

## **Journey**

*Olga Wojtas*

He died many times, in many different places. From the first time he was born, his mother taught him that death was not an ending. There is only reincarnation, she said, reincarnation of the ego in human form, and you will determine what you become. Each time, he listened to her, and so each new death brought progress.

In Sumatra, he was lonely, lonely and sullen, and his descendants strove to appease him, afraid of what he might do. They played music with drums and gongs, anxiously hoping it was to his taste. His mother cried, deaf to the sound.

In Indonesia, they carved his likeness on a cliff face, so that he could stand sentinel. They dared not look at him directly, but only out of the corner of their eye. In what sense was he guarding them? To keep them safe or to keep them captive? His mother cried, her eyes blinded by her tears.

In Japan, they guarded him. This guarding too was open to debate. Ceramic figures were artfully placed to appear to protect him, but their stance was such that they would also protect the living from his unquiet spirit. His mother cried, partly from grievance, partly from fear.

In Scotland, they admired his scholarship. They took his head, and hung it in the darkness of a deep cave below a place of learning. Then they sealed the entrance to the cave. Admiration can be coincident with fear. His mother cried, caressing the rough stones as though they were his brow.

In Egypt, his heart was feather-light, and each day they watched him emerge from darkness to rise up in his golden boat. Despite the lightness of his heart he was very far from them. His mother cried, remembering his childhood sturdiness.

In China, they calculated what he would need, and fashioned banknotes to bribe the wrathful judges of the underworld. A blaze sent him the necessary funds, and fire also consumed the shapes of a passport, a mobile phone and a sports car. His mother cried to see the means of escape.

In Ghana, they calculated what he would want. They built him a coffin in the shape of a jet plane and the livery of a luxury airline. His mother cried to see the speed with which he could leave her.

In Mexico, they came to visit the grave with his favourite food and drink, with sugar skulls and marigolds. They laughed and sang and invited him to join them.

And his mother cried, but she also laughed and sang, proud to see how well-loved he now was. And she prayed that his travels had not yet ended.

A journalist for more than thirty years, **Olga Wojtas** was Scottish editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* before she began adding creative writing to her portfolio. She lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she attended the school immortalised in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as the Marcia Blaine School for Girls. This inspired her postmodern crime novels, *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar*, and *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace*, published by Contraband. She is the recipient of a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award, and has had more than forty short stories published in literary anthologies and magazines.