

# Orphelia

Gabriel Rocheman



*“Hell is just a frame of mind.”*

Christopher Marlowe

I woke up from a very deep sleep with the feeling that I had been half-awake for a while.

Gathering my wits was a tedious experience. I still had a lingering anxiety from my nightmare. I didn't know whence the feeling came, but I felt quite agitated about some imaginary event which I didn't even remember. Overall, my afternoon nap had left me more tired than before... I decided to walk off the remnants of sleep, and my first steps led me to my study.

What I found there awoke me fully in an instant.

I was under the impression that it had been a while since anybody had entered my study. The house was big enough I could choose to ignore parts of it and still have more space than I knew what to do with. I fondly remembered the chaos that used to reign in there. It was a very spacious room which usually managed to look small, due to the sheer quantity of objects packed in it. Every scientific tool known to mankind – and even some which probably weren't – was supposed to be there. They were more or less organised by fields of study, and the gaps between them were filled with books and articles.

Now, however, the chaos was arranged around the centre of the room, as though it were all in an unseen revolving motion. I was amazed at the whole transformation, and I quite hoped it had been spontaneous. The scientific term for this kind of pattern, which now and then emerges out of chaos, was “strange attractor”, as I recalled. The fact that I felt strangely attracted into it was therefore a happy coincidence. The dusty smell dispelled any doubt I could still have had: this was indeed my study. I recognised some of the tools in there even though most seemed to have been scrapped for parts and reassembled in baroque ways. In fact, they all seemed to be in a kind of symbiotic relationship. Even more baffling: they were actually all functioning in a hushed symphony of chimes, humming, and whispers, reminiscent of life itself. It sounded like a biological organism, but it looked like a jumble of copper, steel, and plastic resting in a shallow pool of papers, brutalised books, and shed parts of machinery. It was like a dense, shiny forest with all its papery and leathery leaves on the ground. I felt ill at ease, as if some sort of feral animal could leap at me from the depths of this jungle. In the centre of the room where all the practicable paths led, there was a clearing. In the centre of the clearing stood a bed, and in the bed a woman lay, eerily motionless.

I exited to the hallway and closed the door, pondering whether my study had become sentient. And even if it had, when had it turned into this oversized artisanal life support system for a comatose woman? Had it birthed her? I hoped it had, but realistically someone had to be behind this.

It all became clear when I found one of my oldest friends waiting in the library, dressed as a nurse. I was more surprised at his attire than at his presence; he had always had the habit of popping up now and then and acting as if he had been there all along, before figuratively sweeping me away in his turbulent stride. He also liked to change his appearance to the point that he could sometimes be difficult to recognise, but it was the first time I had seen him in women's clothes. Then again the nurse outfit was more or less appropriate, given his... I don't even know how to call that... Prank?

I cleared my throat from behind the sofa in which he was sprawled like a teenager, reading some second-rate romance novel as if he wanted to point out his gender even more than his preposterous skirt did, and he stared at me evenly.

“Would you care to explain the state my study is in?” I asked, trying to sound alarmed at the whole state of affairs. He gazed at me for a while before answering. He must have been gauging my reaction... He knew perfectly well that I was incapable of feeling any sort of alarm.

“Well it was the only room that seemed available... I thought you weren't using it, judging by the cobwebs. Would it be more convenient if I had her put elsewhere?” He answered with a sly smile disguised as an apologetic one, and in his usual carefree, almost benevolent tone. It looked like he was determined to keep me in my nonplussed state.

I must have shown my weariness unwittingly because when I asked for more information he

defused my questions by producing one of his ghastly drugs, saying it would make me feel “rejuvenated”. His attire notwithstanding, I was certain that it wasn't medicine and I was positive that he was trying to lure me into one of his rampageous adventures, tempting me with drugs – that's just how he was. I guessed that was how he had ended up with a comatose woman to look after in the first place, whom he was now dumping on my shoulders.

I sighed. I was indeed weary, and I didn't feel up to the ordeal of unraveling the mystery he had presented me with, especially when he dodged every question put to him by inquiring about my state of health and offering drugs with increasing – albeit feigned – disquiet. Plus knowing how this situation had come to be wouldn't have told me what to do with her, and she didn't seem like she was going anywhere...

