

from the terror of flight
(or the discovery of a nation)

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João da Silva: a Brazilian, every Brazilian, he is all of us... immigrants from the South.

Note on tone and style: The stage should be as bare as possible. No discriminate props or obvious set elements, nothing to indicate place or time. Everything (places, characters, spaces, actions) should be brought to life by the performer playing João da Silva. The exception are moments told in a spotlight, which should be played matter-of-factly. Though this is a solo performance, there are occasional dialogues that should all be played by the same performer and will be indicated by a preceding double backslash: \\.

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Darkness and silence.

Faint moonlight shines on a seemingly empty stage.

Suddenly, a coyote howls. High-pitched barks and yips.

It howls again, a long, piercing, ominous screech that seizes the space.

More barks. Howls. Whimpers. This goes on for a while.

The moonlight slowly intensifies.

Suddenly... a single spotlight on a man centerstage. He is João Santos da Silva.

He speaks...

...Maria de Souza was born on October 17th, 1986. She had two daughters: Olívia and Sílvia. Sílvia died at age 4, run over by a bus in the suburban neighborhood of Bangu, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on a very hot December day in 2019. A few months later, Maria lost her job as a waitress when the restaurant she worked at closed its doors during the first days of the covid-19 pandemic. A few weeks after that, her mother caught the virus. No one knows how. She never left the house. It started with some fever and a little bit of coughing until one night she woke up covered in sweat and unable to breathe. Maria left Olívia, now eight years old, with a neighbor, called an Uber and went to the nearest hospital, Hospital Municipal Albert Schweitzer. Albert Schweitzer was a French Theologist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. A portrait of him with the Nobel Medal stands on the entrance hall of the Brazilian hospital that bears his name. It was under his imperious gaze that Maria de Souza's mother suffocated to death while waiting for care. The hospital was full, the nurses overwhelmed, the doctors jaded. Every day, two thousand people were dying all over Brazil. In Rio, over three thousand people were getting infected daily. People were suffocating in the streets, their lungs ravaged by the still barely known virus. A man named Jair Bolsonaro called it a little flu. At a news conference, he mimicked asphyxiation, mocking those whose last breaths happened at crowded hospital corridors. "I'm not a gravedigger!" he yelled at journalists. He was also the democratically elected President of Brazil. Maria was at a public office getting her mother's death certificate when a TV report came up on an old TV tucked away inside a little metal box. A journalist asked Bolsonaro for a message to those who had lost loved ones to the disease. She walked out as soon as he yelled "People die, so what!?"

That day, she decided. She was going to leave Brazil.

She would raise Olívia somewhere else. It took her a while. Weeks. Months. Years. She worked as a cleaning lady. She sold cakes in the streets. She cleaned cars and washed dishes and collected empty beer cans at Ipanema Beach. But she saved enough money. Until one day, Maria announced it: *tamo indo!*

\\Pra onde?

\\Embora!

\\Embora?

\\Pra América!

Olívia had heard of the United States of America. Estados Unidos. She had seen it in movies. It looked beautiful, full of happy, safe, healthy, normal people. She smiled. She would miss her friends, her house, her street. But she would make new friends. Find a new house. Walk new streets. They packed. A week later, they were sitting side by side on an airplane headed to Mexico City. It was their first time on a plane. They huddled together as they watched the clouds from above. To Olívia, it was nothing but a sea of cotton-candy... as familiar as sticky hands and sweetness melting in her tongue. To Maria, it felt alien, an omen made of floating water. Soon, the plane touched ground and neither a girl's imagination or a woman's disquiet kept them from moving forward, through immigration to a cab and onto a crowded bus that left the Terminal de Autobuses de Pasajeros de Oriente on its way to Tijuana.

The trip wasn't fun. Men stared at them funny. Olívia cried. She was hungry. She was dirty. She was tired.

