Ballad of Orange and Grape

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After you finish your work

after you do your day

after you've read your reading

after you've written your say –

you go down the street to the hot dog stand,

one block down and accross the way.

On a blistering afternoon in East Harlem in the twentieth

    century.

Most of the windows are boarded up,

the rats run out of a sack –

sticking out of the crummy garage

one shiny long Cadillac;

at the glass door of the drug-addiction center,

a man who'd like to break your back.

But here's a brown woman with a little girl dressed in rose

    and pink, too.

Frankfurters frankfurters sizzle on the steel

where the hot-dog-man leans –

nothing else on the counter

but the usual two machines,

the grape one, empty, and the orange one, empty,

I face him in between.

A black boy comes along, looks at the hot dogs, goes on

    walking.

I watch the man as he stands and pours

in the familiar shape

bright purple in the one marked ORANGE

orange in the one marked GRAPE,

the grape drink in the machine marked ORANGE

and orange drink in the GRAPE.

Just the one word large and clear, unmistakeable, on each

    machine.

I ask him : How can we go on reading

and make sense out of what we read? –

How can they write and believe what they're writing,

the young ones across the street,

while you go on pouring grape in ORANGE

and orange into the one marked GRAPE –?

(How are we going to believe what we read and we write

    and we hear and we say and we do?)

He looks at the two machines and he smiles

and he shrugs and smiles and pours again.

It could be violence and nonviolence

it could be white and black          women and men

it could be war and peace or any

binary system, love and hate, enemy, friend.

Yes and no, be and not-be, what we do and what we don't

    do.

On a corner in East Harlem

garbage, reading, a deep smile, rape,

forgetfulness, a hot street of murder,

misery, withered hope,

a man keeps pouring grape into ORANGE

and orange into the one marked GRAPE,

pouring orange into GRAPE and grape into ORANGE forever.

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