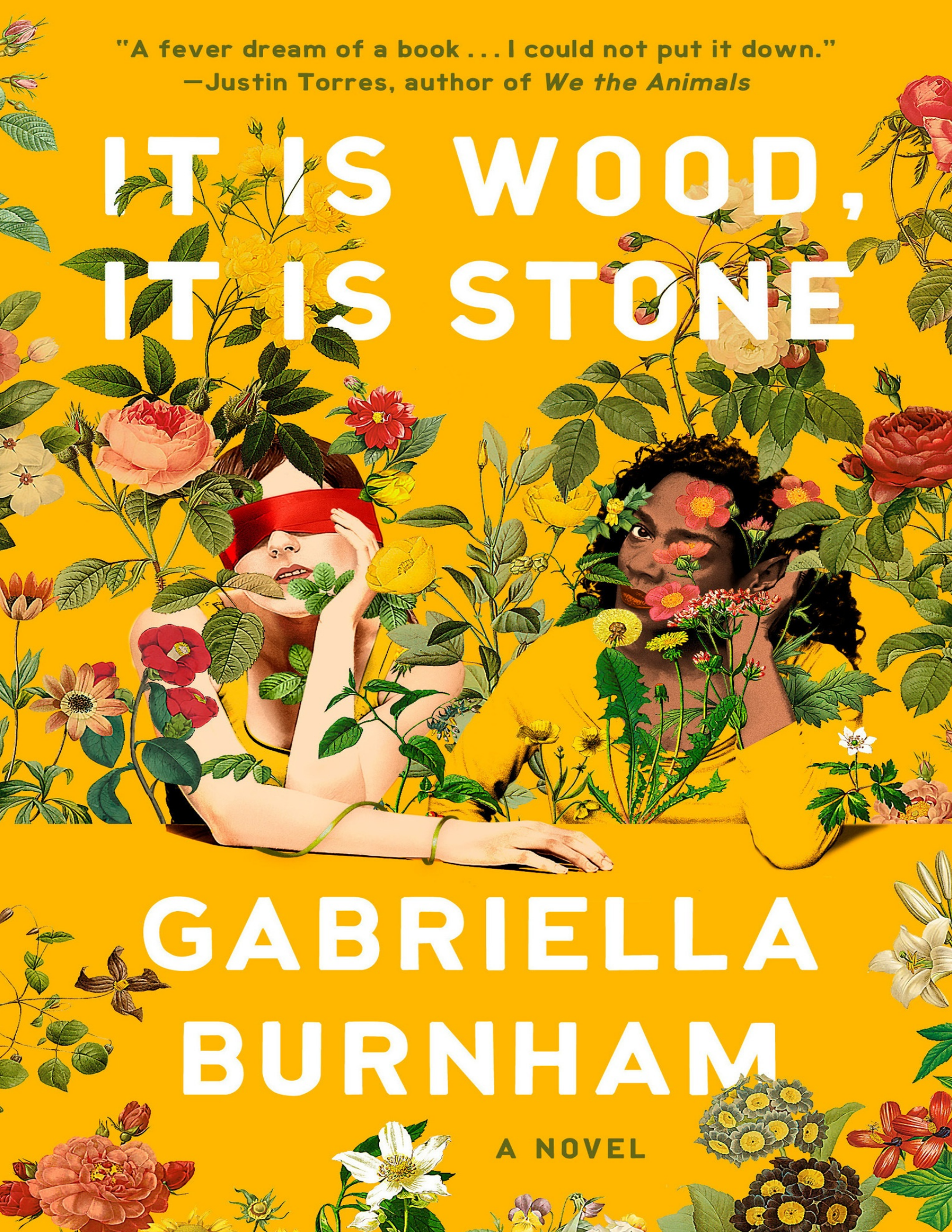


"A fever dream of a book . . . I could not put it down."
—Justin Torres, author of *We the Animals*

