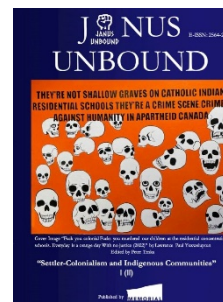


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## This All Happened?

Douglas Walbourne-Gough



*Most of us think that history is the past. It's not. History is the stories we tell about the past.*  
—Thomas King

i) relative perception

Back in Toronto, the same place my mother  
left Corner Brook for. Me just a year old, oblivious  
to the friction I'd caused for being born. We're in  
The Caribou Club, where Harry Hibbs would pack  
the house with Newfoundlanders sick for home,  
where my grandfather would play open mic nights,  
when he and my grandmother still smoked Export A's,  
drank rum n cokes. Long before church, prayer,  
and small town talk steered them toward the light.

The bar was also their living room, every table  
set up like a coffee table with couch and wingback  
chair on repeat, each table displayed a large bible,  
its zippered closure undone, the splay offering  
gold-gilt pages, christ's words under neon red.  
My grandparents and mother somehow sitting  
at all the tables at once. Pop's accordion a remote  
for 'the multicordion'—in lieu of a juke box  
he'd built a glass case full of glowing glass tube  
amps, bellows, pneumatic hoses. Lifetime of tithings  
paid in saved change lining the bottom like a hoard.

Each note played would brighten the lights,  
flush rushes of air through the hoses, bring his  
voice over the speakers blowing benediction  
as he whipped the accordion around his wrists,  
left then right, slinging it behind his back, eyes  
shut in ecstasy, my grandmother's hands thrown

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## This all Happened?

up in rapture while my mother smoked, lit each one from the last, unimpressed. My grandfather's eyes wide, whites like a hunted animal's, christ's voice quoting Hank Williams—*if you're gonna sing, sing 'em somethin' they can understand.*

My grandmother cross-stitches sheet music in scrolls, her perfect up-do catching sheens of light at every table, asks my mother—*can my grandson read music?* Slow snakes of smoke emerge from my mother's nose, shakes her head *no*, drops the butt in a half-empty glass of draught. Her mother shrugs, *there are other ways to serve.* Mom musses my hair, her eyes' green glint keen as a cat, smiles back a drawer of knives—*not the worst thing I've done.*

I'm in the room, can hear their words, the music, smell tobacco smoke and sour beer but my hand passes through her shoulder when I try to say *look at me, you did damn well.* I notice my infant self in a bassinet look back at me with a shrug and realize this isn't the way it all went, nor is it a fiction. My grandfather's accordion hits the floor, its black and white pearl keys fall out like old teeth and the lights come up—the tables gone, no longer sitting in The Caribou but waist-deep in water.

ii) status

I'm waist-deep in Parson's Pond, my mother's parents  
in the water with me. Instead of dunking me under  
in Jesus' name my grandfather, pentecost pastor, gently falls  
backward. A small kick from his legs, *sure, I can lead you  
beside quiet waters but why can't we just go for a swim?*  
Nan, all grace and sunglasses, floats by with a crossword,  
*six-letter word for social rank, starts and ends with s?*

My father's folks paddle past, the phrase *teach em to fish...*  
runs the length of their canoe. They raise their mugs  
of tea with a wink as they tow the sun across the sky,  
their grins possess a knowing I can't quite place. I don't realize  
I'm floating on my back until the moon appears above me  
and the pond's gently in my ears, whispering *as above,  
so below* in the voices of both grandmothers at once.

My father's arms come under me, says *heard you're feeling  
a little lost, nothin a few hours around the fire won't fix.*  
He stands full height, a few stars caught in his beard,  
carries me home in strides, his boots brush the tips of  
black spruce like grass. From up here, we can see Sandy Point,  
can see St. Paul Island as he wades out the bay, *Elmastukwek*  
suddenly on my lips as we head to Cedar Cove.

He takes my wallet, with its government-issued cards,  
takes my christian guilt and self-doubt, drops them into his  
parents' old coffee-can kettle. I ask *why can't I just burn it all?*  
He hands me some matches, nods behind me. My mother  
steps in from the surf on a wave of rolling capelin—*some things  
we shed, some we're steeped in.* She adds the rising tide,  
a few newspaper obituaries, the open throat of a pitcher plant.

Together, we build a pyre of kindling and driftwood, filling  
it with birchbark, but I want to run. She hands me the kettle,  
gently kisses my cheek. *We know who you are, but we can't  
make you believe it.* Shaking, I strike a match to birch, watch  
the bark recoil, gift itself to fire. Not brave, just tired of telling  
myself the same story, I spit the phrase *not enough* into the can,  
break into heaves and sobs, let the kettle boil.

This all Happened?

## Biography

Douglas Walbourne-Gough is a poet and member of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation from Corner Brook, Newfoundland. His first collection, *Crow Gulch* (Goose Lane Editions 2019), has been nominated for several awards, and won the 2021 EJ Pratt Poetry Award. He is currently working on his second collection, tentatively titled *Island*. Douglas' current research interests centre on the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq experience in the wake of the Qalipu enrolment process. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing (UBC Okanagan) and is a PhD candidate in English/Creative Writing (UNB Fredericton).

## Notes

\**Elmastukewek* is the Mi'kmaq word for the Bay of Islands in Ktaqmkek, or Newfoundland.