGNOTO

They're all dead, aren't they? All the census-takers who came before us?

RIEN

Why, yes. That's why they're part of history now.

IGNOTO

*(Shakes HIS head)* I knew that. Why did I have to ask?

RIEN

Look at it this way, Ignoto. What would history be without the dead? They put the meat on history's bones. Without the dead, there would be no history. *(beat)* And the world, my friend, would be a very crowded place.

IGNOTO

I guess. But do you prefer death to life?

RIEN

*(Shrugs)* Can't say. I've never been dead.

IGNOTO

I think I prefer living. *(HE stands up)* I've been thinking about going home, Rien. You know, heading back the way we came?

RIEN

You can't be serious.

IGNOTO

Oh, I'm very serious.

RIEN

Forget it.

IGNOTO

I can't.

RIEN

We've come too far.

IGNOTO

As far as I want to come. I'll simply retrace my steps.

RIEN

Really, Ignoto? This may be your first census trip, but even you should know that we leave no tracks in the desert. What if you hit a sandstorm? What then? No, we need to press on. Am I not making sense?

*(IGNOTO doesn't answer. HE is crying)*

Ignoto!

IGNOTO

*(An emotional outburst)* I'm sorry! But I'm not ready for history! I won't know anyone there! At least you'll know your father!

RIEN

You'll know me. Don't I count for something?

IGNOTO

*(Gaining composure)* You know you do. I'm sorry. I had a weak moment. I'm not being very professional. I promise, I'll try to do better.

RIEN

Don't apologize. You're just hungry. Things will get better. You'll see. We have villages to visit. *(HE slaps IGNOTO playfully on the shoulder)* And meals to eat! Tall drinks, all you want. Antelope steak!

IGNOTO

Stop it! It's torture when I'm so hungry.

*(RIEN puts HIS arm around IGNOTO)*

RIEN

But it's true. The villagers will worship us. To them, we're gods! Why, just the fact that we're here at all, that we've come to count them. Who else cares about them? No one has come to count them in ten years. They'll be very happy to see us. They'll pull out all the stops. A great party will be thrown in our honor.

IGNOTO

Yes, you've told me all that before. And, as much as I want to believe it, need to believe it, I just don't know. Even if there is a party, something else is going to happen later. Something terrible. *(beat)* You know. Don't try to deny it.

RIEN

Okay, okay. But for now, think of the party. For now, that's all you need to think about.

IGNOTO

I'm trying, but it's hard to concentrate.

RIEN

Then think about this. *(beat)* After we have eaten all that we can possibly stuff inside ourselves *(HE slaps IGNOTO'S belly playfully)*, when we're good and drunk from tribal wine, they'll play music for us. They'll ask us to join them. To dance.

IGNOTO

*(Nervously)* Do you think so?

RIEN

Of course. My father described the native dances in his next-to-last dispatch. Everyone dances.

IGNOTO

I see. (*A pause*) Well, I don't know how to put this, but there's something you should know. (*beat*) I can't dance. Not now, not ever. I don't know the first thing about dancing. Cooking, yes. Eating, to be sure. But dancing? I have never danced in my life. Never even wanted to.

RIEN

(*After a brief pause*) You're kidding.

IGNOTO

No. I'm not.

RIEN

You've got to be kidding.

IGNOTO

No.

RIEN

Really now, Ignoto.

IGNOTO

I assure you. I have never danced a step in my life.

RIEN

What about in school? Weren't there school dances?

IGNOTO

I never went to a dance.

RIEN

Now I've heard everything. How could you not know how to dance? (*Beat*) This is disturbing news, let me tell you. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to think. (*beat*) Imagine the natives' disappointment.

(*IGNOTO throws up his hands*)

IGNOTO

It can't be helped. *(beat)* If it was so important, why didn't they have dancing lessons in orientation?

RIEN

I suppose some things are simply assumed.

*( A pause)*

IGNOTO

I'm sorry. Truly.

RIEN

That's not good enough.

IGNOTO

What do you expect from me?

RIEN

*(Circles IGNOTO)* You must learn to dance. I'll teach you. A step or two. Nothing beyond rudimentary. There's no time for more. For fox trot, for samba. Besides, we need to save our strength for the trek to the next village. Come on, now. *(beat)* Stand like a dancer stands, Ignoto. Prime yourself.

IGNOTO

*(Flustered)* Really, now. This seems inappropriate. Here.

RIEN

It couldn't be more appropriate. Especially here. *(beat)* Now, ready?

*(RIEN holds HIS hands above HIS head, snaps HIS fingers and begins to dance in a small circle around IGNOTO, who grimaces)*

IGNOTO

I can't. I simply can't.

RIEN

*(Forced patience)* Watch me again.

*(RIEN repeats his steps, making sure to give RIEN a slight, taunting kick in the rear)*

IGNOTO

Oh!

RIEN

Are you watching?

*IGNOTO folds HIS arms on HIS chest, defiantly)*

IGNOTO

I cannot dance, and it doesn't bother me in the least.

*(RIEN slaps IGNOTO hard across the face)*

RIEN

You can, and you will!

IGNOTO

*(Shocked)* You didn't!

