

## Hidden Book to the Celestial City

Before Fresno became host of a new Silicon Valley and the ensuing wave of gentrification, a local artist named Pradera Petras rose to worldwide stardom off of her cult of subversive anonymity. Pradera, as her family refused to call her, lived in a world that could be said to be more of a liminal reflection of the one we occupy. It is only by completely halting in our own minds and worlds that we can glance into the still pool of water where the mind of Pradera Petras lives. I have done this in my own way, and so while what I am about to recall to you is not perfect, or perhaps fully true, this is her story.

The young woman named Pradera Petras begins in a glassy night sky under the light of a waxing moon. There was nothing special about that night besides every single detail which Pradera Petras could possibly and impossibly take in. The painfully clear night sky stood still from the earth to the stratosphere as if it were miles and miles of still ocean water. The dry wheat which surrounded her rustled plaintively, eager for her company, for the essence of her being. From beneath the soles of her worn out shoes, the dry valley earth wafted up to her nose, filled with the pains and pleasures which all farmland embodies. The waxing moon shone down upon her neck, her messy brown hair, her paint-stained fingers and her eyes, endless from east to west, like the midday sun. In this field surrounded by wheat, earth, sky, insects, stars and planets, the young woman chose her name, and it was only those who could come close to understanding her that accepted this name: Pradera Petras.

A year after finding this part of herself, she had a vision of fire and ash falling through a forest canopy to the floor. There, strange creatures she did not know the names of crawled,

slithered, and flitted about. It must be said that the catalyst for this vision was a strange looking mamey sapote sold to her by the local frutero, José Reinaldo Fuero.

Not long after this vision she began painting strange symbols and scenes on mirrors with colors that she mixed herself. She started with the bathroom mirror in her humble apartment which she leased with other friends who shared her kindred artistic spirit, but she knew that this was just practice.

Her first public debut was a department store mirror. Perhaps the employees should have known to watch her. Pradera Petras wore nothing that could ever be said to come from that shop. Still, she strolled by in her worn green cargo pants, scuffed and mud-caked black boots, and her late abuela's blue huipil, embroidered with birds and flowers in pink, green and yellow. It is possible that the sight of her or the radiance of her intention left the employees dazed and unsure of what to do. Regardless, when she saw the giant display mirror at the center of the store, she went into a trance. In that omnipotent way of writers, she saw every point of the event that led up to this spread out like a valley in which she could also see herself walking. She saw herself walking in that painfully miniscule valley, forward and to no known destination.

It started with the field of wheat in which she spent the late evening spooning out the creamy scarlet flesh of the mamey sapote she bought from the local frutero yesterday morning. In all truthfulness, the rose-colored waxen skin of the sapote looked more like that of a dragon fruit. Its leaves peeled away like a banana's peel, and she dropped them to the ground as she looked at the sun lowering like an egg yolk on the horizon. She spooned out the fruit's flesh and followed it by drinking in the world which lay bare in front of her eyes.

She could not remember falling asleep in the field, though it felt like the most natural thing in the world to do in that amalgamation of heady and fleeting moments. Here she was, and the stars shone above her head like white hot needles, and the dry particles of dust, their cousins, entered her nose. But on this night, unlike that of her self-discovery, the stars up above were covered by a scented veil which frightened her.

As her eyes focused on the night sky, she realized it was a fire, gently brushing its fingers against the golden stalks of wheat surrounding her.

In the distance she could hear people screaming and choking on the smoke, children crying, and dogs barking frantically. But there was something warped about this distance. She was not close enough to any buildings to be hearing these sounds. The oppressive minutes went scraping by as a glacier, and she recognized the sound of her own neighborhood, with people yelling in English, Spanish and a few languages she couldn't recognize. She knew even through the distortion of the smoky veil it was around ten, and more than the usual number of cars could be heard driving around. They were honking quickly, their tires often squealing against the tired asphalt. Driving away in a panic. She was paralyzed, able to see but not to move. Her lungs heaved up an incoherent shriek to the universe, and with every bit of will she had, she pulled herself up, almost cell by cell.

The splintering smoke was unbearable. She had to hunch over and pull her shirt over her face to just manage breathing, and she ran. Her feet ran before her head, her body desperate to survive, to muscle its way out of the haze and mold itself into a true shape outside of the hungry fire. It was only when she thought of the fire's absolute nature that she could feel her body scream independently of her mouth and lungs.

