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BRAZILIAN **LITERATURE** IN TRANSLATION #5



## THE SUMMER OF CHIBO

VANESSA BARBARA  
AND EMILIO FRAIA

# THE SUMMER OF CHIBO

VANESSA BARBARA AND EMILIO FRAIA

Translated by Katrina Dodson

## Chapter 1

**T**he boys are out there in the cornfield where the shooting begins. Bruno breaks out ahead, his stomach weak from laughing so hard, behind him comes Moptop, who's always falling into the same potholes; he opens fire with colorful ammunition—I can swear, even from a distance, that the gumdrop blitz claimed the field and pierced the air like confetti. My brother, Chibo, was in the back seat. I was in front, on my knees, with my head hanging out the window.

From the car, I kept sight of Moptop, who couldn't manage to peg anyone, especially not in the middle of all that corn, and once again the Bulgarian spy would reach the neutral country's border under a downpour of banana chews. Wounded in the back, possibly, he'd climb the hemp rope up to the tree house and call out you sissy you sissy. Moptop would say it didn't count because the game wasn't fun anymore and Her Majesty's plans were encrypted or Bulgaria didn't even exist (and he'd be right, for sure). Then he'd burst into the most decadent, overblown tantrum since our preschool days and start beating up on the younger kids. But not on Chibo, of course. My brother was the oldest of all; he'd just turned twelve, was strong, always stuck up for me, and—I looked in the rearview mirror. He was silent: my words faded away like a station gone off the air. When the car stopped, I hopped out on one foot, and Chibo, full of lightning, didn't move a muscle. He just sat there, distant. I tried to say something but got the hiccups as I slammed the car door shut (and I know everyone laughs whenever I start a sentence and then get stuck on a hiccup, cut off by a jolt that makes me lose my balance), so I kept quiet. I swallowed my breath and stood watching as the car got smaller and smaller, until it disappeared along the edge of the cornfield.

On the plantation, Moptop was headed in Bruno's direction, arms flapping wildly. Bruno sped up hard (wrists firm), shot some clumps of vegetation over his shoulder—at that point I was running too, without really knowing why—and we collided at the midpoint between tree house and road. Actually, I was almost run over: he flew by me and spun me around like a turnstile, raising a cloud of dust and a sweltering southern wind. I coughed and hiccupped in alternating sequences and had just managed to open my eyes when (the hiccups stopped) out sprang Moptop at top speed and, plop, knocked me over. The ground was hot enough to fry your hands on; the plantation was starting to get scorched and would only get worse,

but a huge downpour fell that day, hard enough to hurt your back, the kind that ends after five minutes and leaves behind a mere trace of civilizations and a few submerged ants.

Without stopping, Bruno looked toward the sky with his mouth open and tried to swallow raindrops. He didn't notice that the dirt was already slick, and the chances of slipping were as high as our tree house junk pile, so that he skid, skated, and lost a shoe. He muttered some curse that I didn't catch and continued running in sock feet. Just behind him, Moptop stopped, picked up the artifact and classified it as Exhibit A of the Prosecution—but he didn't exactly request the judge's permission before swinging the sneaker by its shoelace and launching it into the distance. Plop: an insole and high-top projectile well-aimed at the Bulgarian spy.

Despite the size 5-5 ½ caliber wound in his back, Bruno kept running. He dragged himself along stumbling, imagining his glory as a national hero. The chase would be shown on TV in slow-motion, and afterward people would cheer for him as he rode down the street on a parade float. He'd show his great-great-great-grandchildren the mark from the sole at family barbecues and tell longwinded war stories, maybe even attend veterans' reunions and stuff like that.

Bruno would've reached the tree house for sure, if it hadn't been for the intervention of the Great Puddle, the mother of all mud puddles, which appeared all of a sudden while he was looking back. The spy sank all the way in and fell face first. A caramelized Bruno emerged from that mass of muck and saw that it was useless to resist. Two steps away, Moptop's silhouette was already reminding him of his right to remain silent, reciting the First Amendment off the top of his head and showing him (nonexistent) handcuffs. Two inches away, a dirty, circular piece of metal glinted up at Bruno, possibly a ring. He managed to pocket it without Moptop noticing and was subsequently detained by the authorities and imprisoned in the tree house.