RIEN

Yes, I did.

*(HE slaps IGNOTO again)*

Twice. Believe me, it's for your own good. *(beat)* Now, won't you dance?

*(IGNOTO is silent. RIEN begins dancing in wider circles)*

Watch my feet. See how effortless it is? Oh, yes! This will relax you, Ignoto. Clears the mind. Lifts the spirit. *(beat)* Try it now. Oh, this is much more fun than your clock hallucinations.

*(IGNOTO takes a step at last, then suddenly halts)*

IGNOTO

But there's no music!

RIEN

*(HE snaps HIS fingers rhythmically)* I assure you, this is all the music you need.

RIEN

*(In a commanding voice)* TRY IT! NOW!

IGNOTO

*(Weary, defeated)* I'll try. I'll try.

*(Feebly, IGNOTO attempts to mimic RIEN's movements, albeit gracelessly and half-heartedly)*

Like this?

*(RIEN is appalled)*

RIEN

That's it!

*SOUND OF DRUMBEATS*

*(IGNOTO dances. HE is terrible)*

IGNOTO

And like this?

RIEN

*(None too impressed)* Oh, yes. I'd say you dance very well for someone who has never danced.

*(IGNOTO dances a few more seconds, then sighs and falls to the ground in a heap)*

*DRUMBEATS STOP*

IGNOTO

It's no use. I'm exhausted. In this heat, and on an empty stomach, it's impossible. I couldn't dance another second.

RIEN

It's a miracle.

IGNOTO

What did you say?

RIEN

*(Perturbed)* Very well. But at least you can dance if you need to. And you will need to. Villagers, no matter how happy they are to see us, will expect it.

IGNOTO

*(Mops his brow)* And if we don't?

RIEN

Pardon me?

IGNOTO

If I don't?

RIEN

It is viewed as a transgression. It can elicit a brutal response.

IGNOTO

Oh my. That isn't what happened to your father, is it? To everyone who preceded us here?

RIEN

You know very well it wasn't. It could have been. But those people, those brave census-takers, had the good sense to dance. And dance they did. *(Beat)* It was only after they left the village that they died.

*(RIEN glares at IGNOTO)*

IGNOTO

I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect. *(Beat)* If it comes down to it, believe me, I'll dance.

RIEN

I know. I know.

*(A slight pause)*

IGNOTO

I think I have recovered sufficiently now. We really should be on our way.

*(THEY begin walking. RIEN removes a handkerchief from HIS pocket, and a piece of paper falls to the ground. IGNOTO, behind him, picks it up)*

*What's this?*

*(RIEN grabs the paper, begins to smile)*

RIEN

A little something the sandstorm didn't get. *(HE looks at the map)* From what I can tell, there is a village in another hour. Maybe two.

IGNOTO

*(HE consults the map)* You seem unsure.

RIEN

I'm doing my best. We're lucky to have a map at all, even one this tattered. It could just as easily have been blown away with everything else.

IGNOTO

God was smiling, wasn't he?

RIEN

Is that what you think?

IGNOTO

Maybe. *(beat)* Or smirking.

RIEN

*(Studying map)* It's difficult to read this, but I do believe, if we stay on course, we will reach a village in another hour or two.

*(HE holds up the map for a better view)*

Give or take a sweat stain.

IGNOTO

*(To himself)* Smirking. I'm sure of it.

*(THEY begin walking. Suddenly, THEY see something in the distance. THEY are greatly surprised, then utterly delighted. THEY cannot believe their good fortune)*

RIEN

Ignoto, do you see what I see?

IGNOTO

*(HE rubs HIS eyes in disbelief)* Do you think it's real?

RIEN

Aren't we both seeing it? *(Slight pause, then in a whisper)* Be very quiet. Maybe we can sneak up on it.

*(THEY begin moving very slowly, almost in slow motion, on tiptoe)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE SEVEN

*(A brief, wordless scene. Around a glowing campfire, IGNOTO and RIEN gnaw ravenously on some bones. THEY are totally absorbed in eating. THEY make primal sounds and gestures. THEY look around suspiciously, as wild dogs might do when eating prey)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE EIGHT

*(Later, as before, around the campfire)*

IGNOTO

*(Pointing in the distance)* What a wonderful sight! I've never seen sand dunes so large. So white. They're almost too bright to look at.

RIEN

Beautiful, aren't they? I read about these dunes in my father's dispatches. He was quite taken with them.

IGNOTO

I can see why. *(beat)* Incredible!

*(A slight pause)*

RIEN

Feeling better now? *(Beat)* You see, this is but one more benefit in our line of work. Do you realize how few people ever see dunes like this? Don't you feel fortunate?

IGNOTO

*(Distantly)* I guess.

*(IGNOTO, watching the dunes, seems to be having some private vision)*

*(RIEN reaches over, squeezes IGNOTO'S arm)*

RIEN

Ignoto, are you okay?

IGNOTO

I'm sorry. I must have been daydreaming. I was thinking about the dunes.

RIEN

I know.

IGNOTO

Their color, and, for a moment...

RIEN

Go on.

IGNOTO

I saw something else. I still see it, in fact.

