

# The Many Errors of our Way

## On Ken Edwards’ *Down With Beauty*<sup>1</sup>



*Brian Marley*

Uncertainty lies at the heart of many of the fictions collected in *Down With Beauty*. And bemusement. And, perhaps inevitably, a creeping sense of unease and foreboding. It can start, as it does in ‘Us and Them’, with one of several seemingly innocuous factors. For example: “There is excessive arm swinging while walking.” Unusual, perhaps, though none too troubling. But soon something more ominous is felt, something oppressive: “The air is heavy with their breath.” The title lets the reader know where the narrator’s sympathies lie, so what needs to be defined is what the gulf between *us* and *them* consists of, and how great it is. And how could it not be great, given that “Their knowledge seems to them to be perfectly systematic, yet it is complete nonsense from start to finish.” Like all such binary social constructs, misunderstanding and misrepresentation are key: *they*, quite obviously, are not like *us*, and as we are right in how we behave, according to well-established and respected social norms, then *they* must be wrong. And if they’re wrong, as indeed they are, it surely follows that they must be punished for their wrongdoing. Unless, of course, the tribe of *them* is the dominant tribe of the two and better placed to mete out punishment. This authoritarian model of social

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<sup>1</sup>Hastings, UK: Reality Street

division, which triggers and sustains conflict, and which flourishes in even the most advanced democratic societies, provides no solution and no obviously workable way to achieve resolution. For the writer of fiction, though, it offers an extremely rich seam of material.

In the title story, the pile-up of slanted, exaggerated observations creates an atmosphere of tense alertness, paranoia and dread. Peculiarly, the specifics of the threat aren't important. In an undisclosed country, war is imminent – or perhaps it's already begun, just over the horizon, felt as nothing more than an ominous rumble, a dusty shimmer in the air, blotting out the sun. What's feared is that at any moment the settled life of the community may be thrown into chaos. The opening paragraph sets it out perfectly:

War is coming I'm telling you about it what is now won't last  
can't last and that what is coming who can say when the filth  
will be swept away when the language will be cleansed when  
our hands will shape up when the button will be pushed when  
the adorable scholars will prevail this is a wake-up call

The agenda suggested here is massive, the urgency of which is emphasised by the absence of punctuation. Massive: not just, as one would expect, the cleansing of the language and the filth swept away – totalitarian regimes always action this, it's their vain attempt to wipe clean the slate of history and create year zero, from which everything will be as it should be and would always have been had things been perfect from the outset. I love the notion that the “adorable scholars will prevail”, running, as it does, contrary to the prevailing sentiment. Unless, of course, those scholars, though once adorable, have become compromised to such a degree that they start to work under the totalitarian thumb grumblingly, cynically or even willingly. Corrupted or cowed, they may indeed prevail. But how adorable will they then be? This is what Edwards does: present the reader with material that seems, at times, contradictory or at least hard to reconcile; he forces us to think about what we're reading and bring intelligence and judgement to bear on it. That's especially true of the novella-length 'Nostalgia for Unknown Cities' (to which I provided a sidebar in GHR Vol. 1 No. 11), which was previously published as a separate slim volume but finds its natural home in this collection.

Edwards is a fine poet, too, which is apparent in occasional surreal run-ons and odd but apt choices of word and phrase. Not only that, he's capable of introducing a big idea within the confines of a short sentence. Incongruity is his watchword. "His thoughts were collected, before being dispersed for profit," as the narrator acknowledges passingly in 'A Memoir of Our Father'. What thoughts? How much profit? Who can say. And does it really matter? He suggests that stories, no matter how rooted they are in everyday reality, become, in their retelling, increasingly fictive, and one individual's retelling will almost certainly fail to tally with that of another: "That's what they say, anyway, that's the story. It's only a story. A series of rooms, one leading off the other" ('The Story of Nobody'). Fiction at its best is a tricky enterprise, a complex of smoke and mirrors, which most writers try to ground and simplify and, in the process, often inadvertently drain of its quirks and energy. In essence, they do all the thinking they can for the reader, on the reader's behalf. That's nice of them. It's cosy. But Edwards' work is tougher, more challenging, and much more satisfying.

If it seems, from what I've written here, that his work consists of nothing but a litany of paranoia, grief and handwringing, then I'm remiss. Take, for example, 'Free Improvisation', the comic tale of a saxophonist invited to sit in at an improv workshop, of which the other participants inexplicably fail to attend. Acting in accordance with the instructions he's been given, he starts to play from the moment he arrives at the venue, expecting the others to turn up eventually and join in. His levels of puzzlement, disappointment and annoyance fluctuate, but against all the odds he turns in an ecstatic performance, surpassing by far the prior expectations he had concerning his technical ability and quality of musical invention – of which he, reflected in a mirror, is the sole witness. In a dystopian vein, though just as comic, is the promotional/instructional machine-speak of 'The Edge', in which glitches in the software of a futureworld theme park, whose principal attraction is spectacular views of the worryingly near Event Horizon, pepper the corporate bumph with jarring error messages and inappropriate instructions, leading to a total collapse of the system.