In Tijuana, they met Julio. A coyote. They had never heard of coyotes before, animal nor human. Maria paid him 2.000 dollars, and left their humble motel in Tijuana and got on a van. In the dark, Maria held Olívia close, trying to convince herself that whatever dangers lay ahead were better than the ones left behind. They traveled for twelve hours and eighteen minutes. To Maria and Olívia, though, numbers like that lost all meaning. The sound of tires against asphalt, the smell of tequila ingrained in the upholstery, the flickering headlights revealing the road ahead, the awareness of eyes preying on them in the darkness... *that* marked the passing of time.

On a starless night, they started their journey across the Sonora Desert towards Arizona. The moon was bright. In the distance, Olívia heard howling.

\\Que que foi isso?

\\Es un coiote, chica tonta!

They walked for five days. Julio got lost but wouldn't admit it. They soon ran out of food, then out of water. During the day, they huddled together under tiny trees and bushes, trying to escape the scorching sun. At night, they walked endlessly and without aim. One foot ahead of the other and eyes that couldn't be raised high enough to see the moon. Always ahead, staring at fleeting footprints left by the person in front of you, the dirt rising and falling in a hurry. Julio had a cellphone, but no service. María held Olívia close, her eyes scanning the horizon... looking for lights.

Somewhere in that darkness.

No meio daquela escuridão imensa.

Lights. Luz.

Help. Ajuda.

Life.

Algum sinal de vida.

America.

That same day, I, João Santos da Silva, am flying over the Amazon Forest on LATAM Flight LA5634 from Guarulhos International Airport in São Paulo, destination Benito Juárez International Airport, Mexico City.

(The spotlight goes away. The whole stage is lit. João is in an airplane)

I press my face against the window, trying to look out. The Amazon. I want to see it. That huge tide of trees, rising and falling against a soil so ancient you could write history with its clay. This is my last chance to see it.

But nothing, darkness.

The tiny TV is playing Friends. The One Where Ross and Rachel Take a Break. Fuck Ross, right? Anyway, I'm sure I can change the channel somehow, but I'm afraid to ask for help. The LATAM flight attendants are not very nice and I'm a bit... apprehensive. So far I'm still legal, you see. I'm just a guy travelling from Brazil to Mexico. But I know Mexico is not my final destination. I know what I'll do next. And I'm constantly afraid that other people know it too. That they take a quick look at my face and know what I'm about to do. So, I don't ask for help. I don't even get up... not even later, when I make the mistake of gulping down an entire can of Coca-Cola with dinner. My bladder is tiny.

And I *really* have to pee. But... I'm afraid.

You see, in my mind, I'm already crossing the border illegally. It's stamped on my forehead. I doubt anyone on this flight cares, but I already feel... unwelcomed... afraid to be seen, to be noticed. I'm already having to learn the tricks of invisibility. So, even though my bladder is tiny and a can of Coca-Cola has 355 milliliters, I don't have the guts to get up again.

But my bladder is soooooo tiny! And 355 milliliters doesn't sound like a lot, but it is. It fucking is!

(wiggles in his seat, almost in pain)

It's fine. I look at the map on the tiny TV. We've left Brazil behind. We are flying over Panama now. I just have to make it through Costa Rica, then Nicaragua, then El Salvador, then Guatemala, then Chiapas, then Oxaca, then Puebla, and then I don't even remember landing because I just got up, grabbed my bag, and ran out of that plane and into the nearest bathroom I could find.

(pees a long, wonderful, relieving pee)

Put a que pariu! I really did think my bladder would explode... But I survived! I peed!!

I leave that airport bathroom feeling like a new man. Strong. Corajoso. Ready to take on whatever lies ahead. That energy serves me well when I find myself facing the immigration officer who doesn't understand a single word of what I'm saying in my perfect Portuguese.

\\Yo estou en aquí para el passear en as playas de Mexico.

\\Cual es el propósito de su viaje, señor?

\\Yo me gusta mucho el playa e eu estoy a la aquí para poder aproveitarme das playas muito lindas em Mexico.

