

BRAZILIAN **LITERATURE** IN TRANSLATION **#2**



THE SUICIDE'S HEAVEN

RICARDO LÍSIAS

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Translated by Angel Gurría-Quintana

I specialise in collections, but gave away my stamps over ten years ago. I have a single watch, and from my grandparents I inherited a small amount of money and nothing else. I don't keep foreign coins, I don't have shoeboxes full of postcards and I don't catalogue mugs, cigarette packs or key rings. I have a toy Pan Am airplane, but a collection worthy of the name would require, at least, a small fleet.

The decision to give up collections and become a specialist was not made consciously. When I entered university, I had already rid myself of the bottle caps and most of the stamps collected over a few years. I got through my entire undergraduate degree without thinking about collections. Every now and then, a lecturer would say that historians love the dust on documents, and that he had himself spent many hours poring over all sorts of collections. In courses on the history of art, some collectors were always referred to. But beyond that, collections did not interest me much at the time.

It wasn't always like that: during my childhood and adolescence I amassed almost two thousand bottle caps. As for stamps, mandatory for almost anyone who has been obsessed by collecting, I managed to arrange two beautiful albums. I also gathered everything I could find about the football team I liked when I was twelve. In that case, however, I was driven only by passion, which could never be a key element of a serious collector's business.

Nowadays, I don't even watch Brazil's World Cup games.

As a teenager, I loved arranging my bottle caps. They were all grouped by their country of origin and then, in smaller groups, by the drink from which they originated. I basically divided them into soft drinks, which were plentiful, alcoholic drinks and water bottles.

I was proudest of a series of bottle caps with Arabic characters that I had managed to get through a distant relative. I tried to understand what was written on some of them, but since I couldn't I was forced to make an exception in my catalogue and was unable even to classify them by country. As for my three Japanese bottle caps, to this day I don't know if they were from a bottle of water or a soft drink. I never thought they came from beer bottles: a teetotaler gave me the lot.

Twenty-three bottle caps from India were unusual. They were a gift from an aunt who, despite being barely out of her twenties, had suffered an unbearable romantic heartbreak, and after spending a few weeks crying and screaming meaningless words, decided to go find herself in a small town three hours out of New Delhi.

I must have been around fourteen when she went there for the first time. My grandfather tried to maintain some kind of supportive poise and only managed to say over and over that she would change her mind and would come back soon to finish her law degree. The fact that he paid for his disillusioned daughter's airfare remains a sore point between him and my grandmother to this day. Looking back, I think my aunt was last in Brazil some ten years ago. As far as I know, she hardly calls even at Christmas.

About two years ago, I plucked up the courage to ask for the whereabouts of my disillusioned aunt. My grandmother started crying, my mother ate another spoonful of rice while signalling her disapproval with her left hand, and my uncle, always competing with his younger sister, said disdainfully that she was somewhere between southern Russia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan.

He said she spends her time wandering with a group headed by a monk who claims to be the reincarnation of the spirit that controls every living being's emotional side. Not only humans'. At that moment, choking with laughter, my sister almost spat out whatever she was chewing on. I had just ruined our Easter lunch.

I don't find the story funny. I don't believe that monk exists, of course, but I always liked my aunt. Her brother, the joker, unnerves me a bit. When she first returned, I think in 1990 (I can't remember the exact date because, since I started missing everything, I lost the notion of time), I was very impressed by the way in which she gave me the bottle caps she had brought.

For your collection, Ricardo. I can't forget that phrase: for your collection, Ricardo. She gave me the parcel with a far-away gaze. We were all waiting at the airport. She saw us as soon as the arrivals door opened, waved and walked towards us very slowly. My grandmother started crying. My aunt hugged us one by one. Later, if I'm not mistaken, I was the first to get a gift. For your collection, Ricardo.

For someone who loved riding his bicycle, and always felt very intense affections, her gestures seemed too vague. I examined the bottle caps on the way from the airport to my grandfather's house, where we would celebrate her visit.

If I'm not mistaken, my disillusioned aunt returned to Brazil eight years later. We were at the century's end. We didn't see each other: her visit coincided with a difficult post-graduate examination. I was very focused, and when I finally managed to return to São Paulo she had already left.

I never forgot my mother's look of desolation as she told me that her sister, who had become a nun, warned that the world would suffer a great catastrophe, if it did not in fact end at the start of the 21st century.

She never returned to Brazil. Always affectionate, during that second visit she

left me some more bottle caps. But I was already studying to become a specialist and, with the arrogance inherited from my uncle, I threw them out. To study their origin, as any good collector would do, did not even cross my mind.

Since all of that happened, I've come to understand that to feel a longing for the past means, in some ways, to have regrets. I try to remember a few things. Had I not thrown out the bottle caps, for instance, my aunt's phrase would make sense to me today. For your collection, Ricardo.

But I have no more collections.

Last week I went back to the rubbish bin into which I threw some of my bottle caps, the most valuable ones. The others, I left for the bin collector the following morning. I had no hope of finding them: after all, it's been almost twenty years. I think that's right: twenty years. I just looked at the people in the metro station and its environs. And sadly I found nothing that meant anything to me.

My bottle cap collection came to a sad end. The month after I finished secondary school, a little before Christmas, the class got together for a farewell party. It was one of those meetings at which every promises that they will always stay in touch.

I want to see my classmates again. I sought them out on three social networks on the Internet, but since I can't remember their names, I didn't find anyone.

At the party, we would start a new phase of our lives. Naturally, plenty of alcoholic beverages would be available. Today things are different, but back then it took us longer to start drinking.

Because the girls would be there, we anticipated that the evening would lead to the experiences we had fantasised about during our school years. For some reason, probably the last shred of my adolescent pride, I thought that taking my bottle caps would put me in a better position to conquer one of them. That was the plan: seduce them with the best part of my collection.

Today I think such pride demonstrates that I truly have a collector's soul. I will take my bottle caps, the girls will surely be impressed, and I will choose the one with whom to crown the end of my adolescence. I didn't have the slightest doubt.

It didn't work.

All this self-indulgence is making me uncomfortable. Before André's suicide, I had never wanted to look back. Now, I've started missing everything. Because I cannot help remembering an enormous number of episodes I lived through, it is inevitable that I should start to weigh them up. And so, I regret many of them.

When it all started, my first reaction was to hate André. I'm ashamed to say it: he had barely been buried and already I cursed him, speaking to myself as I walked down the street. The first crisis happened when I left the police station.

I had to make a statement. As far as I could tell, I was the last person contacted by André. It all went without a hitch. To be honest, I was surprised by the policemen's politeness. As I was leaving, one of them asked if I knew the legendary Manoel Camassa, a police commissioner who collects coins and election paraphernalia. He even owns several ballot boxes.

After I said goodbye to the lawyer I had hired as a precaution, I began feeling out of breath. The vertigo grew, so I sat down in a square, but a beggar came over and started bothering me. He called me a cry-baby. I think he called me a little cry-baby. I stood up to face him, but my sight darkened with anger and he disappeared. Then I ran away shouting. I must have cursed everyone, but it was certainly André that I cursed the loudest.

I had never shouted so much. I always dealt silently with my problems. I organise and reorganise them in my head, as if they were in a collection, until I find a solution. I react in the same way when making decisions. That graduation party I mentioned is a good case in point. Of course I didn't finish secondary school in the way I had planned.

I took around two hundred bottle caps. I was careful to wipe them with a cloth beforehand. I was a bit apprehensive about the Japanese specimens: if they stood out, my inability to explain whether they came from water or soft drink bottles might undermine my ability to charm the girls. Not to mention that, in such an environment, it would be disappointing to admit that a teetotaler had given them to me.

I decided I would start by showing them the three bottle caps of Polka, a beer made in the south of Brazil in the 1940s by a German descendent. Later, as far as I was able to investigate, it stopped being an artisanal brew and was bought out by a large conglomerate.

At the party I would add that in various places around the world the international drinks industry gobbled up small and local enterprises, leading to an obvious deterioration in flavour. If I finished my story by saying that the owner of Polka created some sort of beer fest, I was sure to captivate someone.

I captivated no one, of course. An hour into the party every one started feeling melancholy, and each time I decided to open my little plastic bag with the ten rare bottle caps, people said that perhaps we could get together again in February. When the atmosphere threatened to become too heavy, we shared each other's news.

One guy would be helping his brother out at a little shop in Canada. Two of the girls had found jobs with a famous stylist and I, the collector, was burning the midnight oil to get into university to study history.

We agreed to leave early, to make the farewell easier. It wasn't, and to this day I dislike thinking about it.

Slightly drunk, I sat alone on the metro and studied the ten bottle caps all the way home. For your collection, Ricardo. For some reason, I no longer felt proud of my collection.

The carriage was empty, and in my mind the journey took a long time. I gave the best part of my collection to a guy who seemed very sad and was sitting close to me. Perhaps a friend of his had just killed himself. We mustn't ask about such things.

It wasn't like that: angry, sad and a little drunk, but excited about the new prospects, brimming with curiosity about what would come my way, therefore quite confused, I threw the bottle caps into a bin at the metro station near my house. They were no longer a part of my life.



THE BOOK



The Suicide's heaven

Ricardo Lísias

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- **Publication year:** 2012
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SYNOPSIS

The narrator of The Suicide's Heaven, a man in his early thirties, is one of the Brazilian specialists on the subject of collections. His best friend's suicide provokes a crisis, makes him question his choices, and causes him "to start missing everything".

A descendant of Lebanese migrants, the narrator ends up travelling to the Middle East while as he researches his grand-uncle's possible involvement in a terrorist group. World events, and Brazil's recent history, become the backdrop to his breakdown, as he queries such complex subjects as madness and suicide.

Gradually, readers will discover that the narrator's greatest concern is with what awaits his friend after committing suicide. According to almost all world religions, he has no right to Paradise, or

will suffer an even greater anguish than the one that drove him to kill himself.

