

Nicholas Moore

THE ORANGE BED

edited by Peter Riley

Copyright © Cambridge University Library, 2011

THE ORANGE BED

In the orange bed Miss Ollipester lies,
Indolent and fat, a book within her hand;
And by the bedside lies an apple, rare
In green and red freshness; the curtains drawn;
A shaded lamp above the bed; an air
Of ease and lassitude, of warmth and compromise
Not difficult to understand.

Outside those fat windows the glib moon shines
In adoration and the lovers move
Secretly to nefarious purposes.
Miss Ollipester hears the distant squeak
Of shoes or tongues, rustle of dress or kisses,
The unforgiving giggles of the weak,
Crazy with viciousness of love.

She turns the page: Mr. Detective Fax
Follows the idiosyncrasies of crime,
Skilfully, with his fingers on the facts,
Lean, indolent, and knowing all the time
How each clue leads to the indefinite end:
And now Miss Ollipester dies with fear,
Alone and mad, with no friend.

Page follows page until the air is still
With an unease suggestive of despair.
Outside the room a shrill, high laugh, a curse:
Inside the room the cool, lamp-gentle air.
Mr. Detective Fax, his final clue
Picked up, hovers beside the windowsill,
Not knowing what to do.

He fingers the rosy apple by the bed;
Decides to eat it, falters, takes the book
In one lean, anxious hand, and turns the page.
He is amazed to find how the plot palls.
Following with his mind each lover's look,
He knows now that the dark conceals a rage
More fierce, more sinister, more false.

THE ORANGE BED

Outside the errant window weeps the yew,
And in the rosebed dancing, classic nymphs
Perform in their romantic pas de deux.
And odour fills the night of hyacinths,
And on the plinths of lawn tread rosy feet,
Wet with the dew and washed with meadow-sweet:
 The box-trees stand in rows.

Meanwhile there is a book beside the bed,
A box of chocolate creams, and one red apple;
The fat woman stretches, leaves the book half-read,
And fills her mind with memories of people,
As one soft hand creeps slowly toward the box
And picks a new chocolate. Clematis knocks
 Gently against the windows.

The bed is orange and the room is full
Of perfumes; now at least the world resumes
Its formal shapes. She reads again, the dull
Triumph of murder, corpses in locked rooms.
Outside she hears the whistle in the dark,
Scuffle and cuff of lovers in the park,
 Of which she disapproves.

The night is over and the day extends
Into another day. Taking the pistol
From the stiff hand, Detective Fax pretends
He has left the story-book and the gypsy's crystal;
He notes the apple on the bedside chair,
The unfinished book, the chocolate waiting there
 For the hand that moves and removes.

Mr Detective Fax is lean and bored
With waiting; lifts the apple to his mouth;
Thinks better of it; takes the book, that stored
Hive of crime; remembers his bitter youth:
Meanwhile outside the lovers pass again,
With other honey, careless of all pain,
 Or the crime between their loves.

The box-trees stand like gnomes against the moon,
Tough little trees in twisted shapes. Presumed
Suicide, of unsound mind. And soon
The orange bed will be again illumed
By the light of amorous revels: and the dead
Be all forgotten, the detective story unread,
And flesh be the fishes and loaves.

THE ORANGE BED

More orange than the winter sun
And more imaginative than the moon,
Miss Ollipester in her orange bed,
Wrapped in her orange night-gown, dreams away
The days of orange murder, and enjoys
Fates worse than death.

Outside she hears the girls and boys
A-whisper in the icy dark, and sighs;
Once in an orange spring she too had read
Romances and had mooned whole weeks away
With baited breath.

But now the orange on the plate
Speaks of far islands of more tropic heat;
Age has more murderous funs instead;
And lies beneath

Comforting orange coverlets,
Lit with the glow of luxury. Time whets
Its taste for death.

THE ORANGE BED

The lovers walk so quietly under the elms,
Aware of the nothingness that haunts their love
And the thin reality of the moonlit air,
That they do not see the detective leaning there
In the shade of the box-trees or spot the diving bats
Who hurl themselves round the eaves like acrobats.
The detective is sad as he watches the window above,
 And tired beyond caring.

The lovers talk so quietly she cannot hear
From their chitterings what truths they have to tell;
The fluttering bats flash darkly across the moon,
As it starts to shine on her orange bed, where soon
She'll be lost in strange realms of murder and remorse,
And the ancient story will follow its old, old course
Till life itself sighs out on a syllable;
 While lovers are spooning

Out in the secret night, where their feverish palms
Grow sticky as though with sweets, and the bats decide
To hang upside down in the dark. For night is come.
Nothing, the brother to night, booms like a drum
In the ears of the silent Watcher. For now he knows
That a nothingness he could only barely suppose
Is actually happening, that Death is beginning to ride,
 And his heart is thrumming.

