

**SHINING LAND**













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*Looking for Robin Hyde*

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There is a meeting-place past the end of the world,  
Not for the ordered ways that searched to the sunset ending,  
But for those whose tattered lameness, past all befriending,  
Dragged along . . .

— Robin Hyde, 'Meeting in Sarras'





# I

We go for a drive.

There are places I've never been in New Zealand — too many places. I spent too many years living elsewhere, and now Auckland encircles me with its water and ranges and clamour. A tunnel is the escape route north, steep hills to the south. Everything feels a long way away. We need a reason to leave town.

My father thought anything south of the Bombay Hills was the South Island. His kāinga was Pakiri, north of Auckland, with its loose-metal roads and indolent river, its cowsheds and scorching beach. Now there are better roads but many more cars. I visit the cemetery at our marae just beyond Leigh: this is our 'meeting-place past the end of the world' where my father waits for me. I rarely make the drive over Pakiri Hill to the valley of ghosts and fragmented memories, of disappeared buildings, of unanswered questions. The beach and the steep island in the distance — Hauturu, or Little Barrier — are contested land. Sometimes they feel too heavy with history, and I envy people for whom they're only scenery.

I have so many questions to ask of the past, but I forgot, or never thought to ask, or the past already seemed distant and unknowable. And now the past can be evaded by turning right instead of left on a particular road.

We take a drive, my husband and I, hurrying before lockdown seals us in. Haru is in quarantine: he'll have to make the drive much later. None of us knows what we're looking for exactly; we are hoping to sense the past below the mown and the overgrown. The ghost we seek is Robin Hyde.





The wraith spent just thirty years in New Zealand: she was born in Cape Town and died in London. Those were thirty years of flesh-and-blood living, growing up in Wellington, moving around the country — Christchurch, Whanganui, Auckland — for journalist jobs or freelance work. She made a name for herself, for better or worse, and her two selves, two names, travelled with her in New Zealand, to China, to Britain.

Thirty years is how long I lived away from New Zealand, making myself up elsewhere. If that had been all the time allotted to me, would I have come home sooner, would I have worked harder, would I have been a different person? These are neither questions nor statements. Is it possible to change who you are by changing your name and crossing the world? Of emigrating the Russian-born writer Masha Gessen writes: ‘I have felt a sense of precariousness wherever I have been, along with a sense of opportunity. They are a pair.’

Iris Wilkinson was a daughter, sister, friend, lover, mother. Nobody’s girlfriend, nobody’s wife. She persevered at the margins — an unmarried mother, a jobbing writer, moving from boarding house to bach to mental hospital, sometimes pitied or derided by her male peers. Robin Hyde published numerous books in New Zealand and Britain; she reported from centres of power and theatres of war; she was in the thick of things, in conversation with influential writers and editors. She and Ursula Bethell were the only women writers included in Allen Curnow’s landmark *Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1945. In both guises — Dr Iris and Mr Hyde — she worked too hard, straining her physical and mental health. She could be very difficult. She had to keep a lot of secrets.

I keep returning to Hyde's books *Passport to Hell* and *The Godwits Fly*; Haru obsesses over *Check to Your King*. Like Hyde, we are investigators, curious about other people's lives. We are wanderers, outsiders. Haru is Japanese, but has lived in New Zealand for almost fifty years. ('When home is not where you are born,' says Gessen, 'nothing is predetermined.') I've been back here for five years: this is the tenth city in which I've tried to make a home. Although I was born in Auckland, I feel unsettled, as if I don't quite belong, or don't wish to belong. I work too hard and achieve too little. I am secretive. I am a difficult woman.

Hyde only once caught a plane — from Nelson to Wellington, the shortest of journeys, in 1936. But she travelled the globe on ships and trains, charged by the events she witnessed, the testimony she heard and the worlds she imagined, her experience distorted by wars both public and personal. 'I am caught in the hinge of a slowly-opening door,' she wrote, 'between one age and another.' How could she have known such a thing?

We set off for some of the small places Hyde lived, wondering how they managed to contain her. Everything is smaller in the past. Hyde bursts from it, vivid and roaring, all the time wanting too much, too wild inside. I try to douse my own wildfires. Hers I fear and pity and admire, watching them there, in the distance, burning out of control.







She made a name for herself, and that name was Robin Hyde. Its origins lie in a bed in Rotorua, then another bed in Sydney. Sex, birth, death — in that order, the doubled pattern of her life, except the final death was not a child's but her own.

From twenty she had two names, and many people who knew her used both. An angry letter to 'Master' Denis Glover at the Caxton Press was signed 'Iris Wilkinson'. Five months later, in better temper, she signed herself 'Robin Hyde'. In one letter Frank Sargeson refers to her as 'Iris' ('a trying old thing') and in another as 'Robin Hyde, the silly bitch'.

Iris Wilkinson was the name she was given by her parents. Robin Hyde, as she told Glover in the angry letter of 1937, was 'not a pen name, but rather intimately associated with my private affairs'.

When Haru and I meet to plan this book — in his studio, Victorian in its excess and curios, a K Road cave of treasures — he says he can't believe she died so young. Like zealots, we tell each other things both of us already know. We call her Hyde because we've met her through her work. We're camp followers, storm chasers. We don't know 'Iris' at all.



Haru is right. She was a young woman. It's easy to forget: she did so much. All those poems and books, the interviews and reports and columns, the editing and writing jobs, the hospitals and rehabilitations, friendships and love affairs, two babies (born in hiding), the moves for work, the odyssey to the war in China, the final journey to England. At seventeen she was working for the *Dominion*. Her first book was published when she was twenty-three. Ten years later she died in London — in August 1939, just before Britain declared war on Germany.

She was thirty-three. Katherine Mansfield — another alumna of Wellington Girls' High School — died at thirty-four. In Hyde's last year as a student, the school magazine published Mansfield's obituary. There 'does seem to me something sad in life,' says the narrator of Mansfield's final story, 'The Canary'. 'It is there, deep down, deep down, part of one, like one's breathing. However hard I work and tire myself I have only to stop to know it is there, waiting.'