

field note

PROMOTION EXERCISES

The sixth-grade promotion exercises were to be held on the playground, and all of the sixth-grade classes rehearsed for the big event each day for four days. Not all of the children are present at the rehearsal, however. Some, like Claude, have been eliminated from the procedure, and he sits watching the lines of kids file out on the playground through the window of the Punishing Room.

Each teacher, all women, stands watching her class issue out of the building in straggly lines and continually bark out orders about space, pace, and proper bodily demeanor. "Hands out of pockets," "Straighten up that line," "So-and-so, you're too close to the person in front of you. Slow down," or "So-and-so, walk a little faster." One of the teachers says smugly, "This is your graduation, you know."

Once the kids are assembled alphabetically and by class, they practice reciting together the Kahlil Gibran poem that they have learned by heart.

The morning of the promotional activity ("We don't call it graduation because it's not strictly speaking a graduation from anything," one of the teachers tells me) is sunny and beautiful. Extended families stream onto the playground, which is covered with neat rows of folding chairs, and take their seats. The kids come filing out of the building, the seriousness of the ritual written all over their solemn faces. There is no problem with pace or space now. They know how to conduct themselves when it's time to do so; they just have little patience for regimentation and too much control.

Lamar, who had been suspended and forbidden to participate in the exercises, appears in the line, looking the clichés of angelic all rolled into one: he is as good as gold, as neat as a pin, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. His head is completely shaven, the teachers have decided to turn a blind eye to his presence. I hear one of the student specialists saying that he and his mom think he got away with something but "she goin'ta be real sorry later."

I see Horace's mother and sister, Terrence's family, D'Andre's grandmother. Everyone has dressed up for the occasion. I am struck

by the generational mix—grandmothers, mothers, fathers, many babies. Babies are passed around with oohs and aahs of approval.

Principal, teachers, and students all perform the ceremony with impressive displays of approval and respect. The valedictorian is an African American girl. Tears come to my eyes as she speaks so seriously and wisely. Everyone is listening attentively.

At this moment, we are all at our very best.