

ANDREW MOTION

---

## The Atlas

Years ago—they would do for a lifetime—  
my father gave me the *Times World Atlas*,  
which I soon closed: why so many pages

on soil types, temperatures and rainfalls,  
physical regions, winds and snow covers,  
and so few on how people actually live?

Now I understand. When I turn to the map  
of Britain's Solid Geology, which reveals  
a ball of gum-coloured London Clay

brought to a halt by a thin band of oolite  
on the border dividing Essex from Suffolk,  
I think: it certainly never looked like this,

but here is the place I grew up all right,  
the average July temperature 17 degrees  
at sea level, the annual rainfall between 0

and 750 millimetres, the principal crop fruit,  
and my father covering the calcareous earth  
with long strides, clearing his throat to ask

*What was your question again? Ah, yes. How  
do people actually live?* then stooping away  
like a man trundling an invisible wheelbarrow.

## My Masterpiece

In my other life  
I am the darling  
of the High Renaissance,

and have just completed  
my consummate masterpiece  
'Madonna in a Window'.

The compassion of the face  
and unknowable frown  
are both conundrums

which will outwit scholars  
and bewitch the public  
for the rest of time.

But my real triumph  
consists in the view  
extending behind her,

the mile upon mile  
of blue-green hills  
with their miniature lives.

That miller for instance  
who shuts up shop  
at the height of harvest

and all for a carp  
like a flake of gold  
in the stream of his wheel.

Or the poacher-boy  
who checked his snare  
but discovered instead

his bare-headed girl  
with time to kill  
in a cypress grove.

The lovely Madonna—  
I already know  
the depth of her secret;

theirs escapes me,  
in much the same way  
that a perilous sun-shaft

flees through a landscape  
and just for a second  
fulfils what it strikes

before galleon clouds  
storm in behind it  
and drop their anchors.