RIEN

Well? What do you see?

IGNOTO

*(Expansively)* Meringue!

RIEN

What is it?

IGNOTO

Meringue. *(beat)* The largest bowl of meringue in the world. So white, so fluffy. *(beat)* Just exquisite.

RIEN

*(Flatly)* Meringue.

IGNOTO

Yes. *(beat)* Don't you see it?

RIEN

*(Looking at the dunes)* Honestly?

*( A slight pause)*

No, I don't. At all. *(beat)* But do you know what I see? I see an old mistress of mine. Her thighs were that same color. So silky. Smooth. Ah, yes. White heaven. That's the only way to describe her thighs.

IGNOTO

Another mistress? *(Beat)* What about your wife, Rien? You never talk about her.

RIEN

*(Angrily)* What about my wife? What are you insinuating?

IGNOTO

Nothing at all. But you never talk about your wife. Never mention her at all. All you do is talk about your mistresses.

RIEN

For your information, I have a very beautiful wife. She is the mother of my son, thank you. I love my wife. There's not another woman in the world I would rather be married to. *(beat)* But a wife is not the same thing as a mistress, Ignoto. Don't you know that?

IGNOTO

*(Breezily)* Of course I know that.

RIEN

I would hope so. (*A slight pause, then HE gestures again*) No, these dunes, these are mistress dunes.

IGNOTO

Maybe for you. (*beat*) But it's different for me. I want to run to them. Roll in them.

RIEN

So do I!

IGNOTO

Then why don't we?

RIEN

Because it's not like you imagine.

IGNOTO

I think it would be.

RIEN

(*Shakes his head*) No. Taste it. Go on.

IGNOTO

What do you mean?

RIEN

(*HE points to ground*) Taste your meringue. You'll see.

IGNOTO

(*Looking at the ground*) But here, it's only sand. I can see it. Out there, it's different. Out there, it's meringue!

RIEN

It's not. Believe me.

IGNOTO

But it could be.

RIEN

It's all in your mind. *(beat)* Or your stomach.

*(IGNOTO begins to say something, but instead HE stands up and begins to run towards the dunes. RIEN stands and calls after HIM.)*

RIEN

Come back, Ignoto! Come back! You'll get lost! Ignoto!

*(IGNOTO runs offstage. A few moments later, HE returns, looking rather sheepish, HE wipes HIS face and spits sand)*

IGNOTO

You were right about it, you know. *(beat)* The meringue.

RIEN

*(HE motions for IGNOTO to sit)* Have a seat, Ignoto. Let's talk this over.

*(THEY sit down beside each other. RIEN puts HIS arm around IGNOTO'S shoulder, in an almost fatherly fashion)*

RIEN

How long has it been this bad, friend? *(Beat)* You can tell me.

IGNOTO

I don't know what you mean.

RIEN

I think you do. Your problem with food?

IGNOTO

Oh, that. I told you before. Food is my life. When I'm not eating, I'm thinking about eating. When I'm asleep, I dream about eating.

RIEN

*(Gently)* Ignoto, have you ever known a woman?

IGNOTO

I've known many, yes.

RIEN

Good. But have you ever been with a woman?

IGNOTO

Well, not exactly.

RIEN

I mean just that. Exactly. *(slight pause)* So, you haven't?

IGNOTO

No. *(beat)* I've never had time.

*(IGNOTO moves a few feet away from RIEN)*

RIEN

*(Incredulous)* Never had the time? In your entire life? For this?

*(HE waves HIS hand toward the dunes)*

For a thigh?

IGNOTO

*(Defensively)* I had other interests.

RIEN

Like what?

IGNOTO

Well, my postcard collection, for one. It has taken many years, but I have a wonderful collection. It might be worth quite a bit of money.

RIEN

Yes, I'm understanding you better all the time. *(beat)* Postcards. *(a slight pause)* There was always time for food, wasn't there?

*(IGNOTO doesn't answer)*

Wasn't there?

IGNOTO

Don't ridicule me.

RIEN

I'm not. I find it amazing, that's all.

IGNOTO

And what about you? *(HE points to dunes)* Your milky thighs? *(Beat)* Good heaven, Rien. Do you think I like hearing about all that? Do you? Well, I don't! In fact, I'm getting very tired of it.

*(A pause)*

RIEN

Let's just forget it. What does it matter now? *(Beat)* It's just that, now that my stomach's full, I was thinking about a bit of sex. You know, before taking a nap? A bit of sex, yes.

IGNOTO

I'm pretty full myself. But I was thinking I might have some room for dessert. Before I take a nap.

RIEN

That's just the way I see it. *(beat)* You know, we're not so far apart.

IGNOTO

Maybe we're not. After all.

*(A pause while THEY stare at the dunes)*

RIEN

Lovely, lovely thighs.

IGNOTO

Yes. *(beat)* But covered with meringue.

*(THEY look at each other and smile)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE NINE

*(Later. The desert. Daytime. IGNOTO and RIEN come walking, looking rather the worse for wear.)*

RIEN

Only a little more now.

IGNOTO

*(Not looking up)* What?

RIEN

I said, only a little more now. Then we can rest.

