

Alan Paton on The Shared Life

John Barthelme

ALAN PATON'S first book in four years is an elegy on the death of his wife, Dorrie, in their South African home two years ago. Brief though it be, "For You Departed," is the only book of Paton's since his two celebrated novels — "Cry, the Beloved Country" (1948) and "Too Late for the Phalarope" (1953) — which evokes flashes of their haunting prose.



Alan Paton

After the success of those novels Paton hoped to become a professional writer, but the politics of apartheid stirred his conscience, and, except for a long political biography published in 1956, he has been silent. It required a shattering event like his wife's death to produce this moving testament.

As Paton himself described it, he began writing the book within a month of his wife's passing. The words poured out of him — remembrance of things past, the flood of shared joys and sadnesses. The entire book is written in the second person as though he were addressing his wife. The result is a narrative instinct with poetry, tenderness, passion and occasional humor. Though he may not have realized it at the time, the writing proved to be an

act of catharsis for Paton the man and writer.

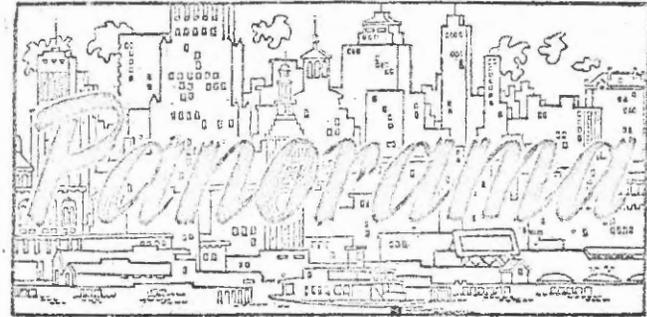
The book opens with a painful description of his wife's death from emphysema caused by heavy smoking. She was a widow six years older than he when they married in 1928, and already she was a confirmed smoker. Gradually it destroyed her lungs, and her last months were spent painfully gasping for breath, which prompted Paton to muse on the fragility of love in the absence of sufficient oxygen. "One morning I said to you, 'I wish I could give you one of my lungs,' but your fear was too great. You were like a woman on a vanishing spit of land in a raging river."

This little book is probably the nearest thing to an autobiography we are likely to get from a writer till now so reticent about his personal life. Looking back over 40 years of marriage unlocked for him the doors of private memory. Re-living thus the high points in his career, he recalls the provenance of "Cry, the Beloved Country," begun in Norway and completed in California, the plaudits of critics around the globe and the journeys to many lands, his increasing involvement in anti-apartheid politics, the searching of his home by the security police and the confiscation of his passport, depriving him of the travel he had come to love.

Many things have been written about "Cry," but Paton sums it up in a few lines for his wife. "It is a song of love for one's far distant country, it is informed with longing for that land where they shall not hurt or destroy . . . for that cannot be again."

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