

The Goodbye Letter

by Shireen Mall

The Goodbye Letter is a short work of fiction, which seeks to capture a number of important episodes in John, my deceased father's life. It is a dialogue using biography and the tools and traditional mediums of biography like letters, clips, journal entries and photos, combined with memory and imagination. By combining archive material in my possession with my own imagined extensions and re-inventions of memories that John recounted to me while he was still alive, or which I myself was privy to, I hope to stitch together a coherent yet simultaneously fragmented representation of episodes in my enigmatic father's life in Cape Town during the apartheid years.

The inspiration for this project was sown unknowingly when my father's goodbye letter was found by my eight-year-old daughter Sarah, a year after her grandfather, John's death in October 1997. A stack of my father's old papers had been burnt in a bonfire in my mother's backyard six months earlier and by chance one afternoon, whilst Sarah was playing there, she came across one un-burnt sheet. This, it turned out, was a goodbye letter from my father to us all. Coincidentally, Sarah was the one sitting on his knee the day he wrote it in 1993; my father makes mention of this in the letter itself.

The serendipitous discovery of this precious literally nearly- lost family document made me wonder what other silences and near silences surrounded my father's life. It also sparked a desire in me to begin to piece together some of the fragments that I had both in memory and archive before my father's story was lost for good.

My quest is to write a piece that captures a series of important events in my father's life, including the death and burial of his own mother. It will fuse the facts and archive material with additions inspired by my memory but fleshed out through the creative medium of fictional writing. This fusion of fact and fiction represents my attempt to acknowledge both the stories which have been lost with my father's passing (the "unsaid") and (the "unsayable"); that is to say, those aspects of life which I can never know absolutely, not just because he is dead and can no longer be interviewed, but because memory itself is subjective and therefore an unreliable doorway into the truth.