So I accepted the drug just as I had done so many times before. As expected, I felt all the passions of my youth returning to my tired bones, I felt energised and full of desire, I almost saw my hands turning into those of a child. I immediately forgot all about the comatose woman in my house.

We enjoyed a night of terror and hellish bliss.

It had been a while since I had been taken away into the sheer frenzy of human sadness. Not many people came to my home: they were too busy vanishing into their own deliria. So my friend and I changed to more socially acceptable clothes, and we went to them.

What amazed me was the silence. They had to notice the silence: no matter how much they tried to shout over it, it was deafening. A roaring emptiness, beating and clapping all around. It was so violent that it almost felt like there actually was some sound for the first few seconds. That was a short-lived illusion: sound always carries some sort of information whereas the sole goal of silence is to prevent it from reaching any form of consciousness. This was definitely silence. It felt like a hurricane, though: it pushed the crowd up and down and left and right in a psychotic blur of disorderly motions. Had there been death and it would have been called a war, had there been fear and it would have been called mass panic. It was empty, therefore it was soberly dubbed “neighbours” and we were supposed to love it as ourselves.

I honestly did. I relished in the chaos. Chaos was predictable yet stupidly entertaining. For instance, if there are repetitive elements in it, they always tend to synchronise. This is why the stalls find themselves joining the curtain call even when they had enough of people bowing to them. Here, the neighbours were jumping up and down. The crowd on either side was jumping as one, but one side was off the beat of the other, and the centre was simply hectic, lost between two contradictory rhythms.

I saw that my friend was obnoxiously bothering women, so I had to turn elsewhere for company. I helplessly shouted at a girl who had been eyeing me for a while when she wasn't rebuffing suitors.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm dancing!”

I was surprised she had heard me.

“That's not dancing! That's gesticulating!” I tried to articulate clearly over the silence but my throat was already falling apart. She understood yet again, and I thought I would have to examine her ears.

“Wales owes me a nuanced hen!”

That couldn't be it.

“What?”

“I said show me how *you* dance, then!”

I caught her by the waist and dragged her into what I imagined a Bacchanale to be. It was basically a Galop that sometime broke into a Charleston, Tango or Rock'n Roll, often involving other gesticulators in our affairs. She was terrible at it but she seemed to enjoy herself, even though

I couldn't hear her laughter over the silence. However the dance was very messy, and since the neighbours were everywhere we ended up bothering a lot of people. At some point, we had made enough enemies that we just had to leave that god-forsaken place of debauchery and filth.

I finally heard her laugh. She laughed while we retrieved our coats hurriedly, while we ran up the stairs, and she was still laughing when we exited to the street. It was refreshing to finally hear some normal silence, easily broken by the wind or the cars in the distance, rather than those unshakable explosions of vacuum, scattering the inevitability of death everywhere. She also laughed when I said that.

"So you don't like the music of your time, do you?", she said while rummaging in her purse with a large smile.

I was dumbfounded. She actually hadn't realised how silent the club was. I tried to explain it to her but she didn't really care. She listened and understood, she looked impressed with what I said, but she didn't care. I tried to make her react, I delved deeper and deeper into the vanity of her actions, of her being... I practically insulted her and everything she stood for.

"You sound smart."

"What does it take to get a reaction out of you, vile woman?" She wasn't vile but she had annoyed me with that pointedly stupid reply to my soaring lyricism.

She finally managed to pull a small, beige package out of her purse. It instantly let out a divine fragrance as she pulled out a small bundle of brown fibres and rolled them within a thin piece of paper. She stuck it in her smile and lit it on fire. She liked seeing me in that state and she wasn't going to stop infuriating me.

"I'm not here to enable you and your philosophical musings."

"Then what is the point of you, you wretched harlot?" She drew on her cigarette, kissed me, and blew her smoke in my open eyes.

"Stop it with the old-timey abuse. It's not sexy."

"Well, you two sure know how to attract attention on the dance floor." He announced his entrance from behind us. I had tears in my eyes, but I could still see that he was unbelievably drunk. I was pretty sure he had made himself that way just to be a pain. She asked me who he was, so I told her.

"That's my friend. He's the devil."

"Should I feel insulted?" I ignored him. I still couldn't see very well, and I doubted for a split second that it was indeed him, but it was just because he had stolen someone else's jacket. When she turned to me, her smile was a bit crooked.

"I don't like him."

"Now I'm definitely insulted!" He interjected in the background. He was beginning to look vindictive indeed.

