

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

CANTO III: HEAVEN

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 two voices in this Canto:

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

Williamina Fleming: a middle-aged Scottish woman, very charming and full of wonder and delight for all things in the universe.

NARRATOR

Finding myself in yet another place,

I wait for intro from McGonagall –

But nothing comes, and now another face

Appears before me, her expression full

Of welcome and her hand reached out

As if to take me by the heart and pull

Me into Paradise and let me rest

Where all this journey has led me toward,

The culmination of my curtailed quest.

The vision speaks. The most harmonious chord

I ever heard resounds within my ear.

She welcomes me as if I were adored,

Yet I glance back – the poet has disappeared!

Strange as it seems, that causes me dismay

(I kind of liked him, much as he was weird.)

This spirit, I presume, will guide my way

And so I place my hand in hers and walk,

Trusting this stranger won't lead me astray

And listening as she begins to talk.

[FLE] "Williamina Fleming is my name.

Some secrets of the cosmos I unlocked;

I saw a universe of gas and flame

Sketched out in only spectrographic lines.

Such limited resources! Yet we aimed,

My trusted team and I, to breach confines

Of human limitation – and we did!

I learned to interpret mathematic signs

Of what celestial bodies might be hid-

-den beyond our atmosphere. Our little planet

Is just one world of many, one amidst

A universal dance of elements!

We tread our measures, blithely unaware

That we are all part of one great event.

Like stars we're born, like stars we briefly flare,
Like stars we die, like stars, when we expire
We leave evidence of what once was there.

We gaze at night on long-extinguished fires,
Looking in wonder at our starry skies,
Not thinking of the miles and years required

To bring their light to sparkle in our eyes.
I saw, in data, stellar nurseries,
Witnessing births long after their demise,

And learned that none among us truly sees
How our effects on others lingers on.
We may hope that our skills, our expertise,

The things we learned and all the things we did,
Will be remembered – I've been lucky there,
My story started with a desperate bid

To keep a roof over my head somewhere
I barely knew. Uprooted from Dundee,
Abandoned by my husband, pregnant, scared,

Washed up at the Harvard Observat'ry
I took a job as maid just to survive –
Or so I thought, for no-one could foresee

That this would be the place where I would thrive.

Professor Pickering would be the one,
Chiding a young astronomer mid-skive,

To say "My maid could do what you have done -
And do it better, Scottish though she is!"
I proved him right - I did the work, and stunned

His colleagues with my swift analysis
Of spectrographic plates and what they said.
I found, south of Zeta Orionis,

A nebula shaped like a horse's head -
Most popular stellar image of *your* time! -
Identified ten novae, and now dead,

I see how things I found were built upon.
The women of my team who all were waged
After I was the first - when they were gone

Others arose to take their place, engaged
In scientific and personal quests
To shake the bars of mortal knowledge's cage

And break them, go beyond, discover, test,
Then after our own lives to watch and see
Who rises next to carry on progress.

I greet you at this point in your journey
To share with you the wonders of the mind.
Become the universe's devotee,

Explore, create, discover! Leave behind
A better world than you inhabit now.
Through science, art – the medium you find

It not what matters, only what you do.
The most important thing is to allow
Your own mind to stay open, your heart true.”

NARRATOR

I turn and look back at the city now,
Dundee the way it truly looks today –
But always in my mind it stays endowed

With landmarks I recall from younger days,
No buildings where the walkways once criss-crossed,
Where once I swam there's now the V&A,

A landscape filled with loved ones I have lost
And reminiscence from the recent past.
Yet after I my memories exhaust,

More lie beyond – not mine, I see at last,
But shared by all who've been here, all who've gone,
All whose time here is yet but a forecast,

Whose memories are things yet to be done.
We join in space who cannot join in time –
In words and thoughts and memories we live on.

I call ahead, in the speaking of this rhyme,
I reach out to the living-yet-to-be,
And ask that in this space, in their own time,

They might cast their minds back, and think of me.

This is the end of this promenade performance. If you wish to share any stories, memories of Dundee and/or hopes for the city's future, please ask your guide for a Being Human Festival card and pen so you can do so.

Thank you for joining us this evening.