

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.