Empty Doorways, A Novel
Len Abram

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.
-- Archibald MacLeish

Chapter One

The boy read the story in Ms. Colavita's eighth grade English class. He couldn't recall all the stories. Forgotten things live in a place she called oblivion. He lost things there too, but not this one. For Gabriel Clay, the memory of what he read was as close as the sweat on his palms.

In the story, the butterflies arrive and then the ice. Fighting for his life the secret agent on the run felt as if butterflies were landing in his belly. They finally flew away, but his fear stayed. The agent felt as if frost had coated his throat and chest and his blood was freezing into red snow. The boy shivered. Ms. Colavita said fear was powerful. She was right. It could turn people inside out. He was scared.

Thumb-tacked to the powdery plaster of his room posters covered the walls. Hoop stars and legends shot jumpers or drove through arms and legs for a perfect layup. He leaned against the headboard of his bed stacked with the books he hadn't finished or started. The light of the streetlamps, white as milk, leaked through the thin blinds and spilled onto the floor.

Here it comes, he thought. The first insect landed inside his belly. Wings dry as bay leaves grabbed onto a puff of air and rose. Gabriel felt lighter with the insect gone, although it weighed less than the air lifting it. That's what flight was in the nature films; the magic of wing and wind.

Gabriel found few butterflies around the neighborhood where Maddie Clay, his grandmother and he lived. He had to go three miles to Franklin Park to see them. In broiling July woods and steamy August fields, butterflies flew by the dozens: yellows, whites, blues, and reds, and his favorite, orange and black, all the way from Mexico.

The butterfly in his belly gone, chills started up his spine knob by bony knob. JJ had told him, "You a player now." Player, he understood, meant making the varsity team. Yes, Gabriel was a competitor now, along with JJ in his business. The boy noticed that he, too, was dropping his verbs. Ms. Colavita would have corrected JJ's speech. "It's not *ast*, but asked," she would insist.

In English class, Ms. Colavita wouldn't let up on the subject-verb agreement. "If we don't agree on anything, we will agree about subjects and verbs. It's not 'You be a good friend,' but 'You are a good friend,'" she commanded. "And make sure he or she is a real friend, interested in your well-being." Gabriel wasn't sure if JJ was a good or a real friend. Maybe JJ's favorite expression answered this: "It ain't good or bad. It's good for business or bad for business. Ya know?"

Ms. Colavita influenced Gabriel long after school. She expected things from her students, things he didn't want to give. He heard her voice hours after she spoke. She warned and encouraged, biting down on the important words, like honor and respect, like breaking nuts with her brilliantly white teeth.

"And I don't want to hear profanity," she said. "The rude words, the gutter words, the words the rappers use. The N-word, the M-F-word, and that atrocious B-word, contempt for the women who make your lives possible. Do you know what these so-called artists do? They sell poison, hate, low expectations, and anger…all the while they get rich off you. You're their victims, not their fans."

Gabriel didn't understand everything Ms. Colavita said, but he did listen. When she looked at him, he felt special. Tall as he was, she sat him in the front row so the kids behind looked around him. She whispered to him after class, "I am keeping not one but both eyes on you, Gabriel Clay. You have more in that mind of yours than you show the world, young man."

He rewrote his assignments for her a half a dozen times, fixing grammar and changing words until she said he got it right. His last paper on George Washington Carver, the man whose name was on their school, was his first A-minus. She added a smiley face, a rare compliment.

Ms. Colavita corrected how he spoke too. She hated Ebonics. Until she said it, he thought Ebonics was a disease from Africa, not how he talked and what he heard outside of the classroom. "Leave street talk out there," she said, pointing to the windows and the neighborhood two stories below. "This is our school." Her chocolate skin, darker than most of her students coupled with her straightened hair earned her the right to tell other blacks how to speak.

Gabriel was black too, but more mocha than the darker-skinned Haitians or Somalis, although his size might be from Africa, at least from what he read. JJ picked him because he looked older, Gabriel guessed. Wasn't he African-American? The African part was from the Masai warriors in Tanzania. A picture on the wall of Mr. Yasi's classroom showed the African plains, animals grazing, so many like black smudges, and in the forefront, tall, lean as saplings black men with long spears and small shields, the Masai.

They, too, would bang their heads going through doorways. The boy reminded himself to duck. His grandmother said for him to get used to it, that he'd spend a lifetime bending. "Doorways are made for average folks. You most certainly not that," she said, half proud and half worried. People who are not average can get the wrong kind of attention.

On the neighborhood basketball courts, Gabriel was in high demand. With his long arms, he grabbed rebounds. With his jump shots, he leaped eye level with the hoop. In the summer, some business dude, Mr. O'Toole, put up money for tournaments.