"You're not supposed to. He'll grow on you, though." I don't know why I tried to defend him.

"I'm not sure I want him to."

He was enraged by her remark. He grabbed her by the collar and proceeded to bark at her menacingly, shouting slurred obscenities and threats. He seemed confident I wouldn't stop him. I normally wouldn't have, but I wasn't finished with her so I put my hand on his shoulder and planted my eyes in his and said "Now is not the time." He looked at a loss at my response: he was too far gone. He tried to shake himself free, failed and struck at my face. I used a trick he had taught me before: if you tilt your head forward so that the fist lands on your hairline where the skull is thickest, and firmly plant one of your feet behind you, your leg in alignment with your spine, it'll be as if your opponent was punching the concrete ground. It looks like you're getting struck, but he's the only one getting really hurt.

He was too drunk to feel his hand crack. The shock still brought me down and stunned me a bit, but his hand would probably hurt in the morning. I believe he left shouting abuse and threats: I was quite disoriented at that precise moment.

Her voice accompanied me back to my senses.

“You shouldn't have done that... He would have shouted a bit then he would have left... He was just a sad idiot on a bad alcohol spell, but now you're all broken and the whole thing became way more... cliched and traumatic than it could have been.”

I tried to get up while listening to this. It wasn't completely trivial a task. as a result I ended up needing some clarification on what she meant. I tried to unravel it while tidying myself up with the handkerchief she handed me.

“Well I'm sorry I didn't ignore your plight, fair damsel. It was both sexist and inconsiderate of me to... To let myself get beaten up in front of you for your protection? Thereby having your *delicate* self suffer through a display of physical violence *and* assuming you were too *delicate* a flower to fend for yourself?”

“Exactly,” she deadpanned.

I sat back on the sidewalk and she kept towering over me, eclipsing the blinding streetlight.

“...I think your interpretation of gender relations is a catch twenty-two.”

“That's just how they are.”

That sentence suddenly filled me with dread. As I squinted at her dark silhouette cut into the sickly, greyish blaze of the street lamp, I felt my blood freeze and my breathing stop. I had heard that sentence before. I had heard it a lot: it was the ultimate hiding place for absurdities and lies. Every loophole in every so-called fact was in it. I recalled the silence and the chaos, the illusions, the Bacchanale... I understood in that moment that I had seen through some kind of cosmic *circulus in probando*, and behind it an unspeakable monstrosity was looming. It wasn't the first time that I encountered that omnipresent goddess of chaos and carnage. She had risen a long time before, when the empire of language had collapsed, when the world had been doomed to an insular life in an ocean of disguised silence. She was the oldest and the harshest of deities, with a thousand dead tongues hanging out of her smirking mouths, a million dead eyes who followed men everywhere, forever blind and forever unseen, a billion mutilated appendages which she plunged into the souls of mortals to control them like puppets, performing those delirious rites for herself through them. She was the original mother goddess from whom everything was born as order out of disorder, and in whom everything died as collapses of reason. For the first time, in the shadow she cast over me, I saw everything that words hid and silence conveyed. Ignorance. Isolation. Madness...

The ancients called her Eris, she was both the mother and the daughter of the night and her avatar was smiling at me again, but this time it was predatory. I understood why my friend didn't like her: he was jealous. He was right to be, she was a serious competition for him. The terror she inspired me in that instant only made my desire for her stronger. I knew I wouldn't see my friend again that night, but I didn't care: I was in fascinating company.

We enjoyed a night of terror and hellish bliss.

When the morning came, the woman had left and my friend had come back. To me she was just a drone, an extension of the terrifying cosmic being I had glimpsed at the night before, but I was a bit hurt that she hadn't even stayed for breakfast. I wanted to find a way to commune with her mistress once again.

As for him, he looked bored. He was still dressed with stolen clothes, resting his chin on his fist, sitting at the table, eyes half-shut. A sudden decision brought him to his feet: he grabbed me by my arm and dragged me to my study without a word.

“There she is. Not a puppet, the real one.” He had read my wishes in my eyes. He shoved me inside. “Here is your goddess.” I wasn't sure whether he meant the woman or the room.

Nothing much had changed in the study. Except for the two of us. We were now sitting on

either side of the bed, each of us holding one of her hands. I had read somewhere that human contact could help with comatose patients. He had left to change outfits before joining me inside, and since we were in my home he had borrowed some of my clothes and managed to dress exactly like me. We looked positively ridiculous.

