

Desolation

PATTIE PRICE

DO THE NAMES Modderdam, Cross Roads, Vrygrond, Unibell, Werkgenot, mean anything more to you than 'Squatter Camps'? Or are the syllables of the word 'Demolition' etched on your brain — forever?

You see the smoke and flames from the distance, but come on them more suddenly than you expected. You do not know what you thought to find, but this was heartless destruction at its worst — total destruction of homes before the very eyes of 'people living there'.

You see the instruments of demolition at their work. Bulldozers — alias 'front-loaders' — tearing up, battering down, and men finally setting alight the miserable shacks of the poor — their only shelter from the icy blasts of the Cape winter. And the people — not squatters, but *people* — fathers, mothers and children — standing around in shivering immobility because there is nothing else they can do.

They are wet and miserable, some agonisingly tired, the smaller children cling to a mother. Here is a woman sitting on a wet box giving her newborn baby the only comfort she could give — her milk.

Responding to the call of the churches, the Sash, the Institute of Race Relations, the Cape Flats Interim Committee and Cafda, concerned citizens move in, sloshing through the rain and mud with hot soup, food, blankets, clothes. And the suffocating smoke of destruction over everything, makes tears flow — if they did not flow before.

The aftermath, next morning, in all its starkness, hits you in the face. It might be a war-devastated area. And this was a community of people a day ago!

The early morning mist across the Cape Flats is mixed with smoke from fires here and there, for the work of destruction is almost, but not quite, complete. Right before you a bulldozer is busy on a remaining shack, determined not to leave anything upstanding, not even a tree, which sullenly refuses to be battered over and recovers after each assault.

A desolate, haunting picture. Here and there through the mist you can see grey and ghostlike figures moving about to beat the bulldozers, snatching what can be retrieved and adding to the small pathetic piles of belongings, waiting the response of the call to concerned citizens to put their Christianity to the test and turn up with cars, lorries, carts and bakkies — anything —

to help to transfer these people and what can be salvaged of their belongings to some form of shelter.

One of the grey ghosts deposits what was once a chair on one of the pathetic piles at the roadside awaiting transport, and rushes to snatch something else from under the very jaws of the bulldozer. As he does so he sees two minions of the law (or BAAD?) dragging out a homemade wooden bed (the work of some ingenious husband or father) and flinging it on the dwindling fire. Unbelievably a large mattress follows but produces nothing but smoke.

The ghost, with a look of utter incredulity (or implacable hate?), stands without moving, then turns, shrugs, and crosses the highway.

The destructers turn to another burnt-out pile, and kicking the edge, pull out a little grey cat. Could it still be alive? Seizing a stick the worker cracks it on the head (an act of mercy?) and throws it on the fire. You do not watch the cremation but turn away. There is an inclination to be sick.

How did other animals fare? You wonder about this in a sudden horror. As you are sickly wondering, you notice a small, anxious brown dog, hardly more than a puppy, appearing from nowhere and nosing distractedly around. He picks up a scent, is off to the side of the highway, plunges regardless into the river of death. You find your breath being held until he emerges on the other side, still following a trail. But the homeless man is out of sight.

A cold mist hangs over the ashes of Modderdam. The occasional bakkie turns up, snatches its load and is off. The little grey cat has gone to a Heaven of No Pain. On the other side of the highway the homeless man emerges from the trees, a little brown dog at his heels — the only joyful soul in a sea of misery.

As you drive off, the glow on the other side of Modderdam increases. New fires have been lighted up. Help will be wanted in this area. The miasma of mist and smoke form a shape hanging over the place.

Not unlike a sword.