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## Chalkboard Concerto: Growing Up as a Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools

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*Chalkboard Concerto: Growing Up as a Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools*

by Charles Vanover and Johnny Saldaña

**Introduction to the Ethnodrama and Complete Play Script**

**Excerpted from**

**Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre**

**Johnny Saldaña, Editor**

**AltaMira Press, 2005**

**Editor's Introduction**

**Johnny Saldaña**

*Chalkboard Concerto: Growing Up as a Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools*, as an ethnodrama, originated from educational researcher Charles Vanover's (2002) autoethnographic report, "Attunement," which he presented at an American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference session. Charles read his article while seated behind a table, as many will do at professional presentations. Saldaña, in attendance that day, was captivated by Charles' personal story of the difficulties of an unprepared and novice teacher in an inner-city elementary school. It was a tale told directly, truthfully, and vividly about the details and emotional struggles of daily classroom life. As "Attunement" was read, Johnny visualized the story being performed on a platform with an old teacher's desk, a chalkboard, an attendance book, and other props and set pieces reminiscent of an elementary school. He imagined the audience seated in traditional rows of classroom chairs with folding desktops.

After the reading, Johnny initiated discussions with Charles to negotiate the transformation of the article into a staged performance piece for a broader and larger audience.

Charles agreed to the venture, but only under the condition that he, not a university actor, portray himself. Collaboration between educational researchers and theatre artists was advocated by Saldaña (2003, pp. 228-230) to potentially enhance the quality of ethnotheatrical productions and to demonstrate and promote the rigor of arts-based educational research. Thus, *Chalkboard Concerto* previewed as a workshop production (with Caitlein Ryan-Whitehead as assistant director) at Arizona State University in February 2003 for an audience composed primarily of theatre practitioners, and was next performed at the Chicago AERA conference for the Arts-Based Educational Research Special Interest Group in April 2003. Due to its success, Charles has subsequently performed this piece at other professional conferences as a form of “touring research.”

Charles wrote in the original program, “This performance is a work of memory. The world our play describes—Chicago in the early 1990s—is no longer the world where the city’s teachers work. Chicago has changed for the better and this performance is dedicated to all those whose labor has helped create a more humane city. The road that connects Erickssen Elementary School (pseudonym) to the Eisenhower Expressway is no longer covered with potholes. Businesses have opened on the neighborhood’s streets and new low-rise public housing units have been built near the school. Erickssen’s playground is now covered with asphalt and the community’s children play on an elaborate set of recreational equipment. The school building has been renovated and its classrooms have a fresh coat of paint.”

“The events in *Chalkboard Concerto* take place during a very difficult moment for that community and for those teachers. Times are still hard for all who live in Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods and for all who teach the city’s most deserving students, but they are not as difficult as they once were. This performance and all subsequent performances are dedicated to

the many people whose work has helped make our world a better place. Let their struggles continue to bear fruit.”

As you read *Chalkboard Concerto*, take note of how the performer iterates between stories of classroom life and memories of the concerts he attended. We believe that the music indicated in the stage directions plays a critical role in communicating the emotional and spiritual meaning of the piece. The style changes from classical to jazz to help transform Charles’ journey from one man’s personal story into a communal experience that, as subsequent performances have shown, can be shared by many members of the audience.

### **References**

Saldaña, J. (2003). Dramatizing data: A primer. *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(2), 218-236.

Vanover, C. (2002). Attunement. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.

*Chalkboard Concerto: Growing Up as a Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools*

**Charles Vanover and Johnny Saldaña**

Dedicated to the memory of the angels

### **Character**

MR. CHARLES VANOVER: a librarian, White, mid-20s, clean-cut; casual slacks, slightly beaten up walking shoes, oxford dress shirt with tie, and a slightly worn but once expensive thrift-shop jacket.

## **Setting**

Chicago, the early 1990s; a traditional teacher's desk center stage with a chair and a freestanding chalkboard behind it.