IGNOTO

*(HE stops)* Here. Let's stop here, Rien. I might drop.

RIEN

Here?

IGNOTO

If not, I may drop just the same. No more now, please.

*(IGNOTO plops down, exhausted)*

RIEN

*(HE also plops down)* Very well.

*(IGNOTO, on his knees, paddles over to RIEN, kicking sand everywhere. THEY sit, back to back)*

IGNOTO

Ah.

RIEN

Yes.

IGNOTO

*(More expansively)* AH!

RIEN

This is nice enough.

IGNOTO

You know, I never imagined how exhausting this would be. Physically, of course. But emotionally, too. Spirit stuff. It's hard to grasp.

*(IGNOTO takes a small sip from the canteen, then passes it on to RIEN)*

RIEN

And no amount of training can prepare you for it. The step after step of it. *(beat)* Let's enjoy our rest, then...

IGNOTO

Then?

RIEN

We'll need to move on. Continue our work.

*(A pause. THEY rest.)*

IGNOTO

Rien? Why?

RIEN

What do you mean, why?

IGNOTO

Why should we continue? Can you give me one good reason?

RIEN

I'm not so sure. Oh, it's a flimsy kind of hope, but I do hope for another village.

IGNOTO

Please, not another one. I'm still getting over the last one. *(beat)* Where is this new village?

RIEN

*(HE points in the distance)* Between here and there.

IGNOTO

*(HE looks in the distance)* Here, I know. I can see it. Feel it. *(HE kicks the sand)* But there? Where is there?

RIEN

What would you like me to tell you? Between here and the moon? It could be. You know as much as I do.

*(A pause) THEY are too exhausted to argue)*

IGNOTO

It won't be long now, will it?

RIEN

*(HE shakes his head)* No.

IGNOTO

I must be some kind of fool. I've been hoping this would go on and on. This counting. This walk of ours. Oh yes, I've been a fool all along.

RIEN

Maybe it can go on a little longer. Maybe there is another village. Who knows?

IGNOTO

Not so long ago, I would have wanted that.

RIEN

*(Consults the map)* Maybe there is, and no one recorded it.

IGNOTO

*(Looking at map)* Maybe it's hidden under one of your famous sweat stains.

RIEN

Could be. The possibility exists.

IGNOTO

*(Sighs)* If there is another village, if one truly exists, I hope it's one with people. With life. *(slight pause)* What was the name of the village we just left?

RIEN

Huzuni. The village of Huzuni.

*(Suddenly, the sound of several large birds nearby. IGNOTO and RIEN hear the sounds, but choose to ignore them)*

IGNOTO

Are you sure about that?

RIEN

*(Perturbed)* Fairly certain, yes. My father sent me a dispatch from Huzuni. Obviously in better times for all concerned. *(beat)* My father never lied in his dispatches, Ignoto.

IGNOTO

Did I say your father was a liar? Did I? Well, I didn't. I only meant that I never saw a sign announcing the village. And no population sign either. A census-taker watches for these things. *(beat)* What did you call it?

RIEN

*(Forcefully)* Huzuni!

IGNOTO

No sign at all. I would have remembered that.

*(A pause. IGNOTO begins counting HIS fingers)*

RIEN

Tell me, Ignoto. How is your stomach?

IGNOTO

Maybe we only thought it was Huzuni. Maybe it didn't have a name. Maybe the Huzuni your father described is still to come. Ahead of us. Or...

RIEN

*(Interrupts, holds HIS stomach in pain)* Because my own stomach doesn't feel too well. I was wondering if your stomach felt the same way.

IGNOTO

It's not wrong to hope for a village with life, is it? Of course not. A village with people to count. A census requires living people. How do we count if there's no one there?

RIEN

*(Suddenly, in a panic)* I might get sick!

IGNOTO

Hand me that map.

RIEN

*(Holding HIS stomach, RIEN hands over the map)* Here. Maybe you can make better sense of it than I can.

IGNOTO

*(HE studies the map)* I doubt if we could make sense of this together. It's almost completely faded out. All I can be certain of are the places where you've sweated. *(HE holds the map out)* You've covered most of the continent, it seems.

RIEN

So, how are you feeling?

IGNOTO

It's quite possible that the village we saw was something else besides Huzuni.

RIEN

*(HE holds HIS stomach, rocks back and forth in distress)* Oh, my.

IGNOTO

We just thought it was Huzuni. Maybe things are looking up after all.

RIEN

*(Hurriedly, in distress)* All of a sudden, I'm feeling very bad. And getting worse. *(Beat)* Still, isn't nausea preferable to hunger? I guess it's a judgment call.

IGNOTO

*(HE finally looks at RIEN)* It could be conscience. Have you thought of that? Remorse?

*(RIEN, holding HIS stomach, doesn't reply)*

Survival can make us feel guilty, can't it? Isn't it all relative?

RIEN

To what?

IGNOTO

To not surviving? To being dead?

RIEN

I don't know. I can't think very well right now.

IGNOTO

*(Folds the map, puts it in HIS pocket)* You've read all your father's dispatches. Did he ever discuss this sort of thing? I'm speaking of diet now. Diet and ethics.

