

JUVENILE JUSTICE

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Even armed with my “acceptable” appearance,
professional clothing
and education,
I feel a bit overwhelmed
trying to find my way
through the large, multi-floored
government building.
Although I can read it, the directory
will not divulge the courtroom’s location-
I have to ask several people, always choosing ones in professional
dress. . .they
might be lawyers, they might know where it is
among the milling people in this early a.m.
that I am to go.
It is easy for me, young, well-dressed and confident,
to approach and inquire,
but what if I were one of the
mothers in worn-out, generic sneakers, hose wrinkling at my swollen
ankles,
long past twenty and far from done with this world’s pain?—
How would I dare to approach them in the middle of their important
talk to
ask where the courtroom is?
I doubt they would find my presence so palatable without the
perfume, spray
and orthodontic work. . . .
After being directed to three different locations,
I finally discover the 2C juvenile court
which is my place for these morning hours.
Not important that I rush after all,
because we, corralled in the courtroom,

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wait an hour for the players to assemble.

It is only minimum wage most are losing as each hour pushes by.

Finally, the black robe enters, we stand, and the games begin
in this arena:

First in to face the lions is a long-haired, bad-skinned boy.

His attorney mumbles a brief invocation over the case,

then judge reads the petition on the matter

(what was he doing the hour we waited?)

while we, facing forward in the rigors of the benches' wood,

observe his thinning and graying.

Here it is, pronounced: Wilderness camp, curfews

and no contact with certain friends. The judge shares

his sensitive, piercing insight- "He is not unintelligent. He does this
because

he likes to."

And then this boy, in wrinkled, unattached clothes,

is released from this exercise

and he and mamma walk out, her run-over, cheap tennies catching
the

carpet.

No daddies came forward all morning;

a sprinkling of mamas and grandmas came

to sit behind their accused,

sat in the strength and powerlessness

of their womaned state.

Little women, overweight

and overburdened,

most having been here times before for these same "offenders,"

the children they knew

on their lap, in their bellies

and in their youngest doll-dreams.

These, left as women, to handle their sons'

ragings against life,

poverty

and hopelessness.

When the court counselor aired

one boy's life

before the room,

I thought certainly the judge could now

see it was a child before him,

like the ones he himself has raised

with new cars at 16, college funds and what his salary could provide;
This one to be pitied,
for his "behaviorally disturbed" status and incarcerated mother,
days and nights in public housing.
I naively thought we could all see
this is a child still, unable to drive a car,
certainly too young to be "tried as an adult"
for his couple of punches and dollars
in a robbery,
but as I'm often learning in my aging,
I am sappy; I don't understand
routinizing and processing
people through a system
(of Justice).
The judge reminded
the courtroom, and most effectively,
the offender,
of this child's destiny
as a poor, black boy
alone in this morning and in the world;
we were reminded of the destination
that the years often move free-lunch, shabby-clothed kids toward—
"He'll be in an orange jumpsuit as soon as he turns 16. That's
where he wants to go; this is what he likes to do."
So much for rehabilitation,
so much for adult benevolence and care
for children
who've already been kicked around
by individuals and systems. . . .
A child with no daddy,
no money and razed hopes;
Finally society is paying attention to him—
being the subject of those minutes,
finally someone is talking about where he's headed,
the possibilities for his life.
His existence is thus acknowledged.

