



## 2020 Winner

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Quilt: "Passage at Knowth" Denise Labadie

### Time Shudders

Silence. Darkness. Only a hint of dull light at the far end. I drift along the gallery of cool, flat stones in the soft, damp air, from one end of the passageway to the other, back and forth, a continuous loop. Set below the rough walls, the ashes still rest. Mine, as well as those of the others.

"Daughter?" My mother's disembodied words vibrate within the chamber's stillness. I sense her voice rather than hear it.

"Yes, it is I."

"Why do you keep coming back here?" Her tone edges on accusation.

"Why have you never left?" I counter.

She is quiet for a while. I feel the energy of the universe quiver. Soon it will begin to quicken in me. I cannot stay long. She knows this.

"You are going back to *him*, again, aren't you?" Her alarm pulses in the stones.

"Yes, I am."

“How can you do this? Each time you end up exhausted, broken, beaten. Have you no pride?”

“I must, Mother.”

“Why?” There is a sigh of anguish in her words.

“He is the other half of my soul. Together we accomplish more than when apart. Much more. And of much more importance, exhausting as it may be.”

The stones throb, smelling of the earth from which they were dug. “You are your own soul, Daughter. He is his own soul as well. You are strong. You don’t need him. You have lived in so many times and places—and gained such wisdom. Except where he is concerned.”

I am quiet for a time.

She asks, “How do you know he will be there, that he will take you back again?”

“It has been decided, Mother. You know how this happens. I will find him. He will find me.”

“And he will take you down with him. Again.”

“Like Father did you? But you were never courageous enough to go back to him. He is the other half of your soul, waiting for you, out there, somewhere. But you deny him. Won’t believe it. Because it is difficult, no matter the reward.”

Again the silence. I sense a moment of her shock, her disappointment. The disappointment is in herself, and I know, once more, she will not try. She was queen once. Too afraid to lose, to hurt.

Outside, rain has begun. The quickening grows more powerful.

“I must go.”

She says, “I don’t understand why you always stop here before taking on your next life.”

“It is only for the times that I share with him that I stop here. There are many lives between. That is when I rest. Lesser lives. Easier lives, such as they are.” I don’t say how I much miss him, need him, but she probably knows anyway. He and I are not royalty, not famed, like she was. The importance of what we do is subtle and underlies what matters. I don’t know what we will face in this next life, and we may never know the consequences. Sometimes—most times—it is the tiniest moment that brings forth a momentous change.

“But why here?” she asks.

“Because you are here, Mother.”

No response. Either she doesn’t understand that I miss her, too, or she refuses to believe that as well. Her presence fades, slips through the cracks between the stones. She has gone back to huddle amongst her ashes.

I sigh and begin a final loop through the passageway. Don’t need hands to feel the cool walls and ceiling of stones. Don’t need eyes to see the subdued, clouded light as it creeps through the slit at the end of the passage. Don’t need ears to hear the rain outside. Or the voices of the ancestors who call.

I have been here uncountable times. Doesn’t matter how many. My ashes stay here, undisturbed after thousands of years. In the important times, the difficult times, it is my starting place. My continuance place.

And now, the universe, the gods, the spirits of the ancestors, whatever they may be called, indicate it is time.

And so I launch, flinging, racing, rip-roaring like a comet, an asteroid, a sonic boom. The rush of wind, the sting of cold. Released once more from the place of reckoning, the decision

made, I crash, invade, meld into the warm, damp miniscule beginnings of life inside another mother's womb, ready to grow, to seek, to toil. To love.

I feel time shudder, and I am alive once more.