

*Sean O'Brien*  
from Canto XXVI Of The Inferno  
Of Dante Alighieri

*Dante and Virgil encounter Ulysses*

We waited. When the flame had reached the place  
And time my leader thought most suitable,  
I heard him speaking to its prisoners thus:

‘O you who form a pair within one flame,  
If I gained merit with you while I lived,  
If I earned much or little gratitude

For those great lines I wrote when in the world,  
Then do not go, but let one of you speak  
Of where he went, when lost, to meet his death.’

At this the ancient fire’s taller half  
Began to murmur, shuddering as though  
It cowered from the scourging of the wind.

Then flickering its tip this way and that  
As if it were a tongue that spoke, the flame  
Threw out a voice, which said: ‘When I escaped

From Circe, who had held me there a year  
Near Gaeta – which great Aeneas named –  
Then neither my affection for my son,

Nor reverence for my aged father, nor  
The love I owed towards Penelope,  
Which should at last have sealed her happiness,

Could quench the longing that I bore: to gain  
Experience of the world, and of the kinds  
Of human vice and virtue it contained.

But I set out upon the open deep  
With one small vessel only and those few  
Old crewmen who had not deserted me.

I saw the shores to north and south as far  
As Spain, Morocco and Sardinia  
And other isles that sea encompasses.

My company and I were old and slow  
When finally we reached that narrow strait  
Where Hercules had set his markers up

In order that no man should pass beyond.  
To starboard I had left Seville; to port  
Ceuta had already slipped behind.

“My brothers,” I said then, “we reach the west  
Despite a hundred thousand dangers. Now  
Let us not deny ourselves experience –

In this, the last watch that remains to us  
To know – of going on, beyond the sun,  
Into the world in which no human lives.

Reflect upon your origins: such men  
Were never born to live their lives as brutes,  
But go in search of virtue and the truth.”

And with this little speech I made my crew  
So ardent for the voyage now at hand,  
I did not have the power to hold them back.

We turned our stern towards the morning then,  
And gaining always on the larboard side  
We made our oars the wings of that wild flight.

The night now saw the southern pole and stars.  
Meanwhile, the skies of home had sunk so low  
They never broke the surface of the deep.

Five times we saw the moon rekindling,  
Five times we saw it quenched since we embarked  
Upon our crossing of that sea, and then

Before us there appeared a mountain, dark  
And distant, which it seemed to me must be  
The highest I had ever seen. At this

We all rejoiced, but soon our joy was turned  
To grief, for out of this new land there rose  
A whirlwind which then struck us at the bow.

Three times it whirled us in a waterspout  
And on the fourth it raised the stern aloft  
And plunged the prow beneath the waves, as pleased

Another, till the sea closed over us.'