Chibo wasn't there either when Bruno told us about the dead man—a body on the other side of the wire fence, in a place on the plantation that, from the way he talked, sounded very very far away. He'd been a kind of traitor to the Bulgarian people, a guy who didn't follow the law and didn't pay taxes because, well, he was dead after all. It didn't take long: in the middle of the cornfield, a whirlwind alive with secret circles, entrances and exits, Bruno suggested a game. Kneeling, he spread out the pages of a spiral notebook on the dirt floor (his entire cartography). He calculated distances and provisions, asked each of us to spin around on our own axis in order to throw off the enemy, and, finally, based on preliminary studies of the local geography and position of the clouds, pointed to the narrowest path where the leaves appeared to be stained with rust. That way, he said. His vague yet intensive directions (west corresponded to north and the center was next to the eastern border) led up to a tree that stood, all alone and very red, near some old persimmon trees, just past a rise where the trail branched off into one, two, three more. Then Moptop decided, just like that, that he'd seen the stiff too and to prove he wasn't lying, pushed ahead eagerly without any more questions, clearing the way with his arm, gathering vegetation samples—"turn right or keep going straight because it all

ends up the same anyway”— and protected his face with his other hand.

We kept silent and walked on, flicking here and there to scare off the weevils that stuck to our legs. Moptop seemed excited and walked quickly: “Now all we have to do is follow the colored lines on Bruno’s maps, go back twenty, thirty steps, and that’s it.” Once in awhile he’d stop short, look back and give some random order (we almost never understood). Ahead of me, Bruno, who was dealing well with these abrupt brakings, kept quiet—maybe he felt a stomach ache coming on. I just followed along, in the stern.

The corn trail didn’t seem to lead anywhere, and the vegetation was getting thicker and more stifling. I looked back and noticed that it was closing in again behind us, but I didn’t say anything. I never did. Moptop was bitten all over and looked happy. He stopped to scratch his leg and examine a beetle stuck to his ankle bone. Bruno considered taking advantage of the situation to climb up on his back and shout from on high, “Land ho!” but ended up minding his manners and asked for a boost. In two seconds, the Brunoscope was raised up above the cornfield. He couldn’t find the wire fence or any other landmarks but spotted a clearing at a distance of twenty feet to the starboard side where we could take a break from scratching and examine the maps.

It was a small area covered in crushed leaves that formed some kind of alien symbol from above (according to Moptop). We sat down without keeping watch on the rear or knowing whether the area was mined, just collapsed on the ground and started fanning ourselves. Bruno drew his knees together and sang softly. At this point, he probably had a terrible explanation for everything and got quieter and quieter—then stopped singing and looked at us, as though it were time to join in the chorus. Moptop lowered his head and confessed that well, actually, he hadn’t really seen the dead body, not with his eyes, you know?, had only heard a story that—Bruno got up and moved ahead: “My turn to lead.” He consulted the map, said that we were going the right way and (just to impress us) pulled from his pocket a ring. “Don’t touch it,” he said, satisfied with the shocked stares of the members of our expedition. “I found it in a puddle last week... It’s a wedding ring.” He paused a few seconds for effect. “The dead guy’s ring.”

Squatting, engulfed by an enormous sun, Bruno shuffled the dried leaves around on the ground. When he saw me, he got up quickly and pretended to be extremely interested in some old twig. Moptop appeared with his hands full of rocks. He distributed the ammo and moved away. We were playing a game of aiming rocks at geckos on a tree, but out of fear, disgust, or pity, Moptop only watched, grimacing at every shot. It didn’t take long for a blow to split one of the geckos down the middle. Moptop squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away.

The little creature’s two parts tumbled down the trunk. I stood staring at the void that separated its head—its eyes were still very much alive—from its tail. Bruno poked the gecko with a stick: “I wonder if it takes a man this long to die.” I thought about Chibo in the back seat, in all that silence, and thought that yes, someone could begin to die very early on (and take days, hours, or years to stop existing).

Three seconds before the attack, the gecko's eyes had been two black, bulging, humid dots—those little peanut beetles that get scared whenever we open the jar and make faces at them. I think it had known what was about to happen; it knew there was no use calling for help, and froze there with that hangdog look on its face.

That same day, before dark, Moptop whispered that Bruno had-stoned-the-Dead-Guy-to-death-on-the-orders-of-the-queen-of-Bulgaria-and-(even-worse)-that-little-twerp-hadn't-told-us- anything. "There, I said it." Moptop was mad about how we only ever listened to Bruno and never called him on his crap: for example, "This is the stiff's wedding ring, I'm the one who found it." And just like that, we'd believe him.

According to Moptop's recent findings, someone had stolen a nuclear microreactor shaped like a ring (developed by Her Majesty's official government research lab) and the Bulgarian spy, codename Bruno, had been singled out to recover it and eliminate the double agent, codename Dead Guy. He explained this all with an air of importance and waited for my reaction. He could provide more details, if necessary. He'd been thinking about it all afternoon. I dug at the dirt a little, in silence, but it was almost night time already, so I didn't say anything. Moptop stayed there for awhile, I think.