A collective fear travelled through her body, atom by atom, in a freezing wave that crashed on the shores of her mind.

Only then could she cry, only then could she see the whole town on fire, with ash falling from the sky and people with no way out weeping at the loss which manifested before them, day after day. She screamed as the waves in her head rocked back and forth with its noise, and finally with exhaustion from running and breathing in smoke she collapsed on her knees and opened her eyes.

She was surrounded not by fire and ash but by a half-moon lit night, just cool enough to deliver a faint breeze that met the back of her sweat-stained shirt. She had scraped her knees on sandy soil. As she looked around, she realized that there was no one here who could have witnessed her running or screaming blindly into the night. To her right she saw the San Joaquin riverbank, ragged with dusted earth and weeds. No one was around.

Pradera Petras decided that she needed to touch the water with her hands, even to bathe in it to remove the sensation of heat that consumed her. She walked down the riverbank, avoiding the thornier weeds until she reached the water's edge. There, besides her reflection, she saw a grassy slope on the other side, the moon, the few stars that were visible under the smoggy sky, and the whole world shimmering back at her through the river's molten silver surface. It was in that moment that a piece of wisdom came to her: the destiny of creativity.

What she painted on her reflective canvas was a cycle of existence that utterly confused the shoppers and staff at the department store. One of the employees was about to attempt cleaning the mess up, but he was stopped by a photography student from one of the local

community colleges and her friend. Staring back at them was a wheel with strange images in between its spokes, and incomprehensible words written in foreign letters along its rim.

Hidden within the coded terror of the image were symbols of healing. Someone noticed for example an aloe vera, someone else saw hands pressed together in supplication. Fruit and war, fire and water circled round and round.

The wheel became a year of art that disturbed the police, local politicians, and business owners to no end.

“I take pride in the safety of our community,” one of the higher-ups in local law-enforcement said in an interview that aired on the local news. “Me and my men have served this town for over a decade now, and we will not let some hoodlum vandalize this beautiful town and get away with it. The citizens of Fresno deserve to feel safe.”

At the behest of several of those business owners and local politicians, the police attempted a short-lived campaign against Pradera Petras’s art. When several officers were identified on video shattering unmarked storefront glass however, the campaign started to end.

The Fresno Bee published a milquetoast article about the unknown artist featuring interviews from a police officer, a local couple with monetary sway and connections to the police and various local businesses, and even a brief comment from the mayor of Fresno. All were incredibly concerned about the cost of property damage, and while it is true that no one over the age of fifty reads the local papers, a good amount its readers were surprised to find political dissent in their own homes.

That is to say, the children and grandchildren of many adults surprised their parents and grandparents with their anger and annoyance at these local political figures for their less than satisfactory art critique. In fact, the town's youth argued that the police were causing more property damage than the artist. Some young punks went so far as to create a watchdog group to record the police and deter them from destroying art that spoke to them on such a metaphysical level.

Yet it was only when a humanities professor at Fresno State University shared his interest in Pradera Petras's artwork with his students that certain right-wing organizations began to express their outrage. Professor Maroa Hernandez from the Fresno State department of Art and Design had of course heard all about the anonymous artist's work, and by a happy accident, he soon stumbled upon a painted mirror at his barber shop.

As a final assignment for his class, he had his students write an essay on the nature of art as self-reflection. These essays in turn created a new school of critique which is just now gaining its due recognition in the art schools of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and other far flung and lesser worlds. Pradera Petras naturally had no part of this aside from her own art. While others were critiquing, lamenting, and staring in awe, her dreams and works continued.

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In the third month of her public artwork, Pradera Petras had another vision. An arapaima was swimming down the river beneath giant waterlilies, massive, and unbothered by the idea of speed. In the river's depths, crabs, snails and unknown creatures with fins, claws, and fingers scuttled and swam about or stayed put in their own unique ways. The stems of the lilies, and

other brackish plants swayed with the current, moving their roots slowly through the river's muddy soil. Beyond the water was an unknown earth that they were curious about but too full of life to move towards. A berry dropped into the river and the dreamer realized she was standing barefoot on the damp earth of the river's edge staring blankly into the moving water.

She began to walk along the riverbank in the arapaima's wake. Occasionally it surfaced to breathe in air, though she did not need to see the faint outline of its mouth against the surface of the water to keep track of it.

