Dream Queen

Queen Ravanrola forbade her subjects to appear in her dreams on pain of death. Of course, her rebellious people ran riot in her head while she slept. After the first executions, the dead returned to haunt her nightmares. She ordered the condemned exhumed and stabbed again and again.

Only the hooded executioner dared approach her throne. The bored and lonely queen put on masks and wandered through the realm. When the strangers she’d seen in the streets reappeared in dreams, she sentenced them to death—though they swore they’d never met. Then, all who lived in Ravan took disguises, a new one each day, so they couldn’t be traced. Even the dying begged to be buried with their faces covered, to be safe.

But who was who? Was the doctor the butcher, or the queen’s henchman? Dark brought no refuge from the nightmare; a glance from Ravanrola could make their dreammasks crack.

In the dead of night, the queen screamed herself awake. In her dreams, every time she dug up her victims, they had different faces.

Then the Ravanians carved masks with Ravanrola’s likeness. After seeing only her own face on everyone for a year, the queen saw herself in a dream. The figure sat on her throne and raised a finger of condemnation toward the dreamer.

Ravanrola woke and silently slipped from the compound.

Thirteen years after she disappeared, the citizens of Ravan finally dared to end the masquerade. Children unearthed parents, stripped the death masks and for the first time looked on their true faces, relieved not to see the evil Ravanrola.

Meanwhile, the town madwoman crouched behind the tombstones, muttering, “Beware. She lies there,” at each open grave.

No one listened.

Who would suspect that such a poor, ragged old madwoman—of all the realm’s inhabitants the most terrified by the Dream Queen—was the great Ravanrola?

Holly Woodward would like to thank Rafi Zabor—a great teacher. These two short pieces owe debts to King Lear and Lady Macbeth.
More of Holly’s writing can be found online. “Eros and Psyche” is posted at www.achipelago.org/vol4-4/woodward.htm, “S & M,” “Behind Closed Doors” and “Subtext” are at www.thedrunkenboat.com/woodward.htm. Holly works as a visiting writer in the schools in the New York area. She spent a year as a doctoral fellow at Moscow University and served as writer in residence at Saint Albans, Washington National Cathedral.