The wind changed direction.

The next day, sitting in the tree house with the plantation at my feet, I moored my ships. Some were made from paper, others of wood, painted blue, the paint peeling off.

I imagined a miniature Chibo in the hatch of one of those boats; he climbed up, trying out a sailor's tune, and the beach was right there (I was struggling to secure my ships). My brother went to handle the ropes, calling me captain. "The island is inhabited, captain." He'd call me captain, and this would bring Chibo back. I stood on the deck of the tree house and made a spyglass with my hand. It was Bruno in the distance. The Bulgarian spy zig-zagged, examining the plantation grounds inch by inch. Then he kicked a few rocks and leaned over something: I was struck by the object's brilliance; a metal lighter. He picked it up, wiped it on his shirt, put it in his pocket. I took the spyglass away from my face and turned around, looking for Chibo. But my brother was gone, he'd disappeared, and a larger wave made our ship pull back.

I waved to Bruno, who closed his eyes and cupped his hands, shouting: "The tree house needs a door!" He'd been smiling, I think. I leapt forward, flew down the rope stairs, and jumped on top of him, shouting something random, but Moptop didn't follow me, nor did I manage to knock Bruno over. He untangled himself from my leg, which stubbornly kept trying to trip him (weak-ling, you-sis-sy), and marched solemnly toward the tree house. I watched the scene from the ground, belly up, having lost the will to live. Bruno climbed the stairs, squatted and faced Moptop, who was looking at his thumb cuticle, at the ceiling, back at his thumb cuticle (it was pretty funny).

Bruno pulled the lighter from his pocket the way police do in dubbed American films, began to play with the flame, and explained the plan:

We're gonna have to split up. Moptop goes west, and you, toward the red-all-over tree. My area's the pond. Nobody talks to nobody. Whoever finds anything leaves a message at the tree house and marks the nearest cornstalk with a piece of clothing. Whoever gets captured better keep his mouth shut.

Okay, now let's make a pact. Any questions?

Bruno flicked the lighter open and told Moptop to put his finger in the flame. It stood waiting. He looked to me for help from up in the tree—his eyes were two humid dots—but I played dead. Whoever's gonna join the secret service put-your-finger-here, 'cause that seals the deal. "This is a girl's game," Moptop objected, hoping that I'd agree, but I didn't do that either— I kept playing dead, pale against the orange of the ground, ants sprouting from my knees and arms. "So it's gonna be like that, huh? You're gonna be against us?"

I don't remember exactly how it happened, but Moptop said, "Yes," very softly, so softly that I couldn't tell whether it was a word or a peep. Bruno socked the wall. "Get outta here," he said and stuck his finger in the flame. So this was what it was to be a man.

It was no use insisting, as Moptop did, shouting that the queen of Bulgaria had just arrived, bringing a top-secret report with her, because, door or no door, Bruno would spend the afternoon locked in the tree house, refusing all visitors. I bet he had all the coordinates in his head, the next steps charted out point by point, and nothing's worse than when everything's ready and all that's left is to attack (the anxiety). Tired of shouting, Moptop came over to me— but he preferred the shade because he's the type that turns pink in the sun. Just like that, from somewhat far away, he pulled a coin from his ear. He performed some finger acrobatics, the coin disappeared, and, "psst!," he beckoned to me. I rubbed my eyes. "Psst!," Moptop hissed again and raised his pointer finger to his mouth, signaling for silence. From his pocket he pulled a crayon and a crumpled-up piece of paper. He drew a phone and showed it to me: we had to talk, that's what it was. He scrawled a bunch of red fruit + a watch showing quarter to eleven = two stick figures. He got up without a sound, shredded the drawings into tiny pieces (he didn't want to leave any evidence, he'd explain later), and disappeared.

We met up at the set time, at the place where the plantation surrendered, and the persimmon trees were victorious for a moment. Moptop held his hand closed and said, stuttering only once, that we had to stick together until the very end, that Bruno's maps were wrong, that he felt a knot in his stomach, and that the double agent codename Dead Guy could, in fact, be alive and tracing our steps. He opened his hand and revealed the transmitters, three beta-carotene-type metal polypropylene capsules that he'd found the day before, in a mound of dirt. They were either that or pebbles, he concluded, getting up in my face. I backed away and backed away and backed away. He reached out his hand so I could see better: "Watch out 'cause they might explode."