I asked him why he had brought her to me.

“You're a doctor. Aren't you?”

I wasn't that kind of doctor and he knew it.

“Well... don't you wish you were one now?”

I did.

“Still you know things. It's your job description.”

I did, but I didn't see what good that would do.

“Well, you could have an idea. A lifesaving one.”

Or I could have the exact opposite.

Or both, as he pointedly remarked.

“Why would you want me to save her anyway? Isn't she your competition?” He kept silent but I understood the answer as soon as the question left my lips. He wanted competition. Besides, he knew that she fascinated me. He knew that I wanted to bring her back. If I did, he would consider his own role in this story as a favour to me. There was nothing he loved more than being owed to.

“...I do have an idea, albeit a very foolish one.”

We exchanged a conniving look: we both knew those were the best ideas, because they could be the simplest.

“I could just go talk to her and try to bring her back. She's asleep but she's not gone... A few years ago I dawdled with the human psyche, I scribbled a theoretical way to project a person's consciousness into a large bubble of space and walk around in it. I can't physically bring her out of there but I could at least try to wake her up from the inside.”

And the stem cell research people thought *they* were playing god. Of course there was a catch and that fiend knew it.

“The problem is I wouldn't be able to orientate in it: it would have an infinity of dimensions instead of just our three. And if anything goes wrong, we could never wake up.”

I knew he could help me with that kind of things. He had guided me into weirder and more perilous situations before.

But instead of simply saying it, Mephistopheles just smiled slyly and bleeped. I was dumbfounded at his response until I noticed that he was now holding her index finger instead of her whole hand, as I was. As of then, he wasn't dressed as me. He was imitating the ECG scope monitoring her heart. He was acting out his obsession for disguises again. But his expression was telling me to go for it and I knew that I could count on him to help me.

Those favours were always called in later, though...

Before I could even think about the price I would have to pay for his help, it suddenly struck me that I wanted to save this woman with every fibre of my being. I went into the outer part of the study to scavenge what I needed to work on my idea. It felt like a biological reaction. As if my study was rejecting her like a foreign body, or as if she was a failing organ I needed to resurrect. She needed to be expelled and yet she was completely necessary. Both impulses made me want to save her, both told me she was the most important thing in the world, but I didn't know whether I wanted her back or whether I wanted her gone.

After a long walk in the forest, I had the necessary tools to build my device and the theoretical paper I had mentioned, which was rustled and torn, but readable. We had to work for a full night, but we managed to transform the window so that it would lead into her mind instead of in a boring garden one storey below. The machine was a long trail of electronics and tubes sprouting



from a mask on her eyes, spiralling through all the other parts of her life support, and into the large window frame. Everything was in place, all that was left for me to do was flipping the switch – which had unfortunately been mounted backwards. It was the only fault in an otherwise perfect job, so I was quite annoyed at it. I actioned the lever into its “off” position, which set the whole room into a whirring crescendo of blinking lights, sprays of white sparks, electric arcs and multicoloured puffs of smoke. The window handle was red hot and some charred thunderbolt shapes were crawling on the wood. The reflections on the window panes became more and more distinct, as if the glass was turning into mirror, until it began to melt away. I didn't even have to open it: the whole window was progressively swallowed in burnt darkness. At some point, it became so black that it kept escaping my field of vision, as if it didn't exist anymore: I had to cross my teary eyes to distinguish it.

I could finally climb in. It occurred to me that this idea was not simple at all. It was merely foolish. What would happen if it shut down before I was done crossing the threshold? Would my body be torn between the two worlds? Would my mind be?

Still I couldn't let all this hard work go to waste.