## **Production Notes**

Hand props and costume pieces are pre-set on or behind the desk, in desk drawers, and in CHARLES' pockets. Tape-recorded music should be played on a good sound system. A wireless microphone is recommended for the actor.

*(as the audience gathers, Bach Violin Sonatas play as pre-show music; house lights fade to black, leaving a dimly lit stage area; Verdi's Requiem & Kyrie play softly under as CHARLES enters from stage left; he crosses to the chalkboard, picks up a piece of chalk and writes "Mr. Vanover" on the board; stage lights up as he uses the chair to rise and stand on top of the desk; music continues softly under)*

The first time I heard the Chicago Symphony, Barenboim conducted Verdi's *Requiem*. I can recall how softly the orchestra played at the beginning of the mass, and how tender the violins and chorus sounded. I sat in the Orchestra Hall gallery and I could see the soloists and all the players. The music took me to another place. I felt I was in another world.

*(CHARLES sits on the desktop)*

Going to the symphony series was an interesting idea that I at first thought might not come to much. It was a treat I gave myself for getting my first full time job as a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. I didn't understand what the orchestra would mean to me as I continued my career. That first evening, I liked what I heard, but I wasn't used to classical music, and sometimes I lost focus and just thought about my day. Then a solo or a chorus would bring me back and I would feel part of the orchestra.

*(music fades out gradually)*

I knew that I would never become famous. I knew that I would never make a million dollars. I also knew that when my students were gone I would be completely forgotten and no one would remember my name. The orchestra made it OK, somehow. I was part of something larger than the particular moments of my life. Teaching was hard work but it was a really good feeling. I was doing something that mattered. I was making the world a better place. I wasn't the greatest teacher, but I had my moments of grace.

*(music up softly and builds: Verdi's Tuba Mirum from the Requiem; CHARLES stands on the desk)*

It was amazing to hear the symphony brass shake the hall during the first part of the *Tuba Mirum*. The Italians understood death. They understood how to live and they knew how to die. When the chorus sang I mourned for my students. When the baritone sang I grieved for the teachers I had met.

*(music plays loudly as CHARLES immerses himself in the piece and sings with the chorus; music then fades softly under)*

There was a lot of joy in the system, but there was also a lot of heartbreak.

*(CHARLES sits on the desktop)*

I listened to the violins and the cellos and the drums. I'm sure there were many other people in the audience and on that stage who were also grieving. It was 1993 and people were dying everywhere. That's just the way things were. During those years there were a lot of people dying in a lot of different places.

*(music fades out)*

When I heard the Requiem, the orchestra wasn't mine in the way that it became part of me during my last years in the public schools, but I felt something change inside me as it played. The chorus took me into another world.

Before I became a teacher, I would try to find love, but it would never work and, besides, I had other things to do. I had other things to live for. Love wasn't something that came naturally to me. It wasn't something I was good at. It wasn't something that I lived with every day. The Chicago Public Schools taught me how to love. As difficult as my first years were, those days taught me how to open up. I broke through some of the emptiness that had hollowed out my life and became a better man.

*(music up: Mozart's Piano Sonata K330, 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement; CHARLES rises, gets the chair from behind the desk, places it in front of the desk and sits)*

It was 1991. I couldn't find a job. The Board of Education offered 55 dollars a day for subs with a college degree but no other credentials, and I decided I would rather substitute in the public schools than wait tables. Every day the Substitute Center sent me somewhere different. Every day I went to a stranger and crazier place. Every day I was exploring and learning and making stupid mistakes.

*(music fades out)*

I moved from class to class. I traveled from school to school. I started as a high school substitute and the work wasn't extremely difficult. After the first period, word would get out that there was a sub and most of the students would cut the class. There would rarely be anyone left in my room at the end of the day.

*(rises and crosses to chalkboard)*

But in those mornings, I had no choice but to stand in front of a chalkboard and talk to a group of strangers for 50 minutes.

*(he rushes downstage toward the audience, walks back and forth as if interacting with a class)*

I kept the class in order. I bantered with the boys in the back. I helped those who did the assignment. Sometimes the kids challenged me. Sometimes I yelled at them. Whatever I did in those classrooms I had to do right then at that moment. There was no margin for error, there was no time to think it through. I had to do something, even if the things I did, did not work.

