

**DANTE 700: A DEAD POET'S TOUR OF THE CITY**

***CANTO I: HELL***

Written by Jen McGregor

Produced by Fronteiras Theatre Lab

**Notes on how to read this script:**

All characters in this audio promenade are performed by one actor (Daniel Hird). There are three voices in this Canto:

**The Narrator:** a young man with a contemporary Dundonian accent.

**William McGonagall:** Scotland's most infamous poet, considered to be the worst of them all. Male voice, middle-aged, Dundonian accent with an old-fashioned inflection.

**Danny:** a male child, petulant and defiant.

**NARRATOR** [*with a sense of urgency*]

"Excuse me! Excuse *me!*"

Grabbing me by the arm, my guide drags me behind him as elbows his way through the mass of people thronging the riverbank. I do my best to keep up, getting my feet trampled by the closing crowds for my trouble. I try to get a good look at my guide, he won't slow down or turn round. I can see flowing brown hair and a dusty-looking jacket, but that's it. I catch the briefest glimpses of a hangdog expression as he glances back to make sure that I'm still attached to the arm he was pulling.

I squeak indignantly, elbowed in the face by someone pushing the opposite way along the bank. I turn my head, intending to yell a few choice phrases in the offender's direction, but then I see what he's moving towards. A small boat with a lone oarsman is coming up the dark river, and the man who pushed past me is stretching out his arms

towards it. I look round. Everyone in the crowd has spotted the boat, or at least the general crush in the boat's direction, and they're surging towards it.

"Shouldn't we be going towards the boat?" I call to my guide above the noise of the stampede. "Everyone else is!"

**MCGONAGALL**

"No!"

**NARRATOR**

He bellows back.

**MCGONAGALL**

"They know not, these poor wretched souls/Where the boat will land/But I, enlightened by my role/Know the very grain of silvery sand!"

**NARRATOR**

I pause, astonished at this unprovoked flow of doggerel, but my guide plunges on and hauls me after him. We reach a tiny jetty and wait. I begin to worry that the rotting wood beneath our feet will give way as people try to mob the boat, but they seem unable to step off the beach. They try, their desperation increasing as the boat glides nearer, but it seems my guide and I are to be the only passengers. He hands me into the boat, steps in and nods to the grinning ferryman to move off.

*[pause]* "What about those other people?" I ask, as the ones left behind begin to howl. "Why aren't we taking any of them?"

**MCGONAGALL**

"They must remain upon these shores

Damned now and ever more

For they in life were unbaptised..." *[hesitation]*

**NARRATOR**

*[confused]* He pauses for a moment. Then another moment.

**MCGONAGALL**

*[Frustrated]* “Blast! I can’t think of a rhyme for unbaptised, can you?”

**NARRATOR**

I open and shut my mouth a few times, which he correctly interprets as a no.

**MCGONAGALL**

“Anyway,”

**NARRATOR**

he says,

**MCGONAGALL**

“if you’ll forgive my foregoing the verse for a moment, they have to stay there because they’re all unbaptised and can’t enter Hell, Heaven or Purgatory.”

**NARRATOR**

*[confused, trying to understand what is going on, escalating to angry]* “But I’m unbaptised! Why am I not staying there? Am I... am I dead? Is this a dream? The last thing I remember is being in a dark forest getting chased around by wolves and leopards and god knows what, and next I’m on some hideously crowded beach being dragged along by a poetry nut! *Where the hell am I?!*”

**MCGONAGALL**

*[solemnly, in a crescendo]* “You ask, young poet, where the hell

May I be? I can answer well

Enough; for sure, you *are* in hell!”

**NARRATOR**

*[pause]* I stare at the poetic weirdo. Then at the ferryman. Then at the black river, the crimson sky, the throngs of tormented souls.

“Hell?”

**MCGONAGALL**

*[coming down from the previous crescendo]* “Er... yes.”

**NARRATOR**

*[angrily]* “And the best way to tell someone they’re in hell is to assault them with bad poetry?”

**MCGONAGALL**

*[offended]* “Bad poetry? BAD poetry?”

**NARRATOR**

He jumps to his feet, affronted, rocking the rickety skiff.

**MCGONAGALL**

*[still offended]* “I’ll have you know that I was famous in my day! Who was it chronicled the tragedy of the Tay Bridge in verse? I! Do you mean to say that you have never studied the canon of my works?”

**NARRATOR**

He snorts.

**MCGONAGALL**

“And to think I was told you were educated! When I agreed to be your guide to the underworld, I thought I would be assisting someone who might appreciate the services of their poet guide!”

**NARRATOR**

*[processing the information]* “My poet guide to the... oh no.” It’s suddenly clear. So clear. Horribly clear. This is Hell, the Inferno. On the other side of the river, that’s Limbo, the outermost circle of Hell. Like Dante, I’m to be led through the afterlife by a dead writer. But what Dante failed to mention, or possibly didn’t know – what hits me now like a bucket of the ice water that all souls in Hell are idiomatically reputed to want – is that the afterlife seems to operate a strict policy of matching your guide as closely as possible to the standards of your own artistic achievement and/or inspiration.