\\Qué playa?

\\Las playas! Playas!? PLAYAS?!

\\Si, playas, playas... pero qué playa, señor?

This goes on for a while, and soon the guy just gets tired of my face and stamps my passport, and... I'm free to go. Funny thing is I never see one beach the whole time I'm in Mexico, not even later, when I'm there for a bit longer, but we'll get to that.

My first time in Mexico is basically me inside of a bus, just watching everything through smudged windows. A country thorough a 3X8 piece of polycarbonate, all the way from Ciudad del Mexico to Tijuana.

In Tijuana, I meet a coyote named Marcos, and he has a crazy plan. See, no dangerous desert crossing with Marcos. No chance of becoming coyote dinner. He is a different kind of coyote, this Marcos. The plan is to get us to a crossing somewhere near Yuma, Arizona, where we will walk across this small river and surrender ourselves to US authorities. Yes, surrender. What happens is they take you to a Border Patrol Processing Center. There, you claim political asylum. And that's it! Border Patrol will process you and release you into the United States of America! You have to show up to court later, you know, to hear if you have been granted asylum or not. Most people are denied, but the thing is, once you're released, you're free to go anywhere you want in the US.

And then I will go to the nearest bus station and buy a ticket to take me all the way to *Massachusetts*.

(stares ahead, dreamingly)

That's the plan. That's what Marcos promises me and a group of about twelve other people. It starts off well. The van we take from Tijuana to the border has tiny windows, but the view... the desert! We travel all day long. And when the sun finally sets on the desert horizon it coats the clouds and sky in this beautiful orange, and it all becomes one...

...clouds and sand all glimmering golden under the light...

It reminds me of the beaches in Rio during summer, when the sun rises over the ocean even before 6AM, the city already coming to life, millions of people crammed into buses making long journeys to jobs they hate. I remember pressing my head against those large bus windows, feeling the cool glass warm up under the heat of those first rays, watching the light turn the waves golden as they crashed over the white sand... It was the only time the city was silent.

(beat, enjoys the silence)

But silence is the one thing you won't find in this fucking van, let me tell you. People have been chatting away all day long, like they're Oprah interviewing someone from the Royal Family or some shit, these ladies from El Salvador suddenly all interested about life in Guatemala, these young kids from Venezuela and Nicaragua fighting about soccer teams that won't ever play each other, this older woman who - I swear to God and I hate the cliché but it's true - is holding on to a chicken she keeps talking to, and this one older Asian man crying and crying about something none of us can understand, but when the Sun reaches the horizon and makes that line disappear, everyone finally just... shuts up and watches.

(stands there in awe, watching the horizon)

For a moment, people aren't afraid of silence anymore. For a moment, it's OK to just let the air float there for a while, unbothered.

But soon it's dark and we have to make a pitstop in the middle of the highway so people can pee and stretch their legs and stuff...

...and immediately...

...the old woman loses her chicken. In the middle of the fucking road. Somewhere in northern Mexico. Pitch dark. She starts screaming.

\\Yolanda! Yolanda!

People are peeing all around, woman squatting near bushes and the men standing near the road... and this old woman... running around like crazy, looking for her damn chicken.

\\Donde estás, Yolanda?!

After a couple of minutes, everyone is ready to go but we can't, because the old woman still hasn't found Yolanda. She runs farther and farther into the desert.

\\Yolanda! Regresa a mi!

People are pissed. The middle of a Mexican highway at midnight is not a safe place to hang around looking for a merda de uma galinha!

\\Leave her!

\\The chicken?

\\A velha!

\\We can't leave her!

\\Then leave the chicken and grab the old woman!

\\She loves her chicken. She's had it for sixteen years!

\\Sixteen fucking years? Caralho...

(beat, in awe)

\\We need to find this chicken!

And so, all of us grab our cellphones and turn on our flashlights and scour that desert highway looking for damn Yolanda! The oldest chicken in the world!