*(Mozart music up again, plays softly under; CHARLES sits on the chair)*

Despite everything, my travels suited me. I wasn't sitting at a desk or going to a meeting. I didn't have a boss. I didn't have to suck up to people I didn't like. I didn't spend my free-time sending breezy cover letters with my resume attached. I taught in the Chicago Public Schools.

*(music fades out)*

Love was part of the compensation package the Board of Education offered me when I started substitute teaching. I didn't know it then. I thought I was just passing through when I filled out the paperwork. I thought I was just there for a little while until I found another job downtown. I thought a lot of things—until I start working at Erickssen.

*(music up softly: Coltrane's Tipin')*

Erickssen was a huge elementary school in the heart of the West Side. The Substitute Center sent me there on a Wednesday when all the high school teachers had decided to come to work. The streets that connected Erickssen to the highway were covered with potholes. The building was surrounded by vacant lots. The children the school served were very poor and they lived hard lives. All of them were African American or Hispanic.

*(CHARLES rises, crosses behind the desk)*

Erickssen was the first place I subbed where someone helped me. I think the teacher whose room they sent me to was really good. I stood in front of the chalkboard and I taught. It was a very strange feeling. The students were Black. I was White.

*(picks up a lesson plan on top of the desk)*

The teacher had left a plan. We followed it. I did nothing special, just gave them their teacher's math assignments and social studies dittos,

*(picks up some word-searches on top of the desk and distributes a few to audience members, returns to desk)*

as well as the word-searches and crossword-puzzles I pulled from the papers in my sub-pack. In the afternoon, when things got difficult, another teacher came in and took out some of the boys who were troubling me. It was an amazing experience. I can't describe what it meant to stand in a school on the West Side of Chicago and look out those windows and teach.

*(music fades out; CHARLES sits on the chair)*

When I went to check out at the end of the day I told the clerks that I would be happy to come back. At Erickssen, I learned that love is not a relationship you have with a person. It's a stance. It's a way of life. It's a power that you invoke if you're worthy of it. Many of the teachers who worked at Erickssen were worthy. Most of them were African American women who were

fiercely organized and very proud. I was none of those things, and not worthy in the slightest, but I kept coming back to that school because I wanted to learn to do what they did. Everyday I would get in my car and drive to Erickssen and the clerks would give me more work to do. I went from room to room for three long months. I didn't know the children. I didn't know how to teach. I didn't understand that one of the main reasons that everyone put up with me was that Erickssen never, ever, had enough subs. Teaching in that place was the hardest thing I ever did in my life, and that's why I did it. I couldn't leave it alone.

*(sound effect: noisy children in a classroom; CHARLES rises and paces back and forth quickly)*

Children create an emotional energy. They change the way that you move and the way that you feel. Thirty poor kids, sixty eyes looking up at you, sixty hands, three hundred fingers, there's so much going on, there's so much happening, it never stops, the classroom never slows down!

*(sound effect out)*

If you can ride with it, if you can move with it, if you can figure out that

*(in a gentle voice)*

this kid needs to be talked to in this way

*(in a harsh voice)*

and that kid needs to be talked to in that way,

*(in his regular voice)*

if you can communicate, if you can join together, there's no better feeling. You become part of a whole, you create a dance, the classroom has a life of its own. You're not in control, but you're conducting. You fly!

*(crosses to chalkboard)*

You stand there in front of the chalkboard and look at each of those faces. You glance into each of those eyes.

*(he picks up a copy of Dr. Seuss' One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish from the desk, stands in front of audience to show them the book cover)*

Energy travels from them into you and then out and back again:

One fish, two fish,

Red fish, blue fish.

*(he looks at the book admiringly and turns to another page)*

Just holding the yellow book in my hand and showing the pictures to the Head Start kids and reading those words:

*(holds the book to show the illustrations to the audience)*

This one has a little star,

This one has a little car.