PRESS REVIEWS

<http://oglobo.globo.com/blogs/prosa/posts/2012/04/28/ricardo-lisias-a-arte-de-perder-442383.asp>

<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrada/36901-livro-faz-leitor-sentir-no-na-garganta.shtml>

THE AUTHOR



Ricardo Lísias Aídar Fermíno

- **Pen name:** Ricardo Lísias
- **Other books:** Cobertor de estrelas - Rocco 2000; Duas praças - Editora Globo - 2006; O livro dos mandarins - Objetiva/Alfaguara - 2009

THE TRANSLATOR

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Ángel Gurría-Quintana is a historian, journalist and translator of Spanish and Portuguese. He has written for the Financial Times since 2003, specialising in literature in translation. His work has also appeared in The Observer, The Paris Review, Brick, granta.com and The Guardian's books blog and. A regular presence at the



Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty, his translations from Portuguese include the stories by Beatriz Bracher, Bernardo Carvalho, Milton Hatoum, Reinaldo Moraes and Cristovão Tezza in the compilation Dez/Ten (2012). He works at the University of Cambridge.

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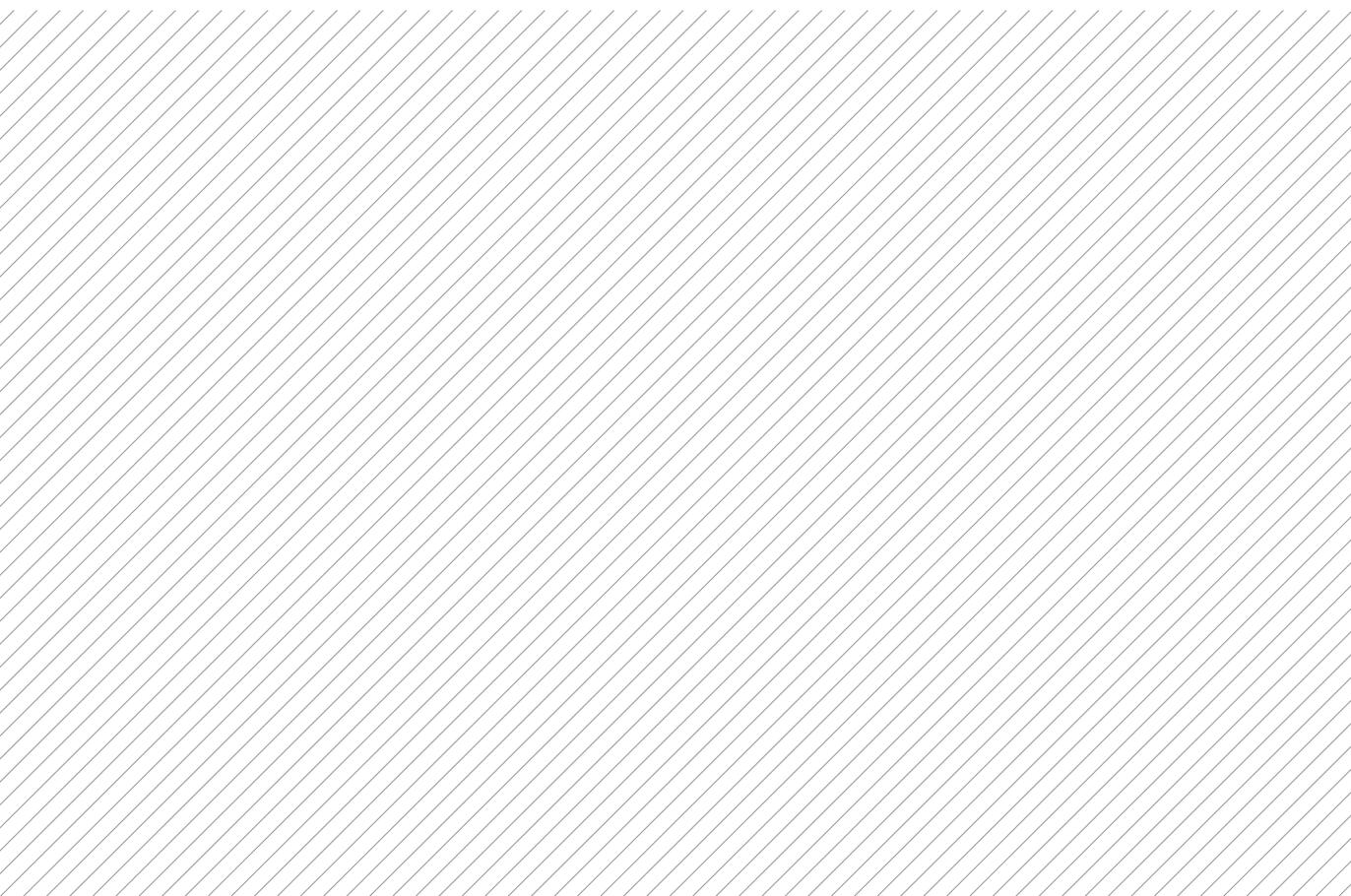
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