IT IS WOOD, IT IS STONE



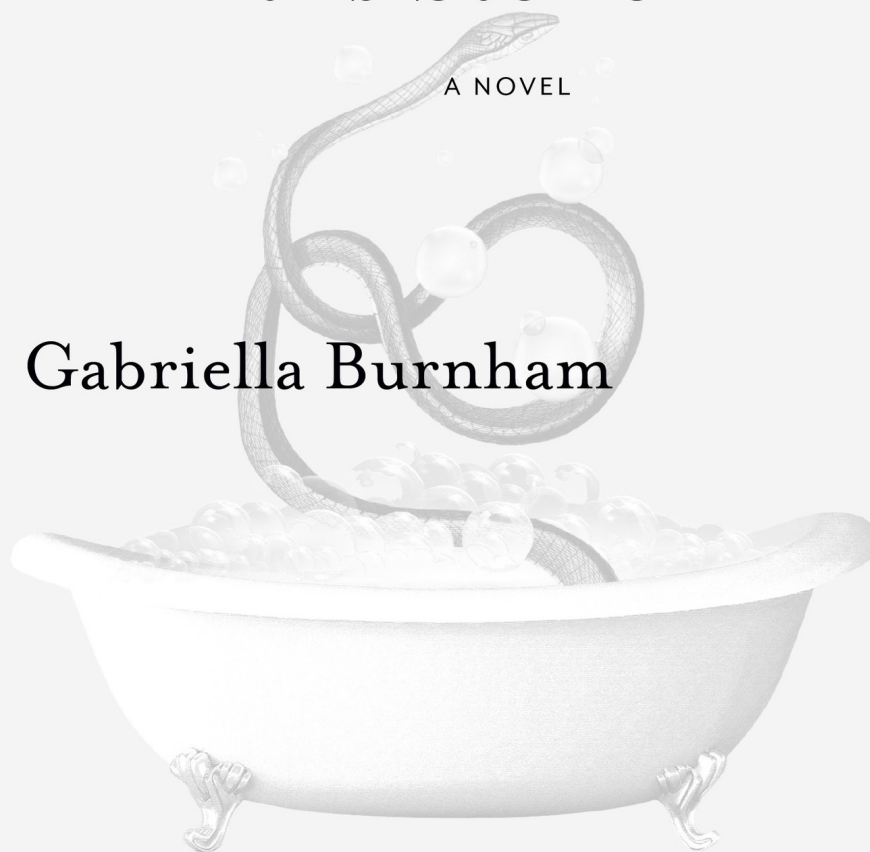
GABRIELLA BURNHAM

A NOVEL

It Is Wood,
It Is Stone

A NOVEL

Gabriella Burnham



ONE WORLD
NEW YORK

It Is Wood, It Is Stone is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 by Gabriella Burnham

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

ONE WORLD and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Burnham, Gabriella, author.

Title: It is wood, it is stone: a novel / Gabriella Burnham.

Description: First edition. | New York: One World, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020003905 (print) | LCCN 2020003906 (ebook) | ISBN 9781984855831 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593230220 (acid-free paper) | ISBN 9781984855848 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3602.U76377 I8 2020 (print) | LCC PS3602.U76377 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020003905>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020003906>

Hardback ISBN 9781984855831

International edition ISBN 9781984855855

Ebook ISBN 9781984855848

oneworldlit.com

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Caroline Cunningham, adapted for ebook

Title page illustration by Michael Morris via composite images: (snake) Bridgeman Images/Two Suriname Snakes; (bathtub) Getty Images/vladru; (bubbles) Getty Images/Yayasya, Katerina Sisperova

Cover design: Michael Morris

Cover images: Nadzeya_Kizilava/Getty Images, PeopleImages/Getty Images (woman on left); Nick Dolding/Getty Images, Natdanai Pankong/EyeEm/Getty Images (woman on right); bauhaus1000/Getty Images, Adisak Mitrprayoon/Getty Images, ivan-96/Getty Images, nicoolay/Getty Images (flowers)

ep_prh_5.5.0_c0_r1

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six
Chapter Twenty-seven
Chapter Twenty-eight
Chapter Twenty-nine

Dedication

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Chapter One

I can still hear your words, the vibrant joy in your voice, as we sat in the back of a taxi stopped in traffic, the windows rolled down but no breeze blowing in, except for the occasional wind from a motorcyclist weaving past.

“Is it what you expected?” You clutched my hand and shook it with excitement.

“Maybe I should answer that once we’ve left the airport road. Don’t you think?”

“I can’t believe we’re here,” you said, not to me, but to a child waving to us from an adjacent car window.