*(he closes the book, looks at the audience)*

They were poor children. They were very poor children.

*(he sets the book on the desk, sits in the chair; music up softly: Tipin')*

After ten years of pro-business policies designed to stimulate the economy, nobody in their neighborhood had a job. Most of the local stores had been burned in the '68 riots. The factories that employed their parents had moved offshore. There was no work anywhere. Every morning as I drove to Erickssen I listened to stories about the Gulf War. Troops moved from place to place. Missiles were fired. When I turned off the Eisenhower expressway I traveled past vacant lots and boarded-up buildings. Some of the residential streets looked pretty good. Block club signs had been posted at many corners, and some of the homes were surrounded by patios and

gardens. But the street I drove down to Erickssen was a war zone. There were abandoned factories and vacant lots filled with trash and abandoned cars.

*(CHARLES rises, takes the chair behind the desk, stands; music fades out)*

I parked my car on the street outside the school and walked through the metal front doors to the office. On good days, the clerks would send me to Head Start and I would dance and sing until 2:30.

*(he sits at the desk, picks up a pencil and writes on a notepad as he looks at a wall clock)*

On bad days they would send me to a fourth or fifth grade room and I would prepare my lessons in silence as the hands on the clock turned slowly towards 9:00.

*(sound effect: school bell; CHARLES rises, rushes to the front of the audience)*

When the bell rang, I picked up my class in the playground, marched them to their room, and walked from desk to desk for the rest of the day and was flooded with emotion. I stood in those rooms and walked those endless corridors and looked at those faces. I thought I could feel all of my students' anger and all of their love and all of their sadness and all of their joy. I didn't know if I was right to feel this way, but I was new and that was how I felt. There was so much life. Even when my classes went out of control, and some of them went completely out of control, there was so much *life* in those rooms. Teaching was a better way to live. I was telling stories. I was singing songs. I was shouting at my class to stay in line when we walked to the cafeteria.

*(crosses behind desk)*

I was laughing in the break room. I was smoking outside with the other substitutes.

*(music up softly: Coltrane's The Kiss of No Return; CHARLES picks up a small orange chair, sets it on top of the desk, climbs up and sits on the small chair, mimes working with a child)*

I was working with the kindergarten teacher helping the boys write their names. She showed me how to hold the children's hands in mine and move the thick pencil across the page. I sat on a tiny, orange seat and worked at a round table that was only two feet off the floor. I remember the way my arm wrapped around the boys' shoulders while I held their hands in mine. I remember listening to them talk about their mothers and their cousins and their brothers and their grandmothers. I remember the smell of their bodies and the sound of each voice.

*(rises, take the small chair and himself off the desk; stands behind the desk; music fades out)*

The kindergarten teacher was old and White, and the office sent me to her room when they didn't have anything else for me to do. She was supposed to have two aides because of a grant, but I think one of them was always sick. She looked *exactly* like a teacher.

*(picks up a pair of thick eye glasses from the desk, crosses to the audience)*

She had thick glasses and wrinkles on her face and wore dresses from Sears and Fields. She helped me and she told me stories. Once, she saw me walking back from the office after I subbed in another classroom and had a terrible day. She told me:

*(puts on eye glasses; in the voice and posture of the kindergarten teacher)*

“Your problem is you are a young man and these older ones are going to challenge you. That's the way they are. It's difficult for every teacher that comes here, White or Black. It's especially difficult for young men. I think you are very brave and I want you to know that it is really worth it. If you can earn their respect; if you can prove yourself to these people, there's no better job in the world. I've worked here thirty years and I have the best life of anyone I know. It's hard, but I wouldn't do anything else. If you can gain your students' trust and earn their confidence, they'll care for you here in a way that they don't other places.”

*(music, The Kiss of No Return, rises softly in the background; CHARLES takes off and returns the eye glasses to the desk, gets the chair from behind the desk, crosses with it to the front of the audience, sits)*

I signed out at the office that afternoon and walked back down the hall and into the parking lot. I pulled my keys out of my pocket and I opened the front door and I sat down in my car and locked my doors. I was exhausted. The class had been really out of control. Two of the boys had spent the last fifteen minutes running around the room. A girl had started to cry.