At one juncture of the river, she noticed a bright clearing where the forest should be. In place of towering trees with leaves that rustled in the forest breeze, there was the reddish desert silt of Fresno. A bleach-white empty fruit stand stood at the far end of the clearing with a sign that read

Strawberries

\$3 each

A few strawberries were left in green plastic baskets that filled cardboard holders in sets of three. A hoe was leaned up to the side as if someone would be coming back soon, but the field looked barren aside from a tree at the center of the clearing. It was a peach tree, the same one whose branches she had hidden in as a child on afternoons when she decided she could no longer bear to be under the sun. It stood there with its crooked arms and curved leaves, green but slightly wilted from the intensity of the midday sun. It was more like a sketch of the tree than the thing itself.

On instinct she climbed into the central groove of the tree where all its arms met like a rough-hewn chair. She was tall and lanky enough to climb it and position herself, though it seemed as though the space were meant more for her childhood self. From her vantage point the white fruit stand stood still, and the river continued in its constant motion. Dangling above her head she noticed a ripe sun, red and orange like a peach. She lightly plucked it from its place and sank her teeth into its furry skin to the flesh bursting with juice both sweet and tart, dribbling down her chin and leaving a sticky residue as it dried up in the afternoon sun.

The leaves on the trees on the other side of the river were waxen and smelled of the rain that must have washed over them, sliding the dust off their stomata which were opening like mouths to breathe in the fresh air. Their exhalations fell down onto the mud which slowly slid into the river who was always moving and always whispering loudly to the center of the forest. She reached out to touch one but realized that the other side of the river was too far, and that it was only through the clarity of her looking, of her open and uninhibited senses that she could see each detail of the forest so clearly.

Trees and air wavered between here and there. Being and nonbeing.

In the midst of all things, it was the peach tree that didn't belong here, next to the fruit stand by the river. The strange peach tree stood comfortably and awkwardly in the clearing by the river that was always returning in a new way with a different body. When she ate of the fruit, her eyes were eating the scene, and her mind was devouring her eyes, and her heart with its continuous rhythm was swallowing her mind until her body became one thing which was the absence of anything. She looked down at her shadow and then above it where its double— invisible yet tangible—was standing.



She let herself fall from the tree, planting her feet onto the warm hardpan and continued walking alongside the river. Her feet she noticed, were sinking further and further into the earth, as if the forest wanted to absorb her into its mud and clay. She pulled her feet up from the mud and ran. She knew she had to get to the river's end where the forest opened up to an unending sea, but she realized she might not make it. As she ran, the ground beneath her feet gave a deep squelching groan that was almost covered by the drone of unseen insects, the cawing of birds and the whooping of monkeys as they flew and swooped from branch to branch. If she stopped, if she were to slow down, she knew the ground would take her.

Her feet were burning from the pressure of escape, sweat dripped down her reddened face, and her lungs were bursting from the luxury of breathing so much fresh air. A thought washed over her mind as she struggled for breath and the energy to continue running: *I will not make it*. But still, out of fear, out of hunger for life, with the juice of the peach fermenting in her mouth, she pushed herself forward. Her toe caught on a tree root and she tripped, face forward into the leaves and damp earth.

She was in her bed, sheets crumpled and almost completely off the edge. At her nightstand was her sketchbook, and with quick breaths and linework she put down on paper what would be the subject of her next set of mirror paintings.

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It was the janitor at Palenque High School who found Pradera Petras's subsequent painting. It was a whirlpool of lines and characters painted in red on the worn and scratched

girl's bathroom mirror. Below the mirror, a stream of water poured from the old turn-handle faucet.

The janitor, Francisco Mérida, managed to clean up the mirror before anyone saw it. Before he did so however, he took a few photos which he sent to his wife and a couple of friends. The photos circulated the internet, especially on social media pages dedicated to spotting and recording the art of Pradera Petras.

Not long after, an employee at a countertop distributing center found Pradera Petras's second painting. But before I can discuss this, it must be revealed what Francisco Mérida saw.

Imposed onto the bathroom mirror was a cathedral which no one had seen before. Perhaps cathedral is a disingenuous word. Yet it has been used by artists and naturalists, such as Antoni Gaudí and John Muir to denote a sacred space in nature where the elements touch each other in an endlessly finite display, a reservoir, of the oceanic cosmos. The image of the cathedral which Francisco Mérida saw was undoubtedly a cave or a grotto of some kind, terrifying in its scope and angles.

