

Matt Howard *BROADLANDS*, BloodaxeBooks, Sept. 2024

Reviewed by Ann Skea



Cuckoo chick fed by a meadow pipit. Pete Walkden.

What is it like to hold a baby bird in your hands? In ‘Nest Surveying, II, 17/4/17’, Matt Howard writes of his ‘every nerve’ caught

*with the hot throb and scratch
of pin feathers, and the faecal sack
clamminess...*

This is the reality of it. Not just a romantic thrill, as you might expect, but the feel of a body and a reminder of its natural processes. Then, on this particular bird-protection nest survey, there comes a moment of mutual shock when suddenly the mother bird is back

...bristling

*perched on the gorse,
at our head-height, no less
than four feet away.
Her whole desperation
fixed at my own gape.*

‘what am I midwife to?’ he wonders as she stands and faces this ‘ogryish outweighing of the odds’ with an unwavering ‘casting and re-casting’ of ‘ringlets of song’.

In another poem about an organised nest survey, Howard contrasts the careful documenting of data about nest location – ‘note it all down’ - with the need to follow ‘the quick of a wren’s mind’, to ensure she is ‘momentarily off’ before touching the nest; then the emotional ‘whelm’ of placing his fingertips on ‘four eggs’ – new life that ‘is the beginning of everything’.

Matt Howard is, as he said at a poetry reading, ‘just an amateur with a passion for nature’. He lives and works close to the Norfolk Broads and has spent years exploring and getting to

know the rich diversity of plants and animals in the meadows, reed-beds and marshlands of the Broadlands. He believes that there are many 'modes' of being an ecology activist, and, for him, poetry is an important one. He wants to let us be there with him in the field so that we feel nature and think about it, to put us into the conversation, and to provoke us.

In activist mode, one poem in *Braodlands* is, unusually, a list: a 'Chemical Chorus' - a chant in capital letters of all the 'safe' (?) DDT replacements we are still using as herbicides and crop desiccants in our farming practices. There are 20 of them in his list, which ends 'GLYPHOSATE GLYPHOSATE GLYPHOSATE'.

In another poem, not content with just noting hazards to our environment, he pronounces a heart-felt 'curse of losses' on 'the bastard or bastards' who dug up the milk parsley on which 'twenty or more' native swallowtail butterflies (restricted to this area of England) were living.

In contrast to this, there is a poem full of joy as he observes Field Teachers leading groups of young school children, 'liberated or herded', into a bare, rain-sodden, marshland meadow where they learn that the ground beneath their feet is 'only floating on all the grown and growing things', and that '*by jumping together, we move the whole world*'. So,

*Up they go, bewildered and delighted
almost instantly landing, feeling the ground shift and righting.*

*Just look at the air about them, the peat spatters,
that earthy freshness catching the breath.*

Howard has a clear-eyed awareness of the complexity, beauty and resilience of the world around us and of our role in its ecology. 'See how the rotary ditcher is / making all this' he urges. How it excavates

great lengths

*of foot drains, shallow pools, fresh lymph nodes
off the main dykes There's a new fringe
already in the wing mirrors,...*

But 'these muck scars will not last'. In a matter of weeks there will be grazing for the wild birds - 'wigeon', 'pink-feet', 'redshank', 'lapwing, and 'midge larvae' for their chicks. Here, 'We're no more than tending a body of water // that'll bloom the tumbling displays to come'.

Howard is a close observer of the insects and plants he has come to know well and his descriptions are beautiful as well as being biologically precise. In a poem about the 'Marbled Orb Weaver', he sees not only the sticky silkiness and the 'tensile strength' of the web that he accidentally disturbs, but also the spider's 'egg-bloated /green-cream abdomen'; the 'Jurassic

proximity / of brain, venom gland, fang'; and 'each segment of forelegs' as she raises her 'fused cephalothorax' to strike at his 'chewed-raw-to-the quick' fingertip.