*(CHARLES takes a tissue from the Kleenex box in the desk, wipes his forehead)*

I was shocked and angry and worn out and sad. I was covered with sweat.

*(throws the Kleenex into a gray metal trash can)*

I had started going to night school, and I was always tired.

Every afternoon when I pulled out of the parking lot and drove to night school or downtown to my second job, I wept. Tears never came. I had cried so much when I was a child that I couldn't do it anymore. But I wept, anyway. I drove past abandoned factories and boarded-up shops and I tried to sob. I cried for the children I served. They were so beautiful. Their eyes were so bright. There was no sense to it. They deserved so much and the world had given them so little, and there wasn't much that I could do to make their lives any better.

*(music fades out)*

I cried for the cracks on the playground and the building's peeling paint. I sat in my car waiting for the light to turn at an intersection where all the shops were boarded up and I cried for myself because

*(beat)*

I wasn't a good sub. The other teachers were better than me. They could get their kids to line up. They could lead them from their rooms, through hallways, down the stairs and into the cafeteria and then back again without raising their voice. I couldn't do that. I didn't know how. I cried because many of those kids were sick. All of the boys seemed to have asthma or bronchitis. I cried because I had always thought there was some fairness in the world. But as I drove down Crystal Avenue to the Eisenhower Expressway and flew down the ramp that took me downtown, I knew there was none of that. Nothing like that at all.

*(rises, crosses behind the desk; music up softly: Mozart's Serenade, 5<sup>th</sup> movement)*

But there were also moments of grace. It's important that I mention that. It's important that I emphasize that part of the experience.

*(CHARLES crosses to the front of the audience, paces quickly back and forth)*

There were moments when the lesson *worked*, and the class came together and energy rushed and the whole room began to move. Hands were raised, pencils hit paper, work got done, progress was made. I was alive. I was doing something! I was conscious of my entire body. I could feel my voice hum in my chest and the sweat drip underneath my arms. My back was always tense and I was always moving from seat to seat and from desk to desk. My heart opened up to the children I served. It was just one moment, it was just a day or sometimes just an hour in their lives, but I wanted to give them what I could.

*(sits on the chair)*

All the other subs were Black, and even though they didn't have as many problems as I did, it wasn't easy for any of us. We all had days that lasted for years, and hours that lasted for weeks, and minutes when the clock stopped and the kids refused to mind us, and it was all we could do to survive until 2:30.

*(rises, takes the chair behind the desk, steps on the chair and stands on the desk top)*

The best program I ever saw was performed by a Black conductor. It was just one of the performances on my series and I went without thinking much about it. I didn't know who the conductor was. I think he worked with the Seattle symphony, but I'm not sure. The orchestra came alive for him the way it did for some of the young conductors. It was clear that there was nothing he wanted to do more in the world than to conduct the Chicago Symphony. He made no flourishes or big gestures, but he was able to communicate. During the second half of that program, the Chicago Winds played Mozart's *Serenade*. The conductor barely moved. He kept time gently. His body seemed loose. The players made the music seem effortless. The sound was lush and smooth and I never wanted it to stop. There was nowhere else I wanted to be. I was in heaven for a moment. I had sung in the church choir until I left home for college, and I felt I had gained something I had lost a long time before.

*(music fades out; CHARLES takes a tissue from the Kleenex box, wipes his forehead)*

Teaching is very hard work.

*(tosses Kleenex in the trash can; gets off the desk, cross to the front of the audience;*

*music up: Coltrane's El Toro Valiente)*

Mr. Johnson.

*(walks toward the audience)*

Mr. Johnson!

*(stands in front)*

Mr. Johnson taught me how to be a teacher. He was my role model, my exemplar. He could substitute in any room in Erickssen School and make it work. He could walk the tightrope and never fall off. He was always part of the moment, always riding the wave, always moving with

the beat. He could make the eighth graders mind him and the little kids jump for joy. He could reach almost every student in that building

*(beat)*

and I could not.