So

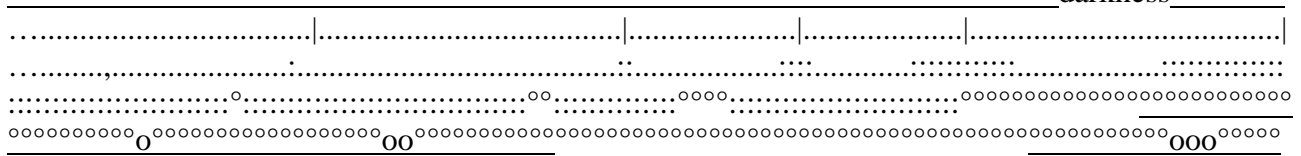
I

leapt

into

the

darkness



I  
 am  
 again  
 I  
 remember  
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 and feelings  
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 sour  
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 raspy  
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 daffodils  
 and thyme  
 cold  
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 breeze

The fragrances of the garden  
     Blend with  
 Coppery tastes  
     And dusty  
     Aromas of absinthe  
     And foliage  
     And liquorice  
     The flavour of cherries  
     Invades my fears  
     As a smell of woodlands  
     Grows and grows and grows  
     The pain in my mouth  
     Is a taste of ground dirt  
     The nocturnal delicacy  
     Of a black canvas  
     Is in the shape  
     Of a forest of giant sunflowers  
     The shadow between the leaves  
     Forms into a flock of maroon butterflies  
     Tumbles among the great stems and  
     Bounces around in the green nature  
     An overwhelming joy  
     Fills my head with wonder  
     The Turneresque firmament  
     Towering above me  
     With a stroke of alizarin crimson  
     A field of jonquils  
     An aureolin sky  
     Clashing with  
     Those two suns  
     Two blazing cornflowers  
     Behind  
     A right-angled valley  
     Which fades into  
     A pile of distant stairs  
     Over a cluster of cotton  
     And some blurs of blue  
     Pooling into azure puddles  
     Cerulean flowers are blooming  
     On the white canvas  
     The silence of the day  
     Is echoing around  
     A sudden noise  
     Betrays a robin redbreast  
     An interrupted song  
     With a feathery rustle  
     A frozen shiver  
 The wind  
     Soft asleep shameless  
     Sweet as a caress  
     Is gently pulling me to someone else  
     Drags along my arms  
     Its insinuating hiss

"Who... Who are you?" I ask, with deference and fear.

The leaves are humming: "Leave! the birds are here!

They are the ears our mistress listens with

To spy on mortals, dryads, gods. The myth

Is true, the mistress of the house is Eris

Leave and ponder this: *Solamen miseris*

*Socios habuisse Doloris.*"

"I know, I know.

'Tis why I've stepped into her soul."

"Oh, no!

All this is not her soul, 'tis but her realm!

In this place, armour, sword or bow or helm

Are useless. Guilt, oblivion, loss, perversion,

those are your foes. In truth, a fool's excursion

shan't make your fortune... you'll meet a foolish end."

"I come here not to wage a war, my friend.

This place is not her realm, though, 'tis her prison.

I come to free my queen, and once she's risen

All this shall disappear: the dream shall fade."

The voice fell silent, every single blade

of grass was still, the leaves were holding pearls

of dew, the wind had stopped. Before me, swirls

of vines and roots began unrav'ling slowly

I waited till a path had opened fully.

"You speak of barging in a holy soul

As though you thought that you could leave your own.

This prison's yours, and you'll be swallowed whole,

Dear doctor. This is *your* dream. *You're* alone."

The warning left me startled: who was that?

What I had done to build this world was still

fresh in my mind, and I had toiled! That rat

would have me think that I was simply ill?

That I was just delirious?

I ignored this nefarious ploy against my quest.

I walked forward into the woods,

Upon this newly formed passage,

as I waited for another test,

Or another kind of message.

I spiralled into darkness, worried sick

Growing more uneasy by the second.

To help my legs, I picked up a walking stick

But then I couldn't use my hands to cover

My ears: I heard some distant screams and shrieks

of pain and fear, behind the walls of clover

on either side of this unhealthy corridor...

I thought I felt, but it was more like a thought of an emotion.

A distant word reaching through layers of oblivion,  
Crystallising some pieces of half forgotten feelings with its lifeless description...

I thought I felt feelings, but I was thinking words,

I heard the words in the cries beside me.

Just as they appeared in my mind.

Did the forest reflect my inner life or did it make me mimic its own?

I had been walking for hours, days, weeks, seconds...

And each step wrought a new, unspeakable inner-scape,

So violent a sentiment that at some point

I didn't know whether I was going forward or back:

I had turned back so many times...

Eventually, after crossing an infinite number of leafy circles, I found the centre of the woods. It was a clearance, but it looked just like the eye of a hurricane.

The clearance was surrounded by grey trees, between some marine blue grass and a cloudy night sky.

