T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2026 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2026 Readers' Notes offer a selection of poems from each of the ten exciting collections on our Shortlist, plus reviews, reading suggestions, and a writing prompt or two for those inspired to respond creatively. We hope the Readers' Notes will aid your deeper reading as an individual, with friends, or within a book group or writing workshop. English teachers: if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, why not hone their skills on this year's Shortlist? And don't forget to check out the T. S. Eliot Prize Young Critics Scheme.

2026
T. S. Eliot
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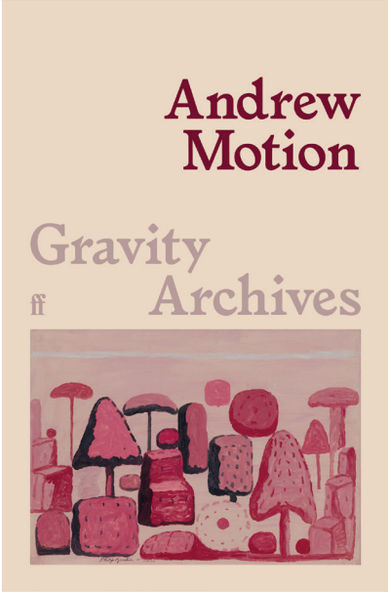

Gravity Archives (Faber, 2026) by Andrew Motion. **www.faber.co.uk**

On *Gravity Archive*

'From his 1978 debut through his laureate elegies for Princess Diana and the Queen Mother, death remains a major preoccupation for Motion. And for good reason: his mother's accidental fall from a horse and subsequent premature death catalysed an unshakeable elegiac pattern, the poet as chronicler of loss – and, by extension, love. But something has subtly shifted in this latest gravitational turn [...] here we see a more rooted and resolute eye surveying the mortality of others as well as his own. An opening sequence of eight roughly sonnet-like poems mourning the Baltimore poet Joseph Harrison contrasts the American's dying courage with the poet's English reticence [...] In 'Autumn Light', a sequence for familial dead begins "Andrew Motion has also died [...] He was a fool in his own opinion", mixing pathos and bathos. In 'English Elegies' John Berryman appears as a "staggeringly drunk" spirit guide, advising against the melancholic pull of home. "*That place was done for, England*, and so on, / John said." Wisely, Motion resolves, "High time / it is that I, like everyone, set out to die alone".' – **Sandeep Parmar, *The Guardian***

'*Gravity Archives* is a book of elegies – for friends who have died, for the English version of himself that Motion left behind upon moving to America, for the friction between what was and what remains [...] The elegiac mode treats the past as though it must be fixed to be mourned, rooted in the understanding that grief requires something to return to. Motion's poems insist on this fixedness with the patience of someone who has spent decades preserving voices that will outlast their speakers.

The title carries more argument than the poems themselves. An archive exerts gravity; it pulls you back toward what cannot be edited. In archival science, a record is authentic only when it cannot be altered without leaving a physical mark. Scripture understood this: the stones Joshua set at the Jordan were witnesses against future revision. *Gravity Archives* is a quiet insistence that each elegy bears the weight of a singular moment, pressed into its form, resisting the convenience of the update.' – **J. M. C. Kane, firstthings.com**

About the poet

Andrew Motion was Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009 and is co-founder of the online Poetry Archive and Poetry by Heart. *Gravity Archives* is his fifteenth collection; other collections include *Essex Clay* (2018) and *Randomly Moving Particles* (2020). He has written acclaimed biographies of Philip Larkin and John Keats. His memoir of childhood, *In the Blood*, was published in 2006, and its sequel, *Sleeping on Islands: A Life in Poetry*, appeared alongside *Selected Poems: 1977–2022* in 2023. Having been Professor of Creative Writing at UEA and Royal Holloway, University of London, he is currently Homewood Professor in the Arts at Johns Hopkins University, and has lived in Baltimore, USA, since 2015.



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What do you think?

- Imagine you are directing a short film of 'The May Tree' – what would be your creative approach? Think about the composition of your shots, the colour palettes, the camera angles. Perhaps your film is not live action, but is an animation…
- What do you make of that 'O' at the end of the fifth stanza of 'Snow'? What might the 'lonely surprise' at the end of that poem be?
- What are the other great poems of snow? Maybe start with **this list from the Poetry Foundation** and add your own. Why might a poet love the snow? What metaphorical meaning might snow develop in a time of climate crisis? Would a Laureate write about snow in the same way that a non-Laureate might?
- What about the word order do you notice in the extract from the 'Gravity Archives' sequence included here? What lies behind that stylistic choice do you think?

Reply in writing

As we were putting together these Readers' Notes, the algorithm served us an advert for a pair of earrings with 'Robins appear when loved ones are near' engraved on them. Is the sight of robin a message from the afterlife? Is a May tree? If your concept of an afterlife encourages you to, write about the entities which might bring you messages from your departed.

Find out more

Other work by Andrew Motion

Sleeping on Islands: A Life in Poetry (Faber, 2023)
New & Selected Poems 1977–2022 (Faber, 2023)
Randomly Moving Particles (Faber, 2022)

On screen

Andrew Motion read his own work alongside the poetry of Keats at the **International Poetry Forum** in October 2025. You can also see him on **A Life in Poetry**, recorded in 2023, talking about his memoir *Sleeping on Islands*, and reflecting on early influences and writing career, his experience as Poet Laureate and his move to the US in 2015.