Moptop, his hands all sweaty and his face flushed, had put his shirt on inside out. One day, he'd cut the collar off an old t-shirt because he felt stifled, and no one

had complained; over time, he'd started tearing the sleeves off other shirts too and now destroys his entire closet at the beginning of every summer. What Moptop really wanted, I think, was to get a basketball jersey, the kind pierced with little sieve holes. His dream was to dribble past Bruno, fly toward the basket and autograph the youngest kids' foreheads, but, while picturing it, he'd mess up, put his head into the sleeve, mix up the sides of his shirt—so that I looked at him and said: "Your shirt's on insideout." That was all I said. In the backseat, Chibo was breathing hard—my brother hunkered down, his wheels spun in the void, the cables were cut, his wings would free themselves from the wreckage, and we'd all fall. I already knew that we'd lost contact with the base, but I didn't tell Moptop, who looked anxiously at his inside-out shirt, looked at the three small stones in his hand, looked at me.

Falling, falling, more than 20,000 feet, Moptop inserted the transmitters into his pocket, into the package of gumdrops. It was as if he were archiving the definitive evidence of the case. Through static I heard Bruno repeating: Moptop goes west. My area's the pond. Nobody talks to nobody. Whoever gets captured better—and he was cut off by a noise, a shrill sound, heavy breathing. Then we started walking, me and Moptop (and it was an odd day), until we split up. He waved back, then kept going, singing softly: "The arm is not an arm, the arm is a head." I went in the opposite direction, toward the red-all-over tree, "the mouth is not a mouth, the mouth is a bellybutton," until the sound faded away.



## THE BOOK



### The Summer of Chibo

Vanessa Barbara, Emilio Fraia

- **Original title:** O verão do Chibo
- **ISBN:** 9788560281510
- **Publication year:** 2008
- **Original publishing house:** Alfaguara
- **Number of pages:** 120 p.
- **Total printing in Brazil:** 3000 copies

### SYNOPSIS

In the four-handed novel *O verão do Chibo* (“The Summer of Chibo”), a boy no more than seven years old, immersed in a very singular universe, describes his adventures during his summer vacation in the middle of a corn field in the company of his friends. But this is a different summer. Because Chibo, his older brother, mysteriously disappears, and all the other boys seem to do the same. This is a subtle work, often humorous, other times touching, about the mysteries that surround growing up. It was a finalist in the Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura.

### AWARDS

Shortlisted for the São Paulo Literature Prize

### PRESS REVIEWS

A little gem about the mysteries that

surround becoming a grown-up.  
O Estado de S. Paulo

Another world in miniature, with lyricism and absurdity to match the fantasies and traumas of childhood.  
Folha de S. Paulo

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FOTO RENATO PARADA

### Vanessa Barbara

#### Emilio Fraia

- **Other books:**

#### Vanessa Barbara

##### Novel

*Noites de Alfaca*, Rio de Janeiro: Alfaguara, 2013

##### Graphic novel

*A máquina de Goldberg*, (Ill. by Fido Nesti), São Paulo: Companhia das Letras 2012

##### Chronicles and short stories

*São Paulo 1971-2011: História recente, versões literárias, resíduos visuais*, (with Luiz Ruffato, Ignácio de Loyola Brandão and Tony Bellotto), São Paulo: Ed. Olhares 2012

*O livro amarelo do terminal*, São Paulo: Cosac Naify 2008

##### Books for young readers

*Endrigo, o escavador de umbigo*, (Ill. by Andrés Sandoval), São Paulo: Ed. 34 2011

**Emilio Fraia****Graphic novel**

Campo em branco (Ill. by DW Ribatski)  
São Paulo: Companhia das Letras 2013

**Novel**

Sebastopol, Rio de Janeiro:Objetiva/  
Alfaguara, forthcoming

**• Author's webpage:**

[www.blogdacompanhia.com.br/  
category/colunistas/vanessa-barbara/  
www.emiliofraia.blogspot.com](http://www.blogdacompanhia.com.br/category/colunistas/vanessa-barbara/)

**• Translations:****Vanessa Barbara**

Lettuce Nights (excerpt), Granta, 2012  
Noites de Alface, France, Zulma,  
forthcoming 2015

**• Awards:****Vanessa Barbara:**

Jabutí Prize for Journalism 2009, O  
livro amarelo do terminal, 2008, São  
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**THE TRANSLATOR****Katrina K. Dodson**

Katrina Dodson is currently translating  
The Collected Stories of Clarice  
Lispector, forthcoming from New  
Directions in 2014. Her translations of  
fiction by Vanessa Barbara and Emilio  
Fraia have appeared in Granta: The  
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