It throbs with a subtle mixture of hope and fear;
Hope of reward and fame; fear of the nothing
He doesn't know except as another's loss.
He watches the lovers silently walk across
The pools of moonlight, and disappear in the dark
As life itself might disappear in the stark
Light of reality, and he feels a great loathing
 For Time and its tossing

Of disparate facts together. To calm the drear
Nothingness of things he thinks of the wry
Contortions of acrobats and the squeals of bats,
The high squeak of moonlight, heads hiding under hats,
The criminal features of lovers or thugs concealed;
And he doesn't know what murder will be revealed
Nor whether the lady herself or her hopes will die.

He stands there, debating;

Then turns on his heel and departs for dearer realms where
Nothing will happen that isn't prescribed in the book.
Miss Olley turns the page, and picks out a chocolate,
Safe in her aura of orange, not knowing her fate,
As she hears a rustle out there in the undergrowth.
Lovers, she thinks, and settles back lazy, and loth
To take – as she ought – the most imperceptible look
At Death where he's waited.

THE ORANGE BED

Obstinate in the dark new lovers quote
Old moonlight adages. Inside the bed,
Orange, reflects the orange of the sun.

Outside, his head in the clouds, Detective Fax
Strides in the moon's sight like a ghost who goes
Immeasurably quicker after his fellows.

The lovers pause between their dark-set acts.
The orange bed holds in its warm embrace
A glowing body clothed in orange of

Imagination. The detective's face
Bears a wan smile. He pauses, takes a note,
Licks at his pencil, scratches at his head,

Considers criminals as though with love.
With love Miss Ollipester too considers
Criminals and their crimes, and with distaste

Hears how the lovers sigh at what they've done
And glide away with pejorative haste,
Leaving her in the doubtful life that's hers

To see death shooting starkly through the door,
Detective Fax following as before,
Notebook in hand, and orange suns no more.

NOCTURNE

The lovers walk in their conceits
Under the icy wings of death,
Feeding themselves on their own sweets
Like phoenixes. Alas! Time whets
The appetite of those who look,
Detective-like, for story-book
Solutions to their dreadful tales.
Detective Fax who never fails
Leans on the darkling elms, and sighs
To see them pass so perfectly
In ignorance of where they go.
He watches where the woman lies
Behind her windows on her bed,
Whose curtains are as white as snow
Lit by the moonlight overhead.
Detective Fax who cannot see
More than a finger's-length away
Knows that she turns the page, and finds
Excitement in her dreams of sleuths
More golden than the sun of day.
Her orange bed is full of truths
About dark gangsters with their minds
Bent on the trivial acts of death.
He waits for his expected call,
But cannot reconcile his eyes
To that strange enemy, whose all
Is the giving and taking of our breath.

NIGHT-PIECE

In search of facts, not wayward moons
Or orange suns,
Mr. Detective Fax stands by the rows
Of darkling yews.

In her luxuriant orange bed
Miss Ollie lies,
Dreaming of murderers and dead,
Unhappy eyes.

Victims lie everywhere, their breath
Quite stilled by death.
Detectives look for telling clues,
But find no news,

Except of lovers in the park,
Who sadly lurk
Tingling at the romantic moon,
Leaving no sign

Except the sibilance of leaves.
Miss Ollie grieves
For them and for their fragile hopes.
The Watcher steps

Out from the shadows of her book
And at his look
She screams and faints. Detective Fax
Runs in and knocks

The novel off the orange bed.
It falls and bangs
The floor and poor Miss Ollie's died
From frightening things.

THE ORANGE BED

The appearance of a classic afternoon,
Of an apple on the plate, the bed laid
With an orange cover, the indolent eye
Running over the lines of the figure
Reclined upon that bed, bright orange,
Reading of Mr. Detective Fax.

The starry evening is betrayed
By talk of lovers, the susurrations
Of whispers in the dark, and the form
On that bed, that bed of orange,
Turns from a preoccupation with
Mr. Detective Fax to matters of horror.

Early in the morning by the orange bed
Detective Fax stands, lean, immaculate,
And takes the pistol from the twisted hand.
He yawns; removes the apple from the plate,
And starts to chew, thinks better of it; turns
The lamp-shade towards the ever-sleeping face.

The morning gleams with orange sun.
Time turns the clock and hurries
Through the day: at night, the curtains drawn,
The sibilance of lovers' tongues
Disturbs Mr. Detective Fax,
Reminds him of the apple eaten.

And, while the gods in arguable postures
Go through their superhuman loves,
The lovers speak about the night;
Fingers search; find; range; destroy.
The classic beauty of Her face
Lights up the night for every golden boy.