There, a formless figure stood: up rose Mephistopheles, in his true form at last. It was a shapeless blackness, slithering and dancing in the centre of the clearing. Taunting me and threatening me at the same time, with a smug smirk and a fiery fury. It looked like a dead tree bursting out of the ground, but it moved like a black flame or a nest of snakes in the night.

That was the most horrible laughter I had ever heard: he contorted for a while.

"This is my home, you imbecile. I lured you in here with the same eternal promise."

"What?"

"You saw me everywhere, in every thing... in everyone else but your Orphelia! as if your love was the only uncorrupted passion."

"Orphelia?"

"Orphelia! The least you could do is remember her: you killed her twice, now. The woman in the bed, remember?"

"But you said she was the Goddess..."

"Eris existed only in your perception, like all things in this world."

"No... I know what I saw! If you tricked me, then... Then was she just one of your succubi, sent here to lure me into your hell?"

"That's exactly my point! She was just a way to forget even more than you already had. I said the woman was *your* Goddess, and I didn't lie. You worshipped her. You still do. Poor Orphelia..."

"Why are you spouting such nonsense? I don't know anyone named Orphelia!"

"Of course, but you won't let me utter her real name... This is just the beginning of the long torture you deserve, my dear friend. You are in hell, now."

I noticed the sickly roots and vines circling my feet just in time to bolt out of the way, as the devil's magic clenched at the empty air behind me. I ran along the path I had come from, almost on all fours. The cries made a lot more sense now: they were accusing me of every sin the world had heard of. Red, distorted limbs were blooming out of the dying vegetation, grasping at me, throwing stones and chunks of earth. I hadn't even realised that I had descended such a steep path. I ran and climbed, sometimes on two legs sometimes on all fours, until I was out of that forest, where the waves of assaults finally subsided.

I lied on the cold grass for a while, catching my erratic breath.

When I got up and looked behind me, the hell I had just left had already disappeared. In the distance, there was a fortified city perched on a cliff. It looked like it had been built from the cliff itself, dug in some places and reinforced in others. The night was fading and though I couldn't see the sun, the sky already took a bluish haze. Over the city, some moving lights could be seen, sometimes a spark, sometimes a flash, and even though it was close to the horizon I could hear the

rhythm of life and joy, red and blue lights, even some musical notes... A major third interval was repeated like a mantra... They were celebrating.

I could exactly see what they were celebrating. The sea below was so still it looked like a dark purple mirror. Maybe it was a lake... A gigantic beast was resting in the distance, reflecting on it. It was so huge I thought at first that the moon had fallen. But I recognized it. Its dead tongues hung out from its mouths, its mutilated appendages had taken root in the abyss below... Its eyes were looking through me. It was dead and the whole world was rejoicing. On the shore, at my feet, a stranger lay on her back. The lake lazily licked her pearly nightdress and the sun in her hair was still wet. Her eyes were two blazing cornflowers, but life had withered out of them a long time before. I crawled to her side, and heard the devil's voice call her name from afar.

"Orphelia..."

I was holding her, one arm behind her shoulders and the other around her waist, her head was resting against my throat.

"Orphelia..."

She was as cold as the sea. Between the corpse of Eris and the body of Orphelia, there was a sinking car. Its wet metal reflected an absent sun. My tears flowed into the lake, and the devil's voice poured out of my clenched throat.

Was I remembering my own pain or did the devil instil this feeling of loss inside me? Why would I weep for a strange cornflower in the sun? Of whom was she the ghost? Both night and day have their *lucifer*, their shining aster, and he could either be tricking my memory or making me see the forgotten truth... Could it be that I had forgotten Orphelia? How could I possibly have forgotten her?

The lifeless cornflowers were staring at the sky behind my head. They could have seen my sorrow pouring from my eyes and the pain on my face, but instead they saw the faceless mask of god, when I was left to rot in this lonely Acheron. They had the stars to dance with and the clouds to rest upon. They would forever create and read the forms of those celestial turbulences, those spiralling lights and waltzing winds...

A sting at the pit of my elbow made me realise that I was now the one lying down and looking at the sky. I was on the ground, the nurse was back, and she was holding me. It didn't feel like I had left my hell at all: if I was home, then the Gehenna had followed me.

I couldn't tell whether she was looking worried or whether He was smiling at my suffering.