*[pause]* McGonagall's rant goes on.

### **MCGONAGALL**

*[mysteriously]* "No bloody Phlegethon awaits you here,

No Minotaur, but only Desp'rate Dan,

Who may not be bull-headed in appear-

-Ance, but 'tis said by many a learned man

That you are what you eat. That lesson learn'd,

Can we safely assume? – I think we can –

That Dan, the greatest glutton of cow pies,

Is fundamentally at least part bull?

In diet his Minotaurish aspect lies!"

### **NARRATOR**

I can't tell if McGonagall's a fool,

Or possibly a master satirist

Using his vapid verses as a tool

To show me that some parallels exist

Between the world I typically see

And what I see now with this hellish twist.

Beyond the statue, where there was a street,

Now lies a churning, roiling mass of red,

*[surprised, a bit scared, escalating, voice going higher]* And – is someone submerged?

Are those things feet?

And that's an arm, and surely that's a head!

The red stuff coats them, stifling their screams!

Are these supposed to be tormented dead?

I urge myself to wake up from this dream,  
 Or if I can't, to save these drowning souls.  
 I must find strength to brave the boiling stream,

I take a breath, and – [MCG]“Stop, that’s not allowed!”  
 [NAR]The poet holds me back. [MCG]“Don’t interfere!”  
 ‘Tis laudable your courage can’t be cowed,

Yet when divinest retribut-i-on  
 Is taking place before your very eyes,  
 We can do naught but let it carry on.

These miscreants who boil all had it coming!  
 They’re sullen, wrathful, avaricious types,  
 Their noses at the virtuous always thumbing,

And for their sins they –” [DAN]“No-one likes a clipe!”  
 [NAR] A voice rings out and interrupts the poet!  
 A sticky missile catches him a swipe,

The redness hits his cheek, and even though it  
 Can’t hurt the dead man, surely wounds his pride.  
 Another redness rushes in below it,

The blushing of a poet mortified.  
 And now I see the river’s substance closely,  
 Not water, no, nor rock liquidified –

It’s jam! The poet wipes it off morosely  
 And points a finger at the offending soul.  
 [MCG]“Thou reprobate!” [NAR] he tells it off grandiosely,

[MCG] “How many degradations must I thole?  
 I’m showing this living, breathing mortal round,

Just taking him a short, scholastic stroll,

Not bothering you, doing you no wound,

Yet you assail us with insolent hands!

Frankly, you're all deserving to be drowned

In substances far worse than just mere jam!"

[NAR] His protestations do have some effect,

But not, I think, the kind that he had planned.

The soul that threw the raspberry project-

-ile shrieks with laughter, others soon join in,

The hellscape echoes with their disrespect.

I ask about the nature of their sin,

For what could merit this jammy torment?

The poet would speak, but first a soul butts in.

[DAN] "Sin? That's a laugh! This place is where you're sent

When all you've done is have a bit of fun!

A few wee fights, then judgement, then descent –

But you know what? All of the things we've done,

Each pea we fired at our teacher's head,

Each scrap we scrapped, whether we lost or won,

Each class we skived, each rude thing that we said,

Each time we drove our teacher to despair,

Each lunch lady whose heart we filled with dread –

We don't regret a thing we did up there!

And what is more, we love a bit of jam.

Our punishment's a paradise – so there!"

[NAR] He flings another glob – he lifts his arm,  
 Reveals a skull and crossbones on his chest.  
 McGonagall reacts with loud alarm,

But as he drags me off I see the rest:  
 Chaotic children DC Thomson spawned,  
 Some ankle-deep and some up to their chests –

The tallest Plug, as lanky as he’s drawn,  
 Then Danny, ‘Erbert, Sidney, Smiffy, Toots,  
 The silent one, the round one, and so on.

Memory fails, but all the finest fruits  
 Of Beano strips in all their wicked joy  
 Hail our retreat with laughs and jeers and hoots.

The poet looks back, clearly still annoyed.  
 [MCG] “I thought it best we didn’t wait around,  
 For there’s another awful girl and boy

Who might have been awakened by the sound  
 Of all those hellish chortles, and aris  
 To see what mocking mirth was to be found.

I dare not speak their names. You know who ‘tis.  
 You know their tigerish spirit by their stripes,  
 The ones who menaced all, set all amiss.

The foremost of these wretched guttersnipes  
 Did with his hellhound and his foulest swine  
 Cause many a ghastly grievance, many a gripe.

The girl, his counterpart unfeminine,  
 Her catapult forever in her hand,



Likewise endures this punishment divine.

And though it may seem harsh, please understand,

They're merely grounded for the greater good,

And kept here by their greed for tasty jam.”

**NARRATOR**

He led me on. I followed, as I should.

**Please follow your guide to the next stop at the RRS Discovery.**