(turns on flashlight on cellphone and searches)

\\Yolanda! Cadê você, filha da puta? Yolanda!

Luckily, one of the young kids from Guatemala grew up on a chicken farm which gives him, as he tells us, a sixth sense about chickens. Whatever that means. But he does find Yolanda surprisingly fast, pecking away like an idiot near the road. Chicken rescued, we all return to the van and resume our trip...

...only now everyone is quiet. It's either the sheer absurdity of the chicken rescue or how fucking sad it is, but no one is in a mood to talk anymore.

It's barely six in the morning when we arrive at Vicente Guerrero, the small Mexican city that borders Yuma, Arizona. The sunrise is not as beautiful as the sunset, mostly because Vicente Guerrero is one sad little town with its dusty roads and empty houses. Luckily, we are there for only about two hours. We have coffee in a small little padaria, then Marcos tells us to collect our things and we start the walk towards the US. And it really is just a walk. No crossing. No journey. No arduous desert peregrination. Just a twenty-minute stroll towards the Colorado River followed by an easy crossing of its shallow waters, and... America!

(looks around in awe)

Everywhere I look... corn! Rows and rows of corn. Just endless corn. And soon, from the midst of all that corn, a large white SUV arrives. Then another SUV. Then another. Soon we're surrounded by at least a dozen men from Border Patrol with their bored looks and soft bellies and useless guns and an overall deluded sense of superiority.

(looks around, searches for something)

Marco!? Marco?! Somewhere during the river crossing Marco has left us. I didn't even notice. I don't know why I thought he would still be around, but I just want someone to tell us what to do, because these Border Patrol men certainly don't seem to be in the mood to do anything.

The United States, huh? Corn, SUVs and dull, bored looking men.

They look at us. We look at them. This is it. This is our surrender. Some of us raise our hands, but there are no guns being pointed at us. No shouting. Nothing. Mostly, everyone just looks tired. Us and them.

That is our crossing.

Our transmutation... when the Colorado River waters took away more than just the mud in our boots. When it brought forth not just sediments, but a made-up line... not just minerals, but a constitutional alchemy.

But I don't feel it. Not yet.

None of us do. We just stand there and wait. A few of the young Venezuelan kids approach the Border Patrol guys and try to communicate. Some of them know Spanish, in fact, most of them look Latino and yet... there is something so American about the way they just stand there looking at us like...

\\Hey, I was born on this side of the river, OK?

I don't know. Anyway, they tell us they are waiting for a bus or van of some sort to come and pick us up, so we just stand there amidst that endless corn.

I'm... happy? Not *happy* happy, you know? I never met an immigrant that was *happy* happy. It's more like... I'm content. That alchemy... I haven't noticed it yet. Haven't noticed the institutional undoing of my citizenship, the sudden erasure of my political existence, the wheels of bureaucracy ticking the clock back thousands of years to a sort of primordial existence, one I'll be made to relearn... nomadic and unbelonging to the land, to any land.

But, for now, things are going well. I have kind of made it to the US, and yes, so far it has just been corn and dull looking men but hey, I'm sure there's more to this country than that, right? I've seen movies. And if there's one thing I know, is that you can always trust movies, which proves true when a yellow school bus arrives to pick us up and it is E-X-A-C-T-L-Y like all those school buses I had seen in movies growing up, down to the grumpy yet good-hearted driver, who is actually the first person to smile at me in the US. And, as we drive deeper and deeper into Arizona, I get to see that there is more than just corn in the United States. There is wheat, and lettuce, and squash, and hay, and potatoes, and cattle... all around us, for miles... all I can see is just farm after farm after farm after farm... until I finally see actual human life in the form of the YUMA BORDER PATROL PROCESSING CENTER, where we are, well... processed... which means they check our passports, those of us who have them, enter our names in a system of some sort, get our fingerprints, and place us in front of an asylum officer.