Because of his size his grandmother said he looked older…mature, Ms. Colavita called it. "You still a boy. Don't grow up too fast," Grandmother Maddie cautioned. That was outside. Inside, he had his fears, his butterflies, and ice. As a little kid, he remembered biting down on his lower lip. The spike of pain made him stop fretting. He bit down now, but it did no good. Before he tasted blood, he let up. Nothing helped except getting it done and be home before daylight. He tiptoed barefoot to the kitchen.

Steady, he told himself, and the word did nothing to settle him.

Gabriel used the light from the refrigerator door to fill a glass with milk. He drank it in one breath. Maddie bought him whole milk to put weight on his scrawny backside, or so she had said. In the reflection of a glass cabinet, he saw the white mustache of the milk against his dark skin. He wiped it off with his arm. The milk settled his stomach.

Time to go.

Back in his room, the underwear on the chair was cold. In the dark, he dressed and shivered. He pulled the blanket over his legs and waited to warm up and for the clock to read his release.

Two or three times a month, Gabriel snuck out to meet JJ. That's what the neighborhood called him, JJ, although his first name was James and last was Jill or Jillian, but had nothing to do with J's except maybe slang for the weed he sold. Gabriel met him at Mr. Malik's store.

The kids hung out in front of the 7/11 run by the Pakistani, Mr. Malik. The wife came in a few days a week. She wore shiny dresses that gave her the appearance of being wrapped up like a Christmas present, and her hair covered in a silk scarf. Mr. Malik watched the crowd the day Gabriel met JJ. Malik's eyes were like knife-points darting from kid to kid, looking for a bag of chips stuffed under a sweater or a candy bar slid into a back pocket. The expensive things, the cigarettes and scratch tickets, stayed behind the counter.

Mr. Malik waved his arms, his signal for the boys to quiet down. He put their cash in the till and counted the change. The store burst with noise, kids liberated from classrooms and enforced order. They pushed against each other, spilled out the swinging doors and filled the sidewalk, their racket scattered among the sounds of passing cars and trucks.

A car pulled up to the curb in front of the store. The kids looked up. The performance mufflers coughed as the car idled. JJ's silver Honda was low-slung, with smoked windows and the chrome wheels that spun after the car stopped. The body and chrome glittered with polish and the walls of the tires were glossy black.

JJ parked in the handicapped zone. He got out and leaned against his car, making conversation with the high school and middle school kids, his current or future customers, not that he had anything to sell that afternoon, in case the students were interested. This close to the school—a few hundred feet—meant a mandatory two years in jail, plus any additional MDs. That is, misdemeanors, or felonies, or any felonious shit, as he called them.

JJ thought himself an up-and-coming rapper. He had recorded an album at a studio on Mission Hill, although none of the kids had heard it. He leaned into his Honda and turned the radio up and opened the trunk. Bucket-sized speakers blared bass and drums in 3/4 time. JJ did a few hip-hop moves, old break-dancing stuff, and then rapped to the assembled students about the 300-foot rule:

JJ no fool
300 by school
do extra two
DEA gotta rule!

The kids laughed. They were drinking soda and eating candy, microwaved corn dogs, or leftover bagels from the morning. After six hours of a charter school with its "No, sir," or "Yes, ma'am," they were enjoying the time…theirs to waste.

JJ surveyed his audience in their charter school uniforms, wrinkled white shirts, crooked ties, and matching blue backpacks as they leaned against the storefront. The students laughed, bright white teeth and pink gums in the black and brown faces. JJ joined in the laughter. The kids accepted, even enjoyed him. He didn't look much older than the group.

JJ stretched his thin back against the door of the Honda, his knuckles under the eggs of his biceps to make them bulge. His feet tapped to the beat from his speakers. He fingered a braided gold chain, so heavy it made marks on the pole of his neck. JJ pulled the pendant up on the chain from behind his T-shirt and out came large gold letters: D-O-P-E.

After chatting everyone up, buying drinks and snacks, exchanging knuckle bumps and high-fives, JJ motioned to Gabriel to come over to the car. The boy held back. JJ called him by his first and last name, a surprise to him and he wondered briefly how he came about *that* bit of personal information. JJ offered him an ice cream. Gabriel was silent. JJ took that as a yes and came out of the store with two cones, chocolate, and nuts on top.

"Wanna ride?" JJ asked.

The boy hesitated, until one of the others said, “Go ahead, Gabe. He okay.”

JJ drove while the two of them ate their ice creams. The dealer seemed to inhale his and tossed the sticky cone out the window. Gabriel ate his cone after he had unwrapped three of Mr. Malik’s thin napkins, careful not to drip on the leather seats. They drove up Blue Hill Avenue and then to woodsy Blue Hills, where they parked in the lot near the nature trail. JJ offered Gabriel a joint, but the boy passed.

The dealer opened all the windows and smoked, the sweet odor mixing with pine from the trees. JJ got right to it. He had a job opening. A job? the boy thought. As JJ explained it, he was in the entertainment business, like video games and TV shows, except this was personal; “The game inside a dude.” The way JJ saw it, the law didn’t understand his business.