RIEN

*(In great difficulty)* Yes, I've read them all. He didn't mention eating. Very little talk of food. Of course, they probably didn't lose all their food and supplies, like we did. They had all they wanted.

IGNOTO

They were lucky men.

RIEN

For a time, yes. To a point.

IGNOTO

That's true. For a few hours more. Another day. It still comes down to time, doesn't it? Less or more.

RIEN

*(HE gasps)* Oh...

IGNOTO

Yes?

RIEN

Please, excuse me.

*(Quickly, RIEN runs offstage. HE can be heard vomiting)*

IGNOTO

Oh my. *(Calls to RIEN)* Can I be of help, my good man?

*(RIEN, writhing, doesn't respond)*

*(Louder)* I'm here to help.

*(RIEN doesn't answer. IGNOTO begins to hold HIS own stomach)*

IGNOTO

This is certainly a disconcerting feeling. But, if I vomit, I know I'll be hungry again. Hungrier than before, probably.

*(RIEN, finished being sick, returns and sits down)*

Feeling better?

RIEN

After a fashion. *(Beat)* Terribly sorry about all that.

IGNOTO

Don't apologize. It could just as well be me, you know. In fact, it might still be.

RIEN

For your sake, I hope not. It will just make you hungry all over again.

IGNOTO

Yes, I'm afraid so.

RIEN

*(HE holds his stomach again)* Very hungry.

*(A slight pause)*

IGNOTO

Rien, did the last census team make it as far as Huzuni?

RIEN

They must have. You saw the blankets there, the same as me.

IGNOTO

Stacks of them, yes. Untouched blankets. But what about the food?

RIEN

I don't know. Gone. *(beat)* But at least we know the blankets arrived. That supply brigade was doing its job. That must count for something.

*(IGNOTO counts feverishly on HIS fingers, then stops)*

IGNOTO

Everything counts, yes. We know they accomplished their mission.

*(HE resumes counting, then takes a small ledger from HIS pocket. HE stands, adopts a rather official demeanor)*

RIEN

How will you record it?

IGNOTO

The village of Huzuni?

RIEN

Right.

IGNOTO

For the census. Is that what you mean?

RIEN

That is what we're doing here, isn't it?

IGNOTO

Of course it is. *(beat)* I shall now record the village of Huzuni. *(To RIEN)* Though it might be a presumption, I'll have to go with it. *(HE begins writing in the ledger)* Huzuni, fifty-four blankets. *(HE finishes writing with a flourish)*

*(A slight pause)*

RIEN

*(Puzzled)* Fifty-four blankets?

IGNOTO

Isn't that what I said?

RIEN

Yes. But will you count blankets as people?

IGNOTO

*(HE puts ledger at HIS side)* Aren't we census-takers? Isn't it our duty to count?

RIEN

No doubt about it. But we should count people, Ignoto. Not blankets.

IGNOTO

I ask you, how can we count people if there aren't any to count? *(Beat)* An empty village, empty for what seems like a long time. Years and years. Still, the chance always exists that the people will return. It could happen.

RIEN

They might come back someday, yes. But how many people will you record for Huzuni? That's what I want to know.

IGNOTO

Listen to me, Rien. If I put a zero on the page, you know what it would mean, don't you?

RIEN

It would mean that Huzuni no longer exists. Even officially.

IGNOTO

Precisely. And it must exist, if only officially. If not, it might signal a trend. Other villages would suffer the same fate. Which, it goes without saying, would make our work unnecessary. Think of the census-takers of the future, Rien. Some of them are just babies. Think of your own son. Could I take away their livelihood? Never! No, Huzuni exists, I tell you.

*(IGNOTO begins counting HIS fingers again)*

RIEN

You are a man of vision, Ignoto. Truly.

IGNOTO

*(HE takes a small bow)* Thank you.

*(A pause)*

RIEN

Still, how many people can you count in a deserted village?

IGNOTO

*(HE scribbles in the ledger)* Two hundred and sixteen residents in the village of Huzuni.

RIEN

Yes, that sounds right. *(beat)* But why that specific number? Two hundred and ...

IGNOTO

Sixteen. *(beat)* What do you want from me? Certainty? My God, Rien. There isn't any! The last three census teams recorded the very same population for Huzuni. No decline, no increase. No change at all.

RIEN

Because ...

IGNOTO

Because no one has lived in Huzuni for at least forty years. All a census-taker can do in this kind of situation is estimate. Go by old records. Count blankets, one to a family of four. That's regulation. Four to a blanket. There's no getting around regulation. Four to a blanket.

RIEN

In a village where no people exist.

IGNOTO

But where they might exist again. Look, I know it's a teetering kind of logic, but it's the only way to go. If something should happen, if the villagers return, their blankets will be waiting for them.

RIEN

And we will have done our part.

IGNOTO

*(HE closes the ledger)* Precisely.

*(A pause)*

RIEN

Excuse me, but I'm going to be sick again.

*(RIEN stands and runs offstage again)*

IGNOTO

*(HE holds HIS stomach as a wave of nausea comes on)*  
This may do it for me this time too.

