

FERNANDO PESSOA, A CHRISTMAS STORY

By Miguel Ángel Manzanas

January 6, 2026

December 24. My birthday. And, like every December 24, after waking up lazily, it's time to indulge in the same solitary routine as on previous birthdays: six or seven hours walking around Lisbon after taking a boat from the other side of the Tagus, from what is known here as the *Margem Sul*. As I am a creature of habit, despite an ambiguous desire for novelty, I always end up taking the same route, which is not entirely predetermined but always follows an upward path, from Praça do Comércio, where the boat drops us off, to Campo de Ourique, the neighborhood where Fernando Pessoa lived during the last years of his life. It's about four kilometers uphill, and even though it's almost noon, I don't see many people, sheltered by an unusual fog that gives the city a ghostly air. I arrive at Campo de Ourique and, as is my custom, I enter the Cementerio de los Placeres (Cemetery of Pleasures—what a beautiful name) for a last stroll before indulging in wine and gastronomy. I know very well that Fernando Pessoa's remains are in the Jerónimos Monastery, but that previously, before his honor and fame took him there, he was buried, alongside his family, in the cemetery where I now find myself. Here also lies his only known girlfriend, Ofélia Queiroz, whose humble grave I stumbled upon, quite by chance, on December 24th of my recent past. The truth is that it had never occurred to me to visit the place where Pessoa was buried before being moved to the renowned monument where he now rests. I ask a cemetery employee about it, but he says he doesn't know the exact location. Google Maps saves the day and shows me where the family grave is.



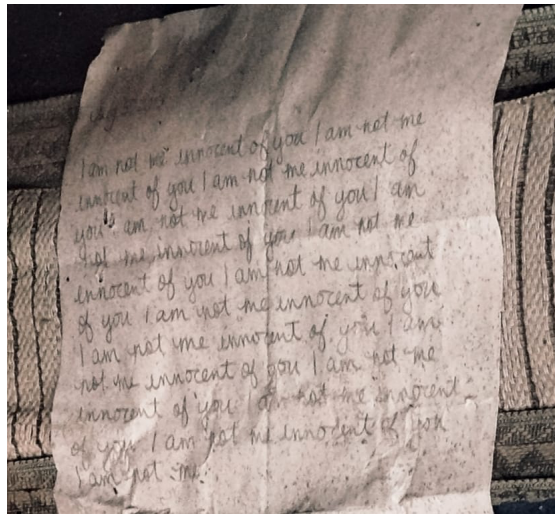
After a couple of failed attempts, I find the grave. "Jazigo de D. Dionízia de Seabra Pessoa" (Tomb of D. Dionízia de Seabra Pessoa) can be read at the top: Dona Dionízia, Pessoa's maternal grandmother, a mentally unstable woman who apparently marked the poet's early years, making him a premature witness to madness. On the right side of the wall, I suppose at the height where Pessoa's coffin was located, there is a small inscription in capital letters: "Fernando Pessoa June 13, 1888 November 30, 1935." I peek through the glass door, and at first glance, nothing catches my attention: several coffins on each side, arranged in a bunk bed structure, which logically must contain the remains of Dionízia's closest relatives. In the place that Pessoa theoretically occupied until his transfer, there is a kind of trunk covered with a blue cloth. At first glance, nothing to write home about, or what did I expect to find inside the tomb? An unpublished poem, his hat, his glasses? But just before I leave, I take one last look and notice that on top of the trunk, somewhat out of my field of vision, there is a piece of paper with handwritten text, and I can make out rounded handwriting, similar to that of a child. It looks like a letter. I decide to take several photographs with my cell phone, some without magnification and others with it, using the camera as if it were a magnifying glass. Too excited, I decide to stop, walk away from the grave, and leave the cemetery. When I return home several hours later, the first thing I will do, I tell myself, is transfer the blurry photographs to my laptop and try to decipher the message. But now is the time to indulge in wine. And so I do, visiting the same bars as always, without the pleasant and morbid memory of that strange piece of paper leaving me completely.

INSERT PHOTO 2



Several hours later, several wines later, I am back home. A quick visit to the bathroom, and straight to the laptop. I connect my cell phone, download the photos, enlarge them: at first the message is illegible, but I apply some filters to the images and the letters begin to take shape. One more filter, a few brightness adjustments, and finally, like a miracle, the text is revealed. It's in English. And the center of the message, to my surprise, is a phrase that is repeated numerous times, more than a dozen times: "I am not me innocent of you," written in neat, large, spacious letters. In my fascination, I believe I am looking at an unpublished work by Pessoa; moreover, the repeated verse fits perfectly into his poetic imagination, but soon, against my will, I regain my sense of logic: above the block of text, in the upper left corner of the page, there is a date: "July 5, 2013." And at the bottom of the page, two more sentences: "Thank you for constellated infinity dear Fernandinho" and "Love from and to the unknown." Finally, as a colophon to the document, a name: "Kelly." I begin to perceive reality, the most plausible prick of Ockham's razor: that this is a letter written by some admirer of Fernando Pessoa who, like me, went to the cemetery more than twelve years ago to pay their respects to the artist in the form of a handwritten note. But the initial disappointment is followed by renewed impetus, a change of attitude, a new enigma: Who does that verse belong to? Could it be the work of Pessoa? And if not, who wrote it? Who is this Kelly who signed the manuscript?