*(CHARLES crosses behind the desk, gets a winter jacket and puts it on as he returns to the front of the audience; music fades out)*

Mr. Johnson was Black, as tall as I was, but much more heavy set. He had a broad chest, thick shoulders and legs, and he spoke with a deep gravelly voice. What I remember most is standing outside the cafeteria where no one could see us, and looking out at Erickssen's concrete playground and the cars in the teachers' parking lot and lighting a cigarette and listening to him speak. His voice changed my life. I can still hear it today. The timbre was deep and rich. His voice was more than a set of words. It was a song, it was a melody. Mr. Johnson spoke with his entire body. We would stand there looking at the grass that grew up through the cracks in the parking lot and we would just laugh about whatever had happened that day.

*(in a deep gravelly voice as Mr. Johnson)*

"Mr. Vanover."

*(in his own voice)*

He said it differently than anyone else. He put stress on the *ov* and not on the *Van*.

*(as Mr. Johnson)*

"Mr. Vanover."

*(in his own voice)*

We stood there in the back of the cafeteria looking at the teachers' Cadillacs and Saabs.

Sometimes I would sip a styrofoam cup of sugared cafeteria coffee. It was January and it was always cloudy, and as we smoked our cigarettes he would tell me stories.

*(as Mr. Johnson)*

"Mr. Vanover, it's crazy there today. The aides don't want to come to my classroom. No one wants to volunteer to give me my breaks. They tell me, 'Mr. Johnson, your kids are wild. They are ready to fly away. You had better calm them down.' I can't do that. No, Mr. Vanover. I can't do it. It's every man for himself at this school. What I do is I come in there with a bag of Chips Ahoy, or something really nutritious like hard candy.

*(reaches into his jacket, pulls out a small bag of Chips Ahoy)*

When the kids walk in after they have hung up their coats, I flash the bag. They know what that means, Mr. Vanover.

*(puts the bag of cookies back in his jacket)*

I tell them, "If you're good, you might get a cookie." And you know what happens when you give those kids chocolate, Mr. Vanover. You know what happens when you give them caffeine! Even a little sugar is enough to make them crazy. But it's every man for himself in this school. I have to do what I need to do to survive. There's not much of a lesson plan in my classroom, Mr. Vanover. I look at what the teacher leaves,

*(frowns and rolls his eyes)*

but most days that's not going to happen. I tell the kids, 'If you are really good, we might just skip the spelling dittos and act out one of the stories from your reader. But only if you are really good,'

*(turns toward MR. VANOVER)*

Mr. Vanover. ‘Only if you sit at your desk with your hands folded and your back high and then do every single problem in your mathematics assignment without talking.’ Oh, those kids, those kids, Mr. Vanover. They know nothing. They know nothing at all.”

*(music up softly: Coltrane’s Midriff; CHARLES takes off the jacket, puts it away behind the desk, returns to the front of the audience; in his own voice)*

Mr. Johnson had been a dancer in college and had taken a lot of improvisation classes. His body was beautiful. His muscles were all organized. Just to see him march down the hallway with the kids flying behind him was an education. I watched his legs and shoulders, his neck and chest. I watched him project himself into every challenge he met and leap into every problem he faced. I watched him set a tone and create a mood.

*(sits on the desk)*

The kids loved Mr. Johnson. They ran up to him in the playground and hugged him. They cheered when he walked into their room. Love was in his arms, it was in his eyes, it was in the sound of his voice. Mr. Johnson could take all of his students’ love and all of their kindness and all of their hopes and all of their fears and give the best parts back to them. He could walk into any room in the school and make it his own. Nobody else could.

*(beat, he looks downward; music fades out)*

Nobody else could. I know that I put Mr. Johnson up on a pedestal, but everyone did. He was what it was all about. He was the real thing, the very best thing. He represented the best of the world that had been lost. Mr. Johnson was church socials and mass choir rehearsals and huge Sunday dinners and house parties and juke-joints and lots and lots of little kids who were impossible not to love. He was all the good things people can’t be anymore because the world’s no longer that way. One can’t be that open. One can’t be that free.