THE ORANGE BED

Chocolate of rose, chocolate of violet
Finds each its way to that down-curving mouth;
 A soft white hand hangs down
Over the dropping book, the tired eyes close
On thoughts of murder and wild dreams of youth;
Mr. Detective Fax rides through the town;
 The box falls on the carpet,

Spreading a litter of chocolates, paper, and gold
Wrappings over the flowers and the curlicues.
 The woman sleeps like dead,
Like the dead she's been reading of, and you'd suppose
That the lean detective himself in his velvet shoes
Was creeping up the stairs with some clue in his head,
 As the night grew colder.

Outside the voices of the retinue
Of the great god Amor swathe their whisperings
 In dark moonsilver, turn
Each love to each, as happy as a rose,
Without a thought of murder or the things
That motivate the sleeper's thought, and burn
 In perpetual renewal,

Each time one dream ends entering another,
Until she wakes to find the gunman there,
 The gun at hand; and cries,
Her screeches echoing the noises close
Beside the house of huddled lovers where
The goddess Moon blesses the squeaks and sighs
 With her limpid mothering.

Mr Detective Fax turns at the gate, as its hinges
Squeal, and he enters the room, and treads on the carpet.
 Chocolates are everywhere,
And the sweet perfumes of luxury dispose
Ironic fragrances. He finds as yet
That it's difficult to pinpoint such a bare
 Crime in an atmosphere so dingy.

His hand moves to an orange by the bed,
As deeply orange as its eiderdown;
 Sucks it, and contemplates
The greying silver of the moonlight's shadows,
All gods and goddesses of night laid down
To rest. He turns. He holds some felon's fate
 Between his hands; squeezes; and knows already.

VERSIONS OF FACT

I

Taking a few facts, spread out on the bed,
The keen detective hovers like a fly
Over his serial and swift perceptions,
Making a plot of something in his head,
The book, the open page, the apple by
The bedside. If he eats it, with a sigh
He'll note his misdemeanour, eating clues
Not being part of his duties, nor deceptions
So sweet as these. He needs the night outside
With its flattering lovers and impossible moon
To keep the buzzings of his heart in tune
With the heady professionalism of his pride.

II

The lovers see a sad car as they pass,
Perturbed as loons by sifflings of the wind
And the moon's cold eye and its proliferations
Of maddening thoughts. They lie here on the grass,
All wet with dew. Their voices rise, and find
An answering echo from the batty, blind
And undiscoverable night, whose use
Is theirs and the detective's, but whose passions
Are darker and more devious and less known.
Mr. Detective Fax can hear them move
In their divine, discoverable love,
And for a moment feels their world his own.

III

The crimes alas! are less discernible.
The actions of the lonely and the mad
Provide only a dotty dislocation
Of normal thought. They never ring the bell,
But creep like aliens round the orbs of sad
Detachable stars, neither the good nor bad,
But just the nothing. And this is what the obtuse

Minds of detectives, lovers, seek relation
For, bend to, and try to emulate,
Seeking the answers that the mad have found
Already, lying helpless on the ground,
Or buzzing inwardly with thoughts of fate.

IV

The lady heard the lovers as she lay,
Douce and delightful, murmuring in the dark
Among the leaves of night, and thought of action,
Inactive there herself, but full of gay
Deceptive thoughts. She lay as in an arc
Of the moon's light, and felt her nerves cry Hark!
To the lazy sounds of delight that carried news
Through the whispering night of distant satisfaction.
And the distance became the present. The absurd
Detective story dropped from her lifeless hand,
As she understood in a flash what the hero had planned
And the meaning of every slowly discernible word.

V

But life in fact continues. Lovers go
Back home to warmer beds. Detectives glean
New information. Time is the serial,
and Time itself is telling its story. Slow
Or quick, the steady footsteps pace the mean
Or moonlit streets where all detectives lean
Gaunt in the shadows, and where facts refuse
To fit the situation, and material
Clues still elude the Watcher where he stands,
Or the hurrying lovers, saying good-bye and good-bye.
Only the one herself will know how to die,
And what book to drop from her ever-despairing hands.

EDITOR'S NOTE

These texts have been assembled from typescripts and holographs found among Moore's papers, supported by two published sources. They were probably not conceived by the poet as a distinct sequence or group of poems, and he never gave the work a title. What we have is more like ten attempts to write the same poem, or ten independent poems all involved in the same story, of Miss Ollipester who is murdered in her orange bed by a detective novel, and Mr Detective Fax who arrives too late and eats an apple. The contexts in which they were found and the character of the typing and holograph suggest a date in the latter half of the 1940s for all of them except the last.