The traffic sprawled for hours, barely moving, like a snake that had swallowed a calf. You had told me before that São Paulo was not the tropical paradise on postcards; it wasn’t the pictures of women on the beach with fruit baskets on their heads. High-rise buildings traced the horizon and favelas extended for miles on both sides of the highway. We passed a road that broke into the dense favela tessellation, revealing clotheslines strung from brick wall to metal roof, and a young girl pushing a shopping cart filled with cans and palm leaves.

A barefoot man standing on the partition walked in front of our stopped taxi and began to juggle oranges for money.

“Look,” you said and nudged my arm, but the cabdriver wasn’t, so I didn’t want to.

When the traffic moved again, just three car lengths, the man wouldn't step away, so the driver whistled and waved his arm out the window. Not angry, but persistent.

"Linda—give him some money," you said.

"I only have U.S. dollars," I said, stirring the contents of my purse.

You took out your wallet.

"They gave me fifties at the money exchange."

For a moment I saw you weigh whether you should part with a fifty-real note. Then the man moved to the side and the taxi lurched forward.

This trip felt like a series of fever dreams from the start. Just four months earlier, on a cold afternoon in September, you came home and told me you had something to tell me. The University of São Paulo had offered you a yearlong teaching residency in their history department. What you didn't know was I had spent that morning cleaning our home, weighing the something that I had to tell you, too. I'd been thinking a lot about an escape from Hartford. What would it be like to spread both my arms into thin mountain air, to have my feet planted firmly on the ocean floor? I thought about how faucet water might taste in Italy while showering our neglected garden, which, despite my best attempts, had browned long ago. I thought about our seven years of marriage, gathered the paradoxical concerns that had been plaguing me for the past several months:

I had lost my job.

I didn't have my own money.

All of our friends were your friends from the university.

I had spent the last year caring for my dying father.

Now my days were replaced with memories of everything I no longer had.

Because of these reasons, I thought that maybe it would be better for the both of us if I packed my bags and left for a while. I anticipated you might point out that these were all the reasons I should stay. Leaving you was less a solution and more like a heartbeat trying to break free from its rib cage. I couldn't go on like this, but knew I might not survive without you. And so I stood at our kitchen island, cutting a bundle of store-bought cilantro with a pair of scissors, waiting for you to come home.

I remember the sounds of the door cracking and closing, your shoes bristling against the doormat. You rushed into the kitchen and dropped a stack of papers next to the cutting board, blowing the cilantro onto the floor.

“Baby,” you said, leaning over to help gather the fallen herbs. “I have got incredible news.”

“Okay,” I said. “But can you get the broom as well?”

“Forget about the cilantro. Linda—we’re going to Brazil.”

I knew you meant to state this as a proposition, not a declaration (the fact that you hadn’t turned into a back-and-forth that neither of us want to relive). I write about it now only to show how excited you were, convinced that a year in São Paulo would be a transformative change. You told me I could take as much time as I needed to respond, but really, we didn’t have that long. We would be leaving in early January, before the start of the Brazilian academic year.

An hour into our taxi ride from Guarulhos Airport, we arrived in our new neighborhood, Moema. There we discovered a district of mansions and luxe buildings. The trees grew unbridled from the sidewalks, cracking the cement, carpeting the ground with purple petals. I tried to imagine what São Paulo looked like before the concrete arrived. Swampy and mountainous, chirring with insects, the lush, viscous leaves bending like boat hulls. The São Paulo we saw stacked unrestrained in all directions, east to west, south to north. Outside our apartment building was a dusty inroad of gas stations and construction. When I stood from the taxi and stretched my legs, taking in our new environment, I could see, just beyond the urban moat surrounding our home, a mass of green. It was the entrance to Ibirapuera Park. The park was a manicured jungle, with palm trees that dangled strings of green coconuts and a pond where couples reclined to watch fountains spray and dance on the surface.

We dragged our suitcases into the lobby and stumbled into all of our boxes, the ones we’d shipped from Hartford the week before, organized in stacks against the wall.

“We forgot to list the apartment number,” you said, and then looked at the elevator, which fit three people and a large bag of groceries if one person leaned against the door.