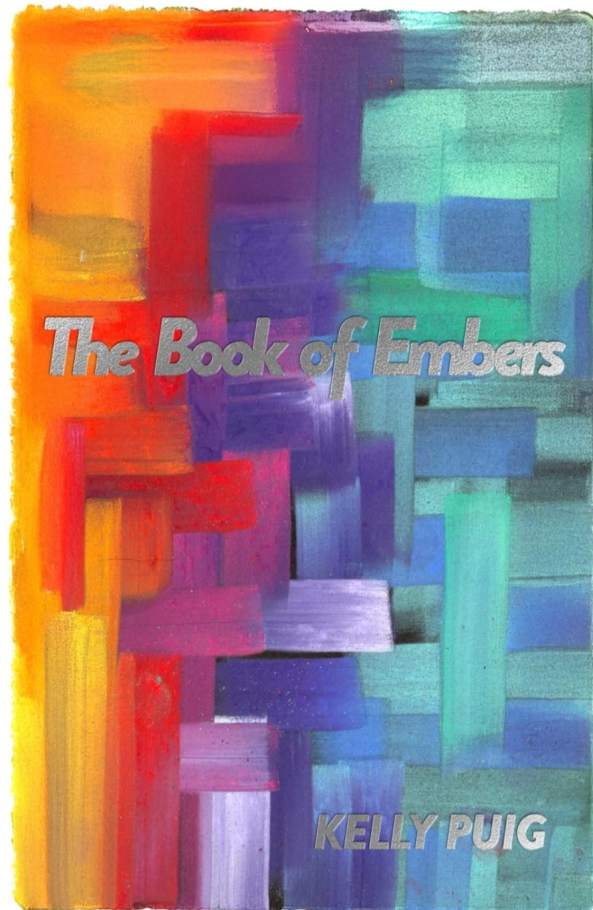
INSERT PHOTO 3



The research is surprisingly easy: I just have to type "I am not me innocent of you" into Google, in quotation marks, and a single web page appears, the only result of my search: "The transmutation of Fernando Pessoa's remains." The text is complex, quite abstract, written in a cultured English that escapes me at times, but what is really important is that, at the end of the article, there is an almost identical version of the verse from the letter: "I am not me, I am not me, innocent of you," and a name: Kelly Puig Carroll. Kelly: the same name that signed the manuscript. A brief biography informs us of the author's achievements: a Master's degree in Literature from the prestigious Brown University in Rhode Island, USA, as well as several publications in various art magazines and her own website where her literary work can be discovered. I have no doubt: I have found the person who wrote the letter. I go to her website, browse through it without dwelling too much on the texts and photographs, and click on the "Bio" option.

There I discover that Kelly is a woman, an American artist of Cuban origin—hence the Puig—who has recently published a hybrid work entitled "The Book of Embers." I click on the "Contact" option, and a virtual link takes me to an email address. And I decide to play Pessoa.

INSERT PHOTO 4



I don't mean that literally, of course: it would be childish and ridiculous to write to Kelly and say something like, "Hi, Kelly, I'm Fernando Pessoa, I just read your letter, nice to meet you." Instead, I play it cool, playing it cool, just like Pessoa did about a century ago when he wrote to the unclassifiable Aleister Crowley about an error he had detected in the astrological chart included in his autobiography: instead of explaining my discovery to Kelly in detail, I simply attach one of the photos I took of her paper along with a curt and suspicious "Hello." Several hours later, I receive a brief reply: "Who are you?" I have no choice but to put the mystery aside and explain to Kelly what happened; to tell her, basically, the same thing I am telling you in these pages. She writes back, fascinated, initially telling me that she does not remember leaving any letter in the cemetery, but that she did visit Lisbon in the summer of 2013 to attend some conferences on Fernando Pessoa's "Book of Disquiet." After several messages back and forth, Kelly seems to recover her memory and tells me that she has just remembered that she visited the Cemetery of Pleasures during her trip and left a flower and a letter on the ground next to the grave, and she sends me a photo as

proof; surely a security guard or cemetery employee picked up the letter and the flower and put them inside, we both agree.

I could go on giving details, recounting the minutiae, subsequent dialogues. Describing the excitement that this unexpected convergence brought us both. But it would be futile, like trying to explain the inexplicable. It is unnecessary: the story has been told. And that was the important thing, to recount this little miracle of chance, this Christmas story. The rest is invisible: let the reader take charge, imagine it, fill in the gaps. Thirteen years after her romantic gesture, ninety years after the poet's burial, a visit I made to the cemetery, a walk without much direction, led to the meeting of two souls. And not two, but three. Fernando Pessoa, Kelly Puig, Miguel Manzanar: it doesn't matter, it's the same breath. "The poet is a pretender," wrote Pessoa. "I am not me innocent of you," wrote Kelly. And I can't think of anything better to add.