The starting point was the first poem, "In the orange bed Miss Ollipester lies...", which was published in 1945. Probably not very long after this Moore wrote "Outside the errant window weeps the yew...". He added to the typescript a hand-written note pointing out that this is a completely different poem from its predecessor.

The next six poems (The Orange Bed x 3 + Nocturne, Night-piece + another The Orange Bed) were found together in the order in which they are printed. The second had a hand-written note under it defining it as a re-writing of "In the orange bed Miss Ollipester lies...". Only three of the six exist as uncorrected typescripts signed by Moore, which was how he usually indicated a final text.

"Chocolate of rose, chocolate of violet..." was discovered separately among the papers, and it is pure conjecture to insert it among the others at this particular point, except that it probably precedes the last poem in date.

The final poem, Versions of Fact, was published in 1968 and on one of Moore's lists of his own poems it is dated 1967. The continuity of substance and manner from the earlier poems is noteworthy in view of the fact that Moore suffered a lapse in his career by which he wrote almost nothing between 1950 and 1967.

TEXTUAL NOTES

The Orange Bed. "In the orange bed Miss Ollipester lies..."
Published *Poetry (Chicago)* LXVI, September 1945
Typescript, identical to printed text.

The Orange Bed. "Outside the errant window weeps the yew..."
Two typescripts, identical, one signed and with a holograph note (see above)

The Orange Bed. "More orange than the winter sun..."
Typescript. Final section scored through and an ending added in virtually illegible holograph.
Before amendment the typescript continued from the fourth stanza as follows:

Comforting orange coverlets,
Lit with the glow of luxury. Time whets
The appetite for lives detectives led
In search of facts, not wayward moons
Or orange suns.

Yet, when the lean detective finally comes
Who's there to welcome him? Miss Ollipester
Herself lies silent dumbly contemplating
Not lovers in the park, but her own death,
And, if a heart is beating,
At all it is the harsh heart of the realist,
Mr. Detective Fax who finds his clues
In this or that, in chocolate or apple;
Who never has a mind to look at people,
Only at death itself. And if she's kissed
In death by anything it's only moonlight
Fresh from the lovers' breath;

Where in the heather the detective bends
To find not luck, but the laces of his shoes,
And these he ties, tying up all loose ends,
Leaving the girls and boys to face their night
And the orange sun of morn to rise and light
Small wicks of faith.

The last line of this earlier version was achieved by cancelling first 'Some icy faith' and then 'Its wicks of faith'

The last line of the final version, 'Its taste for death', is a conjectural reading from a rough holograph intervention. The first word could be 'This', the second word could be almost anything, including 'knife', the third word consists only of a downward stroke with a forward tail attached, and could among many other things be 'of'.

In the margin opposite 'In search of facts...' are two lines in holograph, the second indented, which may read something like :

Dream[s] up Detective Fax and [?lets]
[?Out] [] but [?breath/?truth]

The subject of this sentence is presumably 'Time'.

The Orange Bed. "The lovers walk so quietly under the elms..."

Two typescripts, the first with holograph amendments, the second with a holograph note, crossed out.

The following readings are found in the earlier typescript, all changed by pen to the later:

Title THE ORANGE BED AND THE ACROBATS

2/2 truths / truth

3/3 *originally* dark *changed to* loft

3/5 Watcher / watcher

4/1 throbs / thrums

4/8 Time / thought

5/2 wry / dry

5/3 squeals / pitch

what murder / which murder

6/1 dearer *inserted*

6/2 prescribed / *originally* there *then* described

6/3 Miss Olley / The woman

6/5 out there *inserted*

last line At Death out there waiting.

The Orange Bed. "Obstinate in the dark new lovers quote..."

Two typescripts, the second signed.

The following readings occur in the earlier typescript, mostly corrected to the later:

2/3 quickly / quietly

3/1 dark-set / meaning

5/3 crimes / acts

6/1 the lovers / ghost lovers

6/3 doubtful / *originally* feeble *then* waning

7/1 shooting / shoot her

7/3 suns / sun

Nocturne

Typescript, signed, and earlier holograph with identical text.

Night-piece

Typescript, amended at the ending, and earlier holograph.

Before amendment the typescript ended:

The floor and / The floorboards –

From frightening / By frightening

Readings in the earlier holograph text:

5/4 Watcher / watcher

7/3 The floor and / *as final version of corrected typescript*

The Orange Bed. "The appearance of a classic afternoon..."
Typescript.

The Orange Bed. "Chocolate of rose, chocolate of violet..."

Two typescripts, one signed.

Readings in the first typescript:

4/1 ends / ends,
4/6 Moon / moon
5/4 luxury dispose / luxury. [And yet] dispose

Versions of Fact.

Published in *Outposts* no.76, 1968

Signed typescript, identical to printed text except that the stanzas are numbered in the typescript only.