*(A few moments later, RIEN returns and sits again)*

RIEN

Terribly sorry. I'm becoming a broken record with this stuff.

IGNOTO

Don't apologize. It's... Oh! Oh!

*(IGNOTO runs to a different place, only a few feet away, and vomits. When HE finishes, HE covers it with sand like a cat)*

RIEN

*(Watching)* Indeed.

*(IGNOTO returns, sits again)*

Better now?

IGNOTO

*(Embarrassed)* I hardly know what to say.

RIEN

I understand. Completely. I think I understood before you. Being sick first, you know.

*(A pause)*

IGNOTO

Rien?

RIEN

Yes?

IGNOTO

Had you ever eaten a dog before?

*(RIEN, looking at the ground, shakes HIS head)*

Nor had I. And it troubles me. That we did. I wish I could rationalize it somehow. That the dog's flesh could keep us going, at least a while longer? So we could finish the census? Yes, that's what I mean. That the dog didn't die in vain.

RIEN

I'm having the same thoughts.

IGNOTO

Good. Then we agree?

RIEN

I guess so. *(beat)* But it was grotesque. Killing a dog for its meat.

IGNOTO

Stringy meat at best. I don't know what I was expecting. For it to taste like chicken?

RIEN

It really bothers me.

IGNOTO

You know, it took every bit of my concentration to eat that dog. I kept thinking about it, the chewing itself. Never in my life had mastication been a terrible word. Never.

RIEN

Yes, that would be especially hard for you.

IGNOTO

Something else worries me too, now that it's done. When we were eating that poor mongrel, I started to think about its dreams.

RIEN

Dreams?

IGNOTO

Dog dreams. *(A slight pause)* Will I inherit them?

*(RIEN doesn't answer)*

Tell me! Will I have dog dreams now?

RIEN

*(Quietly)* Maybe dog dreams would be preferable to the ones you have now.

IGNOTO

*(Considers this, then brightly)* I hadn't thought of it that way. Maybe you're right.

RIEN

Black and white.

IGNOTO

What's that?

RIEN

Black and white. Our dreams will be in black and white. You know dogs don't dream in color, don't you?

IGNOTO

Really? *(Beat)* I guess I knew that. In its own way, that's good. If I dream in color, I'll know I'm having my very own personal dream. If I dream in black and white, I'll know I'm having one of the dog's dreams. I can live with that.

RIEN

*(Looks hard at IGNOTO)* Can you?

IGNOTO

For a while longer, I mean.

RIEN

Right.

*(A slight pause)*

IGNOTO

*(Mostly to HIMSELF)* Seven, eight. Day is late.

RIEN

What does that mean?

IGNOTO

Only that it is late. It will be dark soon.

RIEN

I know. *(beat)* I know.  
*LIGHTS BEGIN DIMMING*

IGNOTO

Too soon.

RIEN

I know.

(Suddenly, the shrieks of large birds nearby)

BLACKOUT

SCENE TEN

*(A scene without words. IGNOTO and RIEN are sitting, drinking from the canteen. It's empty. THEY pass it back and forth in silence, maybe pretending there is something left. Finally, RIEN throws it away)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE ELEVEN

*(A scene without words. Later. A dim light. RIEN and IGNOTO walking, much slower than before. Exhausted. IGNOTO picks up a reed from the ground and tries to gnaw on it. RIEN, walking ahead, looks back, watches. RIEN then walks back and slaps the reed from IGNOTO'S hands, shakes HIS head to indicate that THEY need to keep walking. THEY continue walking)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE TWELVE

*(A scene without words. Later. Dusk. RIEN, centerstage is crawling on HIS hands and knees. HE collapses, writhes in the sand. IGNOTO stands behind HIM, watches. IGNOTO is crying. Finally HE regains his composure and bends over to help RIEN up. THEY look around, unsure in which direction to go. Finally, THEY continue walking, very slowly)*

BLACKOUT

SCENE THIRTEEN

*(Late. Night. A vague moonlight. Centerstage, an extinguished campfire. Around it, IGNOTO and RIEN, asleep)*

*(SOUND OF FIERCE BIRD SHRIEKS VERY CLOSE BY)*

*(IGNOTO'S sleep is troubled. HE tosses and turns, begins moaning. Finally, HE begins screaming. This continues until RIEN wakes. Momentarily dazed, RIEN then realizes that the screams are coming from IGNOTO. HE crawls over to IGNOTO and tries to rouse HIM)*

RIEN

Ignoto! Ignoto!

*(RIEN shakes IGNOTO, who continues to scream. IGNOTO tries to push RIEN away. The more RIEN tries to help, the more agitated IGNOTO becomes. Desperate, frightened screams. Finally, RIEN slaps IGNOTO hard across the face. IGNOTO awakens)*

WAKE UP! IT'S ME, IGNOTO! YOU'RE DREAMING! IT'S ME, IGNOTO!

IGNOTO

*(Coming to)* Is it you, Rien?

RIEN

It's me.

IGNOTO

*(HE sits up, rubs HIS eyes)* I couldn't be sure. I saw so many things.