Stone and bones, creatures of all kinds, and a haunting array of strange written characters rose from the top of the mirror, or perhaps they dripped down. Every second glance revealed the familiar aspects of the scene to be different from any referential point a viewer might put forward. Was that a written character or an arthropod? Human bones became animal, and animal bones looked like nothing that could be imagined. Strange to say, the image of the cathedral had no bottom. It spilled down into the sink, which poured its water to some unknown place.

It had only been a day since the images of Pradera Petras's newest piece went viral. Karl Newton thought nothing of it until he noticed a large slab of limestone defaced by the same artist at his place of work. On the slab in vibrant red, blue, and yellow paint was a miracle. It was an underwater sun. The sun can perhaps be said to be a god. The god, whose face rested in the center of a crimson disc looked beyond the painting with its blank, square eyes. Strange symbols emanated from its fiery mane to the circumference of its disc. Below, a blue field of corn bowed or wept.

Much larger than the bathroom mirror of Palenque high school, the mural at Fresno Granite & Stoneworks could be said to depict a karstic cavern. Yet what was to be said of the cavern? That it portrayed an underwater scene seemed undeniable. But then what of the sun?

What of the corn growing beneath the sun and the unbearable burden of blank limestone planted above its head? Professor Maroa of Fresno State posited that if the Maya believed that the jaguar was a creature between worlds, the sun and the water and the fields of Pradera Petras's only non-mirror mural was the creation of a world between worlds. The sun was vanishing far below the surface of human understanding to the unreachable depths of some forgotten cenote. The light of knowledge, food being the ultimate wisdom, could not help but to follow.

Having seen the mural myself (it was soon rehoused at the Fresno Art Museum), I can say that this seems an undeniable interpretation of Pradera Petras's artwork. The disappearance of the mirror as medium seemed especially disheartening. Yet if her only non-mirror painting was a prophecy of the loss of knowledge, it was also a question put to those left behind. It was not Professor Maroa, but the first person to lay eyes on the mural who understood this.

To Karl, the fearsome god seemed to be saying, “I am dead. I am dead yet the remnants of the kingdom remain. Where will they go?”

Pradera Petras’s dream of the river produced a third and final related piece of art. It was in fact, an arrow to the remnants of the kingdom.

The arrow to the kingdom was found on the first Thursday night of the month, during Art Hop. An empty room of a notable art studio was left unlocked with an unusual artifact in its center.

In the middle of the empty room stood a glass display case. More specifically, the glass was a set of four mirrors with the side facing the room’s door open to the box’s inside, that is, missing a mirror. Painted across the outside of those mirrors was a jaguar with a lily growing from its head, swimming from a river into an ocean on fire. Written characters fell in neat lines from the sky to the water, and above the red ocean waves stood a crescent moon.

Inside the mirror display case was a fossilized piece of coral which had been carved into a Maya figurine—an ambiguous human body with a coral crown. Up until it found its way beneath the five glass panels, it had been in the possession of a middle-aged librarian—Kathryn Holmes. Her mother, a merchant marine, had stolen it from a cave in the Yucatán peninsula in the 60s. Those close to Pradera Petras knew that Katherine Holmes had told her about the coral figurine as she was checking out a book on Mesoamerican art from the library.

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A beached whale lay in the Fresno orchards. There were some who said it was there and others who were confused and outraged at the suggestion. Either way, letters and phone calls poured into the mayor's office. He took it upon himself to visit the exact spot mentioned, and while all he saw was an ordinary peach orchard, there was no mistaking the miasma of rotting flesh and ocean brine.

Avid followers of the anonymous artist connected this event to a piece they saw in a JCPenney's a week before it happened. They were struck with wonder at a what was clearly an amorphous leviathan in the center of a royal garden. Raining down from this portentous image at the top of the mirror were chaotic characters that could look like letters from any written language if the viewer were to let their mind grow hazy in its wandering.

Mirrored below was a city which viewers felt with horror they had walked through all of their lives. It was an undecided city that could be made either of trees or of glass and concrete buildings. Wandering the streets were ragged people mourning as the ash of letters fell down gently on their heads. The fruit of confusion was growing in a border around an empty space which directly mirrored the shape of the dead creature in the garden of paradise above.

The symbols looked like letters from some far-off foreign kingdom. Yet there was something familiar in their shape and lines. Those who emptied their minds of preconceived notions, who saw their image in those painted mirrors witnessed the creation of a third entity. After this connection came a realization— the characters painted on the mirror were entirely phonetic. Viewers would sound them out in imperceptible whispers, understanding the message not through translation but rather, feeling. This was the magic of her strange characters.