There is similar precision in his description of a parasitic ichneumon wasp laying her eggs in the 'pulsing / fleshiness of swallowtail larva'. The beauty of the wasp is in sharp contrast to the gruesome process, but the resulting emergence of the newborn wasp from its caterpillar host leads to a thought about our own, less fully formed, emergence into the world. It emerges

*sure
in its wasp rigging,
dripping still
with the other, fully born
from the other, as we could never be
made so young or so fully formed.*

Not all the poems in this collection are about nature, and the range of emotions evoked is astonishing. There is joy, anger, love, grief, irony and nostalgia. On wartime bomb-sites bursts of wild flowers are 'off looting / each annexed margin for living space'. An apocryphal story tells of a 'hot mid-morning' church service interrupted by a hobby falcon crashing through a stained glass window with an insect-feeding swift in its mouth. A transcript of the parliamentary 'Acte for the preservation of Grayne, 1566', details the birds and other animas for which bounty will be paid: 'for the heads of any old Crowes, Choughs, Pyes, or Rookes, for the heades of every three of them one penny'.... for the Heades of every Otter or Hedgehog, two pence'.

There is humour, too. In 'Odonatologists' Anecdote', the 'distinguished' dragon-fly specialist, Hansruedi Wildermuth, 'after all the flight seasons, mosquito bites, / sunburn, then / winters, wading through papers', and after chasing the insects 'down so many waterways and flyways', is attacked in his own garden by a dragonfly laying its eggs 'just under the ball of his left ankle'.

Some of the poems are personal memories, others respond to the work of other poets, and there are two remarkable longer poems in the collection.

In 'Queen Wasp', three carefully structured columns urge us to 'watch' and 'get close' to a queen as she chooses a nest site in a shed, masticates the wood and moulds it in her mouth to make 'the first papery nest strut' and 'inverted cup' of the nest-cells, then walls herself in until, amid 'the drone and thrum of her number', 'more queens more chances' have been created. Everything, as the poem repeats, is 'brighter in her wake'.

The second of these two poems is very different. Inspired by Hungarian poet Ferenc Juhász's 'The Boy Changed into a Stag cries out at the Gate of Secrets', it is an account of the shooting and death of an old stag, as told by its hunter. 'It's time to bring the old boy home mother', he begins, and, as in Juhász's poem, the repeated calling to the mother conveys the

enormity and the pathos of this 'gate of secrets' which takes us from life to death. Unlike Juhász, however, Howard ends the poem with the stark reality of the dismemberment which is the final result of this particular deer shooting.

By no means are all of these *Broadlands* poems biologically precise, or concerned with death. There are also poems prompted by history, boyhood memories, thoughts about museum exhibits, 'the snail in medieval manuscripts', and, about love.

A walk through the 'insect-business' of a loke (a Norfolk dialect word for a short lane), noting the foxgloves with their 'fuller, lower lips and separate freckles', the 'very last of the hawthorn' and 'the elder with each umbel so full of offers', leads to wondering 'how any of this ever works', and memories of 'our fist wind-blown glances' and 'all those years' 'through so much fruit-set and blossom fall'.

In the final poem, 'Though the singing season's done with', the 'spin and drift' of 'the bundling / cottony-white of back poplar seeds' through every part of the house, becomes 'what I most want to remember'.

*May they always. This evening and tonight
Darling there's no need to fuss or clear it,
let's sleep with the windows wider
as all our years, those before and to come,
let's wake to its mantling everywhere.*

Howard's special skill is to vividly bring to life the animals and plants that he knows so well and that belong to the precarious but strong world of nature, with its continuous cycle of renewal. We, too, are involved - sometimes helping, sometimes destroying what is essential. His language is clear and his descriptions are full of the small details that make images jump into the imagination, yet there are underlying thoughts or beliefs which make these poems well worth careful re-reading.

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Matt Howard has worked in various roles for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. He is a well-published poet, and has won a number of prestigious awards for his poetry. He has also been poet in residence at the Cambridge Conservation Initiative and at the Wordsworth Trust, and was Douglas Caster Cultural Fellow of Poetry at the University of Leeds in 2021-3.