“So, why they after me about drugs? Drugs? Doctors give out all kinds of pills. They use needles too, the docs. Every CVS and Walgreens got counters in back full of drugs. Well, I’m kind of a doctor—I bringing joy to the world. If there was more joy in it, people wouldn’t need what I sell.”

JJ seemed like a thoughtful person. Meaning, he thought about things. Different from what they taught in school but thinking all the same. JJ thought he could teach courses about the streets, how they worked, who owned or controlled them. JJ explained he had his own rules. They were the rules of the streets. And they were righteous rules, no matter what the police said.

“Rules?” Gabriel said doubtfully.

“Yeah, sure,” JJ said, disappointed that Gabriel didn’t understand their significance. “You gotta have rules or nothing makes sense. Can you have a basketball hoop at home plate in a football game? No way. You gotta keep things separate and orderly. My rules. I don’t sell to nobody under the age of fourteen. When I was fourteen, I be a man, if you know what I mean, and I was a daddy by sixteen. That bitch took the kid and went South, the real South, where they got farms and corn and cotton and shit. She told me to leave here and go there. What I gonna do there? Plant weed? I send her money, just once in a while. Her lawyer after me, but you know what the cost of living up here is, right? So, I got to do my business.” JJ sat up in his seat and glanced over at Gabriel.

“We’re talking business now, Gabriel…man to man. This is how I run my enterprise. These youngin’s, if they be, let’s say fifteen, want to do weed or ice or molly and they got the cash, why should I say no? But fourteen be my limit for weed and for sure anything else. If you over sixteen, you can buy what you got the cash for.”

“Do you check their ID’s?” Gabriel asked. It was a silly question, he knew, but a way to hold his own in the conversation.

“No, why would I?” JJ responded, annoyed. “I always can tell them ages. You fourteen, right?”

“In a couple of weeks,” Gabriel said. He knew he didn’t look twelve, his real age, or even thirteen. More like a high schooler, where he was headed. He hoped he spoke the words smoothly enough to sound like the truth.

“I been watching you. You look like a dependable,” JJ said.

A dependable? The boy didn’t know what JJ meant, although Gabriel was in line for advanced placement in English next year.

“Dependables,” JJ continued, “are them that do the right thing when no one be looking. Most people are good in front of a policeman or judge, real test is what you do all alone. You get my thing?”

Gabriel got it. JJ’s thing meant thinking, but he couldn’t quite come up with the word. Close enough.

“Of course, if you be religious, then Jesus looking down and keeping score. But if you don’t believe in Jesus, like me, then you gotta keep your own score. But you be a good student and a church-goer too. I seen you and your grandma walking up Blue Hill Avenue in any kind of weather, heading to that little church on the corner, one that used to be a fried chicken place.

“I got work for you to do, young man. The work be easy,” JJ said, eyeing Gabriel up and down. “Delivery and pickup, like UPS. Nothing much to do and the money be good. You try it once and see for yourself.”

JJ passed a couple of twenties to Gabriel. “See, you already on the payroll.”

Gabriel thumbed the two twenties. They felt good, so crisp the edges could cut skin. What would his grandmother or the church deacon say about taking this money? The boy knew JJ’s business. Everyone did. The church leaders warned the youngsters about the drugs and their dealers.

The closest lesson was his own mother; when she was using heavily, Maddie wailed that she couldn’t recognize her own daughter. The need for the drugs took her. Somebody supplied her, but it wasn’t JJ. He heard it was someone who traveled through the neighborhood like a black ghost in a Lexus white as the North Pole.

JJ let on he knew who the man was, at times worked for him in the same business. No wonder his grandmother thought drugs a demon, something the Devil thought up in his battle with the Lord. The deacon of their church said he didn’t think the Lord was winning.

Drugs ruined lives. Gabriel was small enough to look up at his grandmother when they visited his mother in what they called rehab. He overheard adults talk. His mother had been sleeping in bad places, abandoned buildings, and her skin was covered in bumps from dirt and insects. She came home from rehab looking like herself, her skin clean and smooth. She stayed with Maddie and Gabriel for a year. She cleaned offices in Boston late at night, joined them at church on Sundays, even attended his grammar school graduation.

Then she drifted, in Grandma Maddie's words. She missed work as if work came and went like the weather. When she came back from visiting a friend, her head sagged, too heavy to lift. One night she didn't come home. She forgot to say goodbye.

Now, he knew where she was, Framingham, where the women had their own prison. His grandmother had said his mother was in rehab again. Maybe this time, she'd make it.

If drugs took so much from him, why shouldn't he get something back? Why shouldn't he make some money? JJ's job paid way better than minimum wage.

The hours were odd, but the money be good, as JJ would say.