Much was discussed following the whale. People shouted angrily in the streets and in the town hall. Right-wing deniers of the whale drove their trucks up and down the wealthier side of town in outrage—they were too unnerved by the downtown Fresno area to go anywhere near it. Local activists doused the whale in whatever paint they could find as a message that the mayor and Fresno elected officials must do something. The invisible carcass rotted and expanded for much longer than anyone felt comfortable with. What finally occurred with the whale is one of the most lamentable acts leading up to the demise of Fresno.

The same right-wing individuals who denied the existence of the whale—saying that focusing on something invisible was a waste of tax-payer dollars—were the ones whose attention destroyed it and the town.

One night, when the stench of the invisible whale carcass was especially unbearable, a small convoy of the whale-deniers drove their pickup trucks to the field where it lay. They doused it in cans of gasoline and set fire to it with tiki torches. The effect was almost immediate. The rotting flesh and gallons of methane burst into flame, and soon after the carcass exploded. The fascists were jettisoned several yards away by the invisible exploding flesh of the whale they had denied. Burning flesh and gas spewed in every direction for miles. The whole event lasted about eight hours.

The initial explosion was timed to about midnight exactly. Because of this, it was about forty-five minutes before anyone in town noticed and called a fire-station. The field where the whale carcass had been and the town of Fresno were on fire. The fire lasted for around ninety-six hours and devastated the town. To this day, local activists angrily point out that after the majority of the fascists who caused the explosion went home and washed up, they went around town with

their tiki torches, burning any putrid invisible flesh they could find. There is video evidence corroborating this claim, though no one seems to care since Fresno is no more.

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She had a dream where she was crouched on a boulder by the river's edge. The trees, like giants, stood watching guard above her, dropping air onto her shoulders. She felt the cool stone on the toes and soles of her feet, and as she glanced into the water, she realized indifferently that she was naked. Without touching her head, she felt that the roots of her hair alternated between their normal feeling and the sensation of being tree branches with their stiff fibrous connection to the longer branch, which connected with the body of the tree, running down to its mouth underground.

Silently, and unnoticed until it was within the periphery of her vision, a jaguar padded out of the forest. Dappled in night black spots and soft gold fur, it sat on a boulder to her side and gently dropped something from its mouth into its paws. The jaguar turned its face fully towards her own and stared at her with its inky black pupils, centered in divine golden irises. A corner of its mouth twitched with its whiskers and it gave a low growling purr before turning its attention to the light green object in its paws.

It sniffed the fruit, licked it once with its rough tongue, and sliced it open with its paw. It gave out a growl that could be perceived as one of satisfaction, stood up, and stalked back into the forest. The river and the boulders were exactly the same as before, aside from the split fruit where the jaguar once was. Time reversed and the forest was still again.

Pradera Petras slowly rose up from her squatting position and moved to the place where she had seen the jaguar. She stooped down to pick up the two halves of fruit—a guava. The cut was not the clean one of a knife, but its intention felt more precise than that of a blade. She looked at its pink flesh, unreal against the flow of the river, the sound of insects and leaves constantly moving and the birds making their various calls. Eventually she saw the clear blue sky of the forest canopy in the depth of its pink flesh and realized she was looking at her hometown sky on the other side of her dream. She dropped one half of it into the river and it sank like a stone. Before she could drop the other half, she woke up with its taste in her mouth. The subject of her next set of murals had just come to her.

Unfortunately, a small group of right-wing fanatics destroyed most of her subsequent paintings before the public had a chance to document them. There was however, a deeply devoted and anonymous enthusiast of her work who managed to view and photograph one of her pieces.

It was a simple piece and unlike the surreptitious nature of much of her other work, it was installed publicly without repercussion. The last mirror Pradera Petras ever painted was small, about 12”X13”. It sat amongst the lemons and limes at a well-known supermercado at the behest of the store owner, her uncle, Luciano Consuelo Petras. On its face was a blue lime tree laden with fruit for a woman who stood beneath it. She wore a jaguar pelt and cloak, its head adorning her own. Bordering the mirror’s edge were turtles, snails, herons, and other creatures of the water. Luciano Consuelo Petras kept the mirror up for as long as the supermercado was in business. Even when Fresno was overtaken by a tropical forest a few years later he kept and treasured that mirror wherever he went.



*Fresno, 2023.*