

pink elephants on the platteland

Pat Hopkins

‘This is a thing of the devil,’ snarled Broekman Botes in 1962 as he stabbed a finger towards Koos van Zyl’s bulldozer, which had just completed the winding road in Die Hel (‘The Hell’).

Botes feared that this rough track, winding suicidally down a mountain slope and connecting the outside world to the remotest community on earth, would bring in corrupting influences. Little did he realise that the greater danger was that it may pave the way for residents to get out. That is exactly what happened, and today there are few signs that the secret valley was ever inhabited. There is a wisp of smoke from a grey, gabled guesthouse at one end and a white bakkie parked in front of the Cape Nature Conservation offices at the other. In between are a silent schoolyard, a struggling peach tree in an untended orchard, the rusted wreck of a car, a skew cross on a grave, and a pink rose sheltering in a nook against the crumbling mud wall of an abandoned farmhouse.

The Gamkaskloof Valley – dubbed ‘Die Hel’ – is a narrow, twenty-kilometre long fissure in the Swartberg mountains that separate the Karoo from the Klein Karoo. The valley is fortified by a striking display of reefs, pinnacles and great edifices of twisted mauve-and-yellow rock weathered and carved over millennia by violent storms and winds of such ferocity that gusts crack like bullets when screaming through breaches in the ramparts. At the base of this hard land is a miraculous garden given life by the Gamka River, which bisects the valley, and the water that seeps from everywhere in the mountains to trickle over rocks and into streams. Here, an emerald-green field dotted with arum lilies; there, half a mountainside of crimson erica; everywhere, a cacophony of insects, birds and wildlife.

The first people of the valley were the Bushmen whose rock art still decorates the many caves in the mountains. In the 1830s, at about the same time that the first whites arrived, the Khoi chief David Kiever expelled the Bushmen. How Boer farmers discovered the valley remains shrouded in mystery – some think hunters discovered it or that cattle strayed along the Gamka River and found their way into the hidden valley; others believe that a Boer farmer tricked a Khoi tribesman into revealing his honey supply, or that a white boy had been captured and enslaved by Kiever escaped to alert farmers in the Calitzdorp area of the existence of this lush valley. Whatever happened, about twenty Boer families entered what would come to be known as Die Hel, and, again, there are many opinions as to the origin of this name. The most plausible is that the red hot pokers of the tall spiny Cape aloes that grow there resemble the guardians of the fiery gates of hell.

Over the next century, there is only one reference to this community: when Deneys Reitz stumbled across it during the Boer War to be greeted by a ‘shaggy giant in goatskins and his brood of half-wild children’.

It was only the children who were half wild: everyone in this interbred community, which existed on honey beer and withond brandy, was a little rough. 'They drank more brandy than others drank tea and coffee,' said Piet Botha, the stock inspector from nearby Prince Albert who had bullet holes in his hat from the times that residents fired on him after he began calling on them in 1920s.

'My ears were on fire,' said Karel Cordier, describing the effects of the two glasses of honey beer offered to him by Hennie Alhers. 'When I climbed on my horse I slipped off the other side into a marsh. When I again tried to mount I landed back in the marsh.'

As more and more of the illegally distilled liquor from Die Hel found its way out, the police in Prince Albert began to raid the area – with little success. When a new constable, who was unknown in the valley, joined the station, he was assigned to go and purchase a bottle of liquor from Piet Cordier – the most infamous distiller in the valley.

'I hear that you make the best witvuur,' said the policeman, after introducing himself to Cordier. 'Could I please buy a bottle?'

'No, I don't sell my brandy,' replied Cordier. 'But you're welcome to join me for a drink.'

Later, when the constable could barely stand, Cordier agreed to sell him a bottle of brandy, which he swopped just before escorting the policeman out. Shortly afterwards a summons arrived.

'Not guilty, your honour,' said Cordier when asked to plead. 'Before we continue could I ask that the prosecutor taste the contents of the bottle.'

'This is piss,' spat the prosecutor as he sipped a capful.

'Precisely, your honour.' added Cordier.

As beautiful as the valley is, its spirit is no more – exorcised by an uninvited road. Fortunately, however, it lives on in two platteland towns.