After ten or eleven trips, up and down, down and up to the fourteenth floor, we had all of our belongings inside. I barely noticed what the apartment looked like, just that our bedroom had a mattress and a ceiling fan. We peeled off our clothes, wet from the summer’s humidity, and you rested your hand lovingly against my back, until even that was too hot and we spread to the opposite sides of the mattress. We fell asleep as soon as we shut our eyes.

I took a week to contemplate our move to Brazil, to give you a final answer. I

didn't know much about São Paulo, other than the stories you had told me from when you studied there as a teenager. It sounded thrilling, lively, a place where you had grown into a young adult. I considered that maybe I too could evolve there, just as you had. I was surrounded by old wooden furniture we inherited from my father, heavy and chipped at the edges. His dresser, a grandfather clock, an army chest emblazoned with REAGAN/BUSH '84 and BUSH/CHENEY 2000 bumper stickers. He left us a bookshelf that housed only two books: a twelve-step program guide and a biography of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Most of this furniture he acquired from VFW garage sales and police auctions; it had no sentimental value to him, and yet, as much as it tormented me to be confined by it all, I couldn't bring myself to let it go. Leaving it behind felt like the only option. We could leave it behind and go to Brazil, and I wouldn't have to leave you too. I wouldn't even have to tell you that I had planned on leaving you.

I woke you up the following Monday before your alarm went off.

"All right," I said, gripping your bare shoulder. "Let's go."

"Really?" You rubbed your eyes. "Are you sure?"

And then the alarm began to sound. I pulled the covers over my head until your sleepy hand found the snooze button.

—

I woke up from our post-flight nap around three, in our new apartment in Moema, panicked. It took a few blinks of my eyes to register where I was—all I saw were the bare walls, whirling fan, and the damp sheets where you no longer lay. Even after my mind compiled the pieces and located my body in space—here, São Paulo, Brazil, and you, probably in the kitchen—the dread remained. It expanded inside my chest cavity. Mornings in our bedroom back home floated in front of my eyes. Dust particles hovering in the rays of sunlight. Each morning I would inspect my terrarium on the windowsill, the only plants I managed to keep alive, pink and green succulents and a leafy fern. I fussed over them adoringly, misting their leaves, picking off the dead bits, and reorganizing the stems so that they didn't block one another's light. My face began to tense and prickle, a sure indication that tears would follow, and they did—two streams in the corners of my eyes that crossed over my ears and fell to the pillow.

But then I thought of you, somewhere nearby, and how thrilled you were in the taxi, scratching your newly grown beard, endlessly observing the billboards

and graffiti we passed.

“Dennis?” I called.

“I’m in the kitchen!” I heard you say, and for a moment I calmed, feeling like we could have been anywhere. When I found you in the kitchen, you hadn’t opened any of the boxes, but you had discovered a bag of white rice and canned beans in the cabinet. I stood close to you as you stirred beans on the stove.

“Sustenance,” you said, and revealed the bottle of cachaça we’d bought at duty free.

“Already?”

“Come on,” you said, and tore open a box labeled DISHES, CUPS. You unwrapped two coffee mugs. “It’s a celebration!”

In the evening we tried to make love on the mattress—you thumbed at my bra clasp, clumsily kissing my neck while I raised my arms in the air—but I was too tipsy to keep balance and collapsed on the bed. We gave up and went to sleep in our clothes.

—

The heat woke me early. I prodded my way through the kitchen and nuked the leftover rice and beans. The tiles felt cool on the soles of my feet and I imagined spreading my entire body, star-shaped and naked, to temper the heat. You woke soon after and spooned bean-stained rice, chewing as you unpacked kitchen items, seemingly unaffected by your hangover.

Marta would arrive the following day, while you were checking in at the university, filling out paperwork. I knew having a maid meant that cooking and cleaning, the things I usually took care of in our home, would go to her. But I didn’t fully appreciate that she would be there, physically, another person in the apartment, every day. I wish I’d breathed more deeply into our aloneness that day, huddled together in the empty space, before you became mired with obligation, and before Marta, the apartment, and I became one.

I stood and walked to the living room windows with my bowl of rice and beans in hand. You came too, held me by the waist, and we looked outside at the canopy of beige and brown buildings, the Ginásio do Ibirapuera stadium across the street, and beyond that two water fountains jutting from the pond in the park. The pink morning sky hovered just above the buildings, as if the city had somehow been raised to the clouds, or the clouds lowered to it. We cracked the