*(HE feels HIS face, still stinging from RIEN'S slap)*

I was on fire, I tell you. On fire.

RIEN

You were having a nightmare. Come, Ignoto. Sit by the fire.

*(RIEN moves next to the campfire. IGNOTO follows suit)*

IGNOTO

It's good to be awake.

RIEN

Is it?

IGNOTO

I had a terrible dream. I dreamed I was being smothered by hundreds of blankets. Each of them was on fire.

RIEN

Sand fever. Everyone gets it sooner or later. I was hoping we would get it later. *(beat)* But I guess it is later.

*(IGNOTO, shivering, leans over the campfire)*

IGNOTO

It's so cold. Has the fire gone out?

RIEN

*(Pokes at the ashes without success)* There must be a spark alive somewhere.

*(HE stirs the ashes some more)* One spark, that's all we need. One spark is enough.

IGNOTO

*(Brittle hope)* One spark. One spark. Is that too much to ask?

RIEN

*(Scatters the ashes in resignation)* That's it. It's dead. *(beat)* And that was the end of our matches.

IGNOTO

All gone? No more fire?

*(RIEN shakes his head)*

That does it for me! No fire. No way to keep warm. I can't take it any longer. I'm leaving! I'm going home!

*(IGNOTO stands, begins to walk away)*

I've had enough of this! I'm going crazy!

*(As IGNOTO tries to leave, RIEN goes after HIM. HE grabs IGNOTO to prevent HIM from leaving. THEY fight. IGNOTO tries to push RIEN away. THEY wrestle to the ground. IGNOTO breaks free, starts to run)*

RIEN

Stop!

IGNOTO

I've made up my mind. I was crazy to come here.

*(RIEN runs ahead of IGNOTO and confronts HIM)*

RIEN

Crazy to think you can leave. Where do you think you're going?

IGNOTO

Home. Isn't that what I said? Away from this godforsaken place! I can't take it!

*(RIEN slaps IGNOTO several times in quick succession)*

RIEN

Listen to me! You can't go home. You don't know where it is. *(beat)* Tell me, which way is home? Can you tell me that?

*(IGNOTO, in tears, looks around wildly. HE has no idea)*

See? You leave here, and you'll die somewhere out there. Alone.

IGNOTO

*(Nearly hysterical)* What does it matter? We're going to die anyway!

*(IGNOTO breaks into a run again, this time in the opposite direction)*

RIEN

IGNOTO!

*(RIEN runs after IGNOTO again, tackling HIM. THEY struggle, end up on the ground, breathing hard and spitting sand)*

IGNOTO

*(Angrily)* What do you want from me? Just let me go.

RIEN

If you leave, I'll be alone. You die alone, and I die alone too.

IGNOTO

So?

RIEN

Aren't we a team, Ignoto? Have you forgotten that? Aren't we census-takers? Aren't we?

IGNOTO

*(Quietly)* I guess.

RIEN

What?

IGNOTO

*(Louder)* I guess.

RIEN

Good. Remember that. We have a job to do. This is our mission. No matter what. *(beat)* We gave our word.

IGNOTO

*(HE sits up, quite ashamed)* Yes, we did, didn't we? *(Beat)* I'm sorry. *(slight pause)* My dream upset me terribly. I dreamed about blankets on fire. And I also dreamed that we were walking on a road. Between villages, I think. Then, we started seeing things.

RIEN

*(Warily)* Things?

IGNOTO

Grotesque things. On the road. So many of them, we tripped over them. We had to watch where we stepped. Walk around them as best we could.

RIEN

But, what kinds of things?

IGNOTO

That's just it. We didn't know. And we kept seeing them. Stumbling over them. Finally, we realized what they were. Bones. Human bones. A village's worth, at least.

(SOUNDS OF BIRDS SHRIEKING)

RIEN

Bones. Are you sure?

IGNOTO

Oh, yes. Human bones. Oh, we knew it all along, but we didn't want to admit it. To ourselves, you know. We didn't want to recognize them for what they were.

RIEN

*(With resignation)* I see.

*(A slight pause)*

IGNOTO

This isn't news to you, is it?

*(RIEN doesn't answer)*

You know all about the bone business, don't you?

*(RIEN doesn't answer)*

ANSWER ME!

RIEN

Yes. But I thought all that was still a few days away. *(beat)* Ignoto, your dream was in color, wasn't it? Not black and white?

IGNOTO

Color, yes. Why do you ask?

RIEN

Just making sure.

IGNOTO

What does the dream mean?

RIEN

It could mean several things.

IGNOTO

We both know better than that.

RIEN

In my father's last dispatch, he talked about seeing bones. They found them alongside the road, after they left Huzuni.

IGNOTO

What else did he say?

RIEN

Very little. He remained objective, right up until the end. Naturally, I've read that last dispatch many times. Between the lines, you understand.

IGNOTO

And what did you make of it?

RIEN

Not a lot. It's just like you dreamed it. A village's worth of bones. On the road, outside Huzuni. *(beat)* You were dreaming about them, Ignoto. The people who used to live here.

IGNOTO

What happened to them?

RIEN

The birds, Ignoto. The moonbirds. You know that.

