

Pip Adam

Andy—don't keep your distance

When I was about 20, we knew a guy called Andrew Moore. He made a skateboard magazine called *Yeah Bo* and played in bands. One night he was on stage setting up and my boyfriend called out, 'Andy! Don't keep your distance!' It was a clever joke. A knowing joke. It was 1990. *Songs from the Front Lawn* had only come out the year before. I was impressed—with him for making the joke and with all of us for getting it. The joke reached out of our orbit a bit, it wasn't an obvious one to make. As I remember we were in some grungy basement and Andy's band was loud and destructive and we'd be walking round for days with the dodgy sound mix ringing in our ears. The Front Lawn were artists. I didn't always use that word as a compliment and at that time I felt a certain tension between being impressed with Harry Sinclair and Don McGlashan—they of the short film masterpiece *The Lounge Bar* and concerts which bordered on performance art—and being suspicious. Who had told them they could do this, I thought? Who had told them they could do this in New Zealand? We muddled on casually, we didn't care, we didn't do things ambitiously. *Songs from the Front Lawn* was experimental and clever and polished. 'Andy' was a beautiful song about loss and money. Like the song itself said, though, at that time listening to our weighty, loud, painful music, I thought, None of this is going to last. I imagined everything would fade. Especially, I thought, The Front Lawn's deceptively slight pop song would make no mark on my life.

Probably the joke is what I thought about more than the song, in the intervening years. Maybe the joke kept the song alive in my thoughts. What did we mean? Making a joke of calling out to a live young man in the words of a song that calls out to a dead young man? At times I thought it was because we knew nothing of death. But that's ridiculous, we were soaked in death—friends OD-ed, friends had car accidents, one person I knew swam too far out from an eastern bay beach and never came back. We knew death—often

in those awful years it felt like we knew nothing but death. Was it a death-defying joke, I wondered? Were we laughing in the face of death? Or was it just a recognition that we were the walking dead—that really it could all be over now . . . or now . . . or now. And why not call out to the living as if they were dead?

When I came to write a book about rich people and Auckland, that line about ‘making money out of money’ came back to me and the view from North Head. *The New Animals* is so much about that harbour. Takapuna Beach felt like a strange and powerful place to me. We lived out east—the whole North Shore was a bit of a mystery. We would go to Long Bay once a year to play in the surf and ride on the ETA miniature train—there was a flying fox. Takapuna Beach is a flat, light-sanded bay bordered by cliffs and rocks you could walk out on. It was vast compared with our short, shelly eastern bay beaches.

So, I listened to ‘Andy’ for the first time in years and cried and then I listened to it again and again and again. I was so confused. How could such a simple wee pop song bear all this attention? Because, I decided, it’s a fucking great piece of art.

During this time of intensive listening, my kid—who was about eight at the time—and I were driving and they said, ‘I always start crying before he even starts singing.’ I’ve always been jealous of the way musicians get to use wordless noise to create tone. I talked to David Long on Wednesday; he plays slide guitar on ‘Andy’. He was in Six Volts at the time. I was trying to work out what the instruments were in the song.

‘Is that a French horn?’

‘It’ll be a euphonium if it’s anything.’

‘Why’s it so sad?’ I asked. I meant the music. David explained that the instruments are played in a naïve way and then the bowed bass comes in and it’s kind of devastating. And I realised the specificity of the sadness. Not just sad—innocence visited by tragedy. Fiction tries to do this too—pay attention to the particularity of emotion and find the correct order of words to express it. But imagine having all those instruments to back up your words. David told me Harry Sinclair is playing a concertina. I googled it, it’s a small accordion. If

you listen closely you can hear the valves being pushed and released and the breathing of the bellows—like lungs.

McGlashan is famously a percussionist and although there are glockenspiel and blocks and cymbals in the orchestration, all the instruments seem to do percussive work in the song—producing beat as well as melody. I love the way this sort of mimics walking. I always imagine the speaker of the song walking up and down that smooth-sanded beach. I thought about it lots when I was writing the walking and swimming parts of *The New Animals*. I realised I didn't have to keep writing—'she is still swimming'—I could show it in the rhythm of the language.

And then there's the lyrics. Don McGlashan said of this song: 'Yeah this is really about my brother who we lost when I was about 15 . . . it's not really an attempt to create a story too far away from that.' This attention to one close event. The genius of the late, casual, easy reveal: 'If you were still alive you'd be just short of 33.' The repetition of 'Andy', after the line explaining 'the rest of the family won't even mention your name'. The lyrics use the change to Auckland as its flashpoint. And we take on that rage for a moment, the rich kids, the buildings made out of glass, only to be cut down by the quotidian and now heavy, heavy almost throwaway line, 'If only you could see your home town now.' The lyrical genius of McGlashan is often this reframing of the everyday. It never feels fussed over. Everything comes seamlessly out of everything else. There's no grand gesture.

On Wednesday 16 September 2016, I walked round Auckland in the footsteps of the characters in *The New Animals*. Around 4pm I took a bus over the harbour bridge. I got off the bus at Shore City realising I was going to get to Devonport too early for Tommy's dinner with his parents. I walked down to Takapuna Beach and sat and watched. I'd decided Elodie would swim past. It was a way out of the harbour. Not the only one but a way that meant she could hear Takapuna Beach waking up. It was a beautiful day and it hit me again. The power of the song to evoke the place. The genius of choosing this place—the happy kids, the cliffs, the change in the architecture that surrounds it, the tininess of us and ours in the horizon. And it cemented in me the conviction that 'Andy' is our national anthem of loss.