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Winter 1-16-2015

The Fire Pit

Caroline Joy Clauson
Clauson Homeschool, carrieclauson97@yahoo.com

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Grade: 11-12

Genre: Creative

3rd Place

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Clauson, Caroline Joy, "The Fire Pit" (2015). *Best Midwestern High School Writing 2015 Winners*. 7.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hs_writing_2015/7

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The Fire Pit

In 2001 Dad took a job in Ohio and we settled into an orange brick house behind a meadow. Our new mortgage earned us an old crabapple tree with three burly arms splitting out low from his trunk. He bloomed magenta in spring and tired to a soft pink about the time the cicadas began calling for mates. Hard pits escaped the blossoms on breezy days and thumped to the soil where they finally mellowed into pungent viscid sacks. We loved collecting would them for filling for our mud pies. But one such season as our tree littered our lawn with his flowers, residual wind from an east-coast sea storm knocked out one branch. The next year hail battered down the second, and as a tired old man who has outlived his companions, the last branch fell on a still April day. Mom hired a handyman to whack the trunk to a stump and from then on it served as the centerpiece for a thistle garden and manufactured home for fire ants.

I was clicking through recipes and cliché blog posts this July when a Do-It-Yourself fire pit tutorial landed on my screen. And then I remembered the stub; the honeybees and pink confetti and the patter of crabapples— a seasonal shrine of these days when dad turned on his James Taylor tracks and the clouds filmed the sky to a sallow hue at late afternoon. A fire pit would do nicely there, planted in the grave of our old tree as to remember a past summer but also to usher in crunching leaves, hoodies, and stale candy corn. Besides that, Mom would not let me mole hill her yard anywhere else but over that weed-strangled stump.

The encouraging aspect of a step-by-step fire pit video is that guitar tunes plink above a man sliding his shovel into soft, dark, soil for only a moment before he has carved out a precisely round crater. Well then, so would I. Mine would be an underground pit walled with bricks and rimmed with flat stones. The project only required what I could scavenge in the backyard or at least at Lowe's. The experts online insisted I also have a grinder, a mallet, a level, a chisel, a

spade, a steel rake, and a caulk gun, but those were landscapers' jargon; I would do it all with my shovel.

I began digging in early August. Enough years had passed that I could puncture the stump, and after a creak and a heave, come up with shovel-sized chunks of *mortuus lignum*—dead wood. I first found it took strategically applied pressure to stomp down your blade without landing your foot in a cluster of poison ivy disguised in stinging nettle and chickweeds. After the tree fell the bees also burrowed down in the stump, the nostalgia of crabapple blossoms keeping them at its root instead of out venturing for some inferior nectar. Once they'd discovered I had made a habit of chucking at their memorial, they worked shifts buzzing around the stick of my shovel. Between the weeds and the bees I surrendered, dropped it, ran up to the shower and lathered my ankles with brown soap.

So it went; stabbing, wedging, flinging, sweating, scrubbing, and itching when the scrubbing failed. By mid-August I had carved six inches deep of mulch chips and enough stag beetle larvae to fill it up again. I first discovered one of these tunneled in a large root, his opaque body wriggling from his lodge as I dumped wood and worm on the patio for further inspection. He then curled into tight knot, demonstrating the reserve of a gentlemen and yet exposing the horrid black mask of a killer, and I realized who had feasted away at those happy and strong years of my crabapple tree. "*The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel.*" So be it then.

My golden retriever approaches live meals cautiously, but with a large enough endorsement she will eat anything but raw broccoli. I conditioned her by delivering a second grub and then a third. After her fifth she was in the ditch clawing through the roots. At least from now on two of us would go inside with dirty snouts.

Now I stood in my finished pit—a magnificent hole, one-and-a-half feet deep, exactly round, and leveled and polished by the rain. I had filled in the walls with mud where the roots had broken off too ambitiously and made seven trips hauling the compost away in a USPS mail bin and dumping it along the fence. This shrine was finally purified, empty, ready for the rituals of autumn.

But while searching for the proper type of rock for the base, I made a horrific discovery in the comment archives of my fire pit blueprint. “The heat in these in-ground pits never reach my torso!” She was right. We would have to bend to reach our marshmallows to the fire and sit on the dirt to feel the flames. I needed to fill it in.

Kroger sold me seven clearance bags and I ripped them open one-by-one and poured out clean, black, soil higher and higher into my ditch, drowning the grubs, earthworms, the trinket fragments, the pebbles, the dead roots of the old tree I should not have ever stirred, and set twelve stones in a ring on top of it. I dropped a pile of branches within the circle and sparked a flame. And I remembered the honeybees and pink confetti and patter of crabapples. *This* was the perfect grave for a summer passed and a glimpse of the coming season.