If you like Andrew Motion's work, try…

- Douglas Dunn
- Hugo Williams
- Will Burns

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. The T. S. Eliot estate has provided the prize money since the Prize's inception, and the T. S. Eliot Foundation took over the running of the Prize in 2016, following Inpress Books' acquisition of the PBS. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. The judges for the 2026 Prize are Leontia Flynn (Chair), Ishion Hutchinson and Daisy Lafarge. For more information, visit **tseliot.com/prize**

T. S. Eliot Prize 2026: join in

- Join our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 17 January 2027. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book for in-person tickets at **bit.ly/eliot26readings** or for the live stream at **bit.ly/eliot26livestream**
- Look out for the latest additions to our amazing **video archive of interviews and poems** with Eliot Prize poets on our YouTube channel: **bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube**
- **John Field's authoritative reviews** of all the shortlisted titles will be published on the T. S. Eliot Prize website over the coming months. Read them online at **bit.ly/eliot26shortlist**
- Browse the brilliant **Writers' Notes series**, devised by our partner the Poetry School, in which Eliot Prize shortlisted poets reflect on the writing of their nominated collections. Visit **poetryschool.com** and search 'writers' notes' –and look out for new additions by poets shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize 2026
- **Sign up to our weekly newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at **tseliot.com/prize**
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram**, **Bluesky**, **X** and **Facebook**: @tseliotprize

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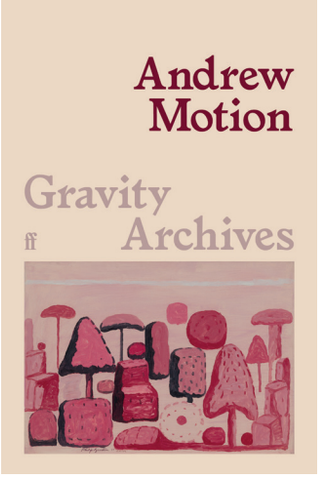
The May Tree

Now I can no longer see you as yourself
you sometimes appear as the May tree

which I remember as airborne snowdrift,
then in the slick of unfolding leaves,

but mostly stripped bare, with its corduroy bark
and scatter of red smears, its black sky

fixed in a passion of electricity,
and thorns scenting blood, blood everywhere.



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Snow

Where in the world did the world
go when the snow
unpacked its infinite number

of blank disguises
in every conceivable size?
And where did sound disappear

when noisy ground
pulled up this weight of white?
Is there a nowhere

now becoming a somewhere
hidden
from hearing and sight?

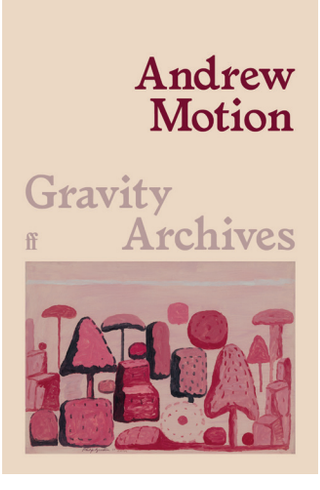
Somewhere like death but not
underground or the end
for ever. O

I would like to know.
In fact
I would like to arrive there now

rather than lie
in this muddle of dull and dazzling light
and wait

for the scrape of a shovel below my window
like someone clearing their throat,
and for my name

as it thaws and enters my brain again
with all I regret
to launch its lonely surprise.



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from Gravity Archives,
2. Between Times

XIX.

Frayed patience of exile; flights delayed or gone;
lost connections and layovers; federal tyrants
ballooning in uniform; nodding epics of Romance.

But I insist, still. In the latest hub, or one looming,
with smoking rooms rammed and enquiry snubbed
by shrugs, grunts, scowls and eyerolls, windows

flaunt runways with clouds grazing blue pastures.
When story can't move on, do we call this one?
High sky battlelines waver in torpid succession,

borders deliquesce, but we, love, flashed old home
the finger, and now angle to each other.
I'll fetch two bottles of water; you watch my seat.

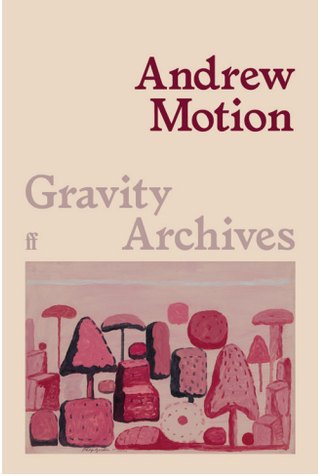
XX.

Basement born I was, but attics grew to love:
an egoist and time I knew myself: hot air rising
bound to be a risk, but I have promises to make

in this life newly bound. I lay my hand on glass
and clearly see through here and now to next,
despite the birch below my window tapping on

and off to catch my eye. Such prettiness I like.
Our first night here, stuff in transit still, we threw
a mattress down and on the floor began the time

we live in now. White door, white walls, and beams
too weak to hang myself I could not help but think,
before I shut my eyes and other dreams flew down.



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