*(music up: Berg's Violin Concerto)*

But it was possible for Mr. Johnson to be that way at Erickssen Elementary School.

*(CHARLES rises, crosses behind the desk, climbs up the chair to stand on the desk)*

On the same program where the winds played Mozart's *Serenade*, the orchestra performed Berg's *Violin Concerto*. I've heard that piece other times and it didn't touch me the way it did that evening. Maybe it was the playing. Maybe I was just ready for it. Maybe it was just one of those nights.

*(CHARLES sits on the desk in a fetal-like position)*

When I was a child, my best friend was Jewish. We would walk home together and I would sit with him in his house. I practically lived in his kitchen. His mother fed us bagels and corned beef and bialys. They had a drawer in their kitchen that was filled with candy and you could take as much as you liked anytime you wanted. We ate and drank pop and watched TV. I liked it so much there I didn't want to go home. It's a strange thing to say. I was White and I lived in the suburbs and I was only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and already there were days I didn't want to go home. That's the feeling the music made that night when I sat in the gallery and watched the orchestra play Berg and Mozart. That's the song I heard as the soloist played.

*(CHARLES begins to conduct with his hands)*

The Black conductor kept time slowly. He was very calm. The violin grew loud and soft and bitter and sweet. I didn't want to go home.

*(CHARLES moves to sit on the desk in a more comfortable position)*

Teaching was never easy for me. I was always running. I was always out of place. I hadn't grown up in the city, and I didn't know how to act. I didn't understand what was going on around me. I had to change the way I spoke and the way I moved. Working at Erickssen was the

hardest thing I ever did and I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Sometimes the other teachers looked more tired than I did at the end of the day. And maybe it was easier for me to work that job because I didn't know those students. I didn't know that neighborhood. I didn't have an older brother who'd gotten shot, or a cousin who was beaten up by the cops, or parents who were prisoners in the home they had worked for all their lives because the neighborhood had changed. Ignorance can be very underrated.

*(music continues in the background)*

Even though the schools I grew up in were better places for children than the schools where I worked, I never saw teachers when I was a child who were as good as Mr. Johnson, or who cared for their students in the way that the best people in the system cared for them. The teachers that I grew up with were kind and dedicated, hard-working, smart and skilled, but they didn't matter as much as the best people in Chicago mattered. They didn't spend their careers sailing through stormy seas. They weren't light in a bushel. They weren't comfort for the forsaken, nor rest for the weary. None of them were called to give their lives. Mr. Johnson stayed at Erickssen Elementary School the rest of his career. He told me the first day that Substitute Center sent him to Erickssen he thought that he recognized the place. But it wasn't until he marched his class to the primary building's cafeteria and saw all the small tables and chairs, that he remembered where he was. He told me that one year when he was little his parents had moved a few blocks off Crystal Avenue. Mr. Johnson said he had gone to Erickssen for Kindergarten or maybe first grade. He couldn't leave.

*(beat; he rises off the desk and stands in front of the audience; music fades out)*

I left. Erickssen was too far way. The commute was too hard. I made too many mistakes. There were other schools. There were other classrooms. I became a teacher, but I never taught at Erickssen after those first few months.

I saw Mr. Johnson once more after that time. I stood in one of the hallways in the old warehouse on Pershing road where the Board of Education put its offices. Both of us were tired. I saw the circles under Mr. Johnson's eyes and I know he saw the circles under mine. But we laughed. We smiled. It was a good moment. He was there to fill out some paperwork because the Board had forgot to pay him that Friday. I was there because I was looking for another job.

*(crosses behind the desk to suggest a transition, returns to the front of the audience)*

I found what I was looking for in February of that school year. I left the elementary schools that had given me my first full time job in the system and started teaching high school.