IGNOTO

I did, yes. And tried to forget it. *(beat)* So many people.

RIEN

Yes, but there's always more birds.

IGNOTO

There's no getting around them, is there? The moonbirds?

RIEN

*(Quietly)* No. Not a chance.

IGNOTO

I guess I knew that too.

*(IGNOTO stands, stretches, looks at the sky)*

IGNOTO

I know that moon.

RIEN

Do you?

IGNOTO

From my dream. We walked most of the night. We were exhausted, but we couldn't stop. We didn't want to sleep beside someone else's bones. So we kept on walking like that, in the strange moonlight.

*(THEY both stare at the moon)*

Do you know a moon like that, Rien?

*(RIEN doesn't answer)*

Well, I do. Not a pretty sight. A ghost moon. That's what we call it where I come from. The ghost of a one-eyed God, staring.

RIEN

Not smirking?

IGNOTO

Maybe. *(slight pause)* What about you? Do you know a moon like that?

RIEN

I do. Very well. My father tells me that a hazy moon like that is really a sore.

IGNOTO

What?

RIEN

A bedsore. On the body of God. It's pressing through from the other side of heaven.

IGNOTO

But your father is dead. How can he say these things to you?

RIEN

He's dead, sure. But he still talks to me, in my dreams. And do you know what else he says?

*(IGNOTO shakes his head)*

That he is very hungry. And very cold. He comes to me in my sleep, begging for a blanket.

IGNOTO

I see. *(beat)* Why don't you tell him to go to the village of Huzuni? There are more blankets there than he'll ever need.

RIEN

*(Spiteful)* Don't you think he knows that? Don't you think he would go there if he could? *(Slight pause)* He's blind, Ignoto. The moonbirds took care of him.

IGNOTO

He died doing this same census, didn't he?

RIEN

Yes. It goes on and on.

IGNOTO

Strange, how it's never finished. Never.

RIEN

Because someone never stops smirking. And the census here has never been completed. Not even once. It's the birds. They eat a village. They eat the census-takers. They're always hungry.

*(A pause)*

The best thing to do is not to think about it. By the time they come for us, Ignoto, we'll be asleep.

*(RIEN lies down to go to sleep)*

IGNOTO

You really believe that?

RIEN

I'm sure of it. The dead are always asleep. The only time they wake at all is when they go looking for a blanket. *(beat)* If it's any consolation, we'll die of hunger. And after that? It hardly matters. *(Beat)* Now, let's get some rest.

*(THEY both try to get some sleep. Then, IGNOTO sits up again)*

IGNOTO

It's funny. Even if you know something can't be avoided, you still have a way of hoping. It's odd, how hope has a mind of its own.

RIEN

*(Sits up again)* It's better this way. Believe me, we'll be heroes. Martyrs. Maybe even saints.

IGNOTO

I know, but...

RIEN

Why, someday, Ignoto, a school or a library might be named after you.

IGNOTO

Why not a restaurant?

RIEN

It could happen. *(beat)* Or a fountain. Yes, that's it! Imagine coins being thrown into a fountain with your name, in gold plate, on the rim. Each coin a wish in your honor. What could be better than that?

IGNOTO

Well, when you put it that way...

RIEN

We'll be the envy of many. And patron saints for all the census-takers still to come.

IGNOTO

I've wondered about that. Will they send another team to look for us?

RIEN

*(Laughs)* Don't question the pattern of these things. They sent us, didn't they? After my father's team disappeared, looking for the team before them? Hasn't headquarters always been good about sending teams?

IGNOTO

Yes, but...

RIEN

But what?

IGNOTO

What if we're the last team ever?

RIEN

Nonsense. This is much larger than you and me. Or even the birds. The census must continue. Civilization goes on. Oh, maybe we don't know who we are, or where we're going, but at least we'll know how many of us there are.

*(THEY both settled down. It is quiet for a few moments)*

IGNOTO

Rien?

RIEN

Yes?

IGNOTO

There's something I want you to know. No matter what happens.

RIEN

What is it?

IGNOTO

I count you as a friend.

RIEN

*(Sits up)* No more than I count you.

*(RIEN looks at IGNOTO, then turns over to go to sleep. IGNOTO counts silently on HIS fingers. Finally HE is too cold to count)*

IGNOTO

*(Shivering)* It's so cold. So cold.

RIEN

I know.

IGNOTO

If I had been thinking, I would have taken a blanket from Huzuni. Maybe two blankets.

RIEN

No. You couldn't do that.

IGNOTO

Why not? We'd be warm now.

RIEN

You wouldn't want those poor people to be without their blankets. No, someday, when they come back, they'll need those blankets.

IGNOTO

You're right. It's better this way.

RIEN

That's right. *(beat)* Good man. *(beat)* Goodnight.

*(THEY both try to sleep)*

*(Sound of large birds shrieking nearby)*

*(RIEN sits up and, shivering, crawls to the cold fire. HE remembers it is out. HE looks around)*

*LIGHTS BEGIN FADING*

*(RIEN sees IGNOTO and crawls toward HIM. HE lies down beside IGNOTO. THEY are back to back)*

FINAL BLACKOUT