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Damascus Dreams

In my dreams, I still walk the winding labyrinth of the Old City. I push through crowds in the covered bazaar. Daylight filters through cracks and holes in the covered ceiling like stars piercing the dome of the night sky. Crumbling columns testify that the Roman Empire reached this far. I walk deep into the Old City, and I know where to turn right or left through ancient corridors without numbers or markings. I have no map in my dreams, as I had no map when I walked the streets and lanes of Damascus. I asked my way until I'd memorized the route home by walking it daily, the paths and steps and turnings all soaked into my mind, etched into my memory after many tracings.

I speak Arabic in my dreams. When I wake and repeat the words, I laugh at the nonsense that seemed like poetry to my dreaming mind. Other times I am amazed that a dream has resurrected the perfect conjugation of a verb long forgotten. Old friends appear, hands waving as I pass homes, beckoning from open doorways where the smell of a midday meal welcomes. It's all here, someplace deep in my memory. Damascus is a part of me.

The streets of ancient Damascus have not changed since I lived there in 1990. They have changed very little over hundreds and thousands of years. The old man who sat on a three-legged stool at the end of our lane—he's gone now. Perhaps his grandson is still there, locking up a shop door and returning to the family home to greet his wife and new son. I would not recognize them. I do not know Damascus as the Damascene. I know it as a foreigner, a wayfarer, one passing through. In deep dreams, I remember. When I wake, hours before sunrise, I shake off sleep and I write.

I write the Damascus I love, but sometimes her face blurs and I can't make out details: both dreams and memories are tangled things. They twist themselves around smells and feelings and other memories of times and people far removed. They tumble to the page like a child at play, breathing hard. I calm and comb them, working out the catches and finding the story enmeshed in strands of memory. I write and rewrite, but some memories remain confused and tangled. I work the others, braiding them and tying the ends with reflection and sometimes also tying them with regret.