*(music up: Mahler's Symphony No. 7, 5<sup>th</sup> movement)*

From the moment I walked in the door everything was easier. Everything was simpler. I was suddenly the man I wished to be. There was another librarian there and the two of us had the time of our lives. We shelved books. We fixed computers. We wrote reports and worked on the budget. We taught the history fair for the social studies classes and the research paper for the English classes and the science fair for science classes and sometimes we didn't sit down until the last bell rang. My partner taught in the morning. I taught in the afternoon. She came in early and got things organized. I stayed late and put the library back together. I didn't want to go home.

*(CHARLES crosses behind the desk as a transition movement, returns to the front of the audience; music switches to Mahler's Symphony No. 7, 1<sup>st</sup> Movement)*

In the evenings, as I walked to my apartment, I saw busses rush down Salmon Avenue towards sunset on the first week of school. I saw leaves fly off trees and rush under streetlights. I saw the moon shine deep into January skies. I jumped over mud and puddles. Sometimes, instead of going home I walked along the lake. There were afternoons I saw sailboats and evenings I saw thunderstorms and nights I saw snow. I bought my stereo. I went to the symphony.

*(music fades out)*

I had long conversations with my students about the most important things in the world and—unfortunately for me as it turned out—I argued with my principal.

*(CHARLES crosses behind the desk, gets the chair and moves it to the side of the desk, music up softly: piano solo from Coltrane's 'Tipin'; CHARLES sits, gets a can of pop from a desk drawer, opens it)*

One May evening, after I had been elected the associate union rep for my high school, I went to the Chicago Teachers Union's Legislative Dinner. I sat at a table with five female teachers, and after about five minutes we recognized each other. They were from Erickssen. I really *was* "Mr. Vanover." I couldn't stop laughing! I could only imagine the stories Mr. Johnson had told them about me, but I was really glad to see them. The dinner was really fun. We had corned beef and cabbage. The teachers told great stories about the principal and some of Erickssen's more famous lost souls. We drank pop and ate apple pie. We laughed and laughed. It was one of those moments that I just wanted to hold forever.

*(music fades out)*

Then they told me about Mr. Johnson.

*(beat)*

He had worked himself to death.

*(CHARLES rises, gets a Kleenex to wipe his forehead, throws it away, crosses behind the desk, addresses the audience)*

I won't say what happened to him. Whatever you *think* happened, I promise you that it was worse than that, and I don't want him to be remembered that way. I can tell you the story of how he lived. I cannot tell you the story of how he died. I wasn't there. I was somewhere else. Mr. Johnson was HIV positive. He was not as careful as he should have been. So, let me just say that: he worked himself to death.

*(cross to the front of the desk, sits on it)*

When I came home from the dinner I figured out that Mr. Johnson died a few months before they started to prescribe protease inhibitors in the 1990s. A few months. If he had taught anywhere else but Erickssen, he would be alive today.

*(beat)*

Mr. Johnson and the rest of the teachers at Erickssen Elementary gave me a start and, as I discovered, the Chicago Public Schools were happy to provide me with as many lessons as I needed to get it right. But that was the end of my time teaching at Erickssen. One spring afternoon I drove out of the parking lot and I knew I would never come back. There was nothing left for me at that place. It was time for me to cut my hair short, get my resume out, and make some calls. It was time for me to end one story and begin another. It was time for me to . . . let it go.

*(he picks up a conductor's baton from the desk and looks at it; he climbs to the top of the desk and stands; lights focus intensely on CHARLES)*

The last year I worked in the Chicago Public Schools, I went to the symphony 25 times.

*(music up: Mozart Piano Concerto No. 24, end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Movement)*

I went during the weekdays and I went during the weekends. I went when I was tired and I went when I was sick. There was music that made my soul leave my body. I heard Barenboim play a Mozart piano concerto with the first chairs as back up, and I was in the center of the world. There was no other life I wanted to live. No other place I wanted to be. Every moment was . . . *perfect.*

*(as CHARLES conducts with the baton, stage lights fade to black as the music continues then fades out)*

*(post-show music: Coltrane's Not So Sleepy)*

