The Deeper You Dig
Creative Writing Contest

Written by Lisa Workman, Contest Winner

Sarah's thoughts wander back to last winter, before Granny Rose lay dead beside her on the lice-ridden old mattress; before Sarah sat trying to figure out how to secretly bury her grandmother at the tender age of thirteen.

They knew that winter would be furious, before it even descended on the mountains. They'd gone digging for ramps in the early fall, and Granny Rose pointed out that all the wild onions had more layers than usual. That was the first sign. Then, on the long walk home, Granny Rose paused to rest heavily on her wooden cane, shrugging her right shoulder to ease the pain of bursitis, and pointed toward the beaver lodges, "Ya see, Sarah? Ya see all them logs? Look how t' North has more sticks than t' South. Gonna be a real bad winter."

Well, if anyone knew, it was Granny Rose. Folks near and far knew about her legendary seersaying abilities. It wasn't even six weeks later when over a foot of snow was dumped on their tiny cabin. They'd hunkered down for days, the skies so gray that light couldn't penetrate the home, even during the day. Sarah was unable to get out to dig up the cabbages and potatoes that lay buried and waiting by the side of the cabin. Fortunately, they'd spent most of the previous summer stockpiling a bounty of foods. Strings of leather breeches beans hung from the low rafters. There was plenty of dried pumpkin, too, even though they didn't have any hog fat for seasoning. It had to be boiled in the big iron pot over the fire much of the day to be palatable, but they ate it anyhow, with hickory nuts on the side, their heavy shells yet another ominous reminder of the winter to come.

Even with the fire going all day and all night, even with every quilt laid thickly on the bed, the chill penetrated to the bone. As the wind howled outside, its long fingers rumbling across the wood shingled roof, Sarah longed to escape. Her eyes too strained by the darkness to crack the Bible, she spent the long solemn hours dreaming of the spring, when she'd be able to gather herbs and wildflowers and berries in her basket all day, frolicking through the woods completely carefree. Granny Rose believed that children should be seen and not heard, so Sarah kept her thoughts and longings to herself during the long stretching days, the only sound the pellets of snow hitting the roof, the creaking and groaning of the logs as they stood firm against the winds. By the fourth day there was another two feet of snow outside, a blizzard of such that even Granny Rose swore she'd never seen anything like it. Sarah thought she was going to lose her mind. Idle time was not her forte - she much preferred to keep her hands busy. She couldn't even count the number of times she'd heard, "An idle mind is t' Devil's workin' shop" from Granny Rose, who had made certain a devotion to hard work was deeply ingrained in Sarah's Appalachian blood.

Granny Rose! Jolted back to the present, Sarah's head drops into her hands, and she presses her cool fingers against swollen eyelids. What is she going to do? She would do anything - anything - just to return to those somber snow-bound days of last winter's first blizzard. As a polar response to the
memories of the coldest winter she’d known, Sarah’s thoughts slowly moved to a solution. A rather warm solution.

It was four weeks since Sarah had torched the cabin with Granny Rose’s carefully washed body eternally resting inside. On the move since then, she’d spent the days walking, avoiding the little towns in the hollows and staying up on the ridges of the Appalachian Mountains. Her feet, already well-calloused, were toughening up even more, and soon they would no longer feel the brutal wear of twelve-hour walking days. Oh, Sarah had a pair of shoes. But when she’d tried them on, they were too small and pinched, and she liked her toes to breathe anyhow. She could’ve taken Granny Rose’s boots, but somehow she couldn’t bring herself to do to take them from their beloved rightful owner.

Spring was in the mountains, and the trees provided canopies of green protection from the sun. A few thunderstorms had rolled through, but Sarah didn’t mind getting wet. She had Granny Rose’s good shawl, which was thick and warm. The biggest challenge had been food. Sarah was no stranger to foraging for food in the woods, but there were no nuts to be found this time of year, and it was a bit early for berries, but already past the morels. She’d found some tubers and some ramps, plus she’d had two weeks where the fiddlehead ferns were good, but she was hungry most of the time. She forced herself to embrace the hunger like an old friend.

And so it was that one day that she found herself getting shaky. She knew she was going to have to descend a bit to try to find a better food source, and she needed water too. The last stream she’d passed was yesterday morning. She began making her way down, figuring she’d covered at least 70 miles since leaving the cabin. Soon, she’d be out of the territory of the meddling, mule-riding Preacher Robbins and she’d be able to breathe a little easier.

The ground was rocky, and several times she started to slide downward, catching her fall with her wrists, which were now covered in a hatching of bloody scrape marks. Tears welled in Sarah’s eyes, and she hated feeling so alone, here in the woods so far from home, with no living relatives. She knew she had to keep pushing, though, so she fought those feelings, pushed them down, and continued walking. It was then that she sniffed the air and smelled something sweeter. Just a touch of sweet and sour hit her nose. Pausing, she looked around, and spotted the wineberry bushes to the right.

They weren’t ripe yet. Sarah knew that. Green outweighed the red in the berries. But her stomach grumbled angrily, and she figured there wasn’t any other choice. The first one was so tart that she felt a cramped burn across her jaw and up to her ears as she chewed and swallowed. After so many hours without food, the tartness felt good, and she greedily began picking berry after berry. A few she didn’t even bother to chew, just swallowed whole, in a pathetic attempt to fill up her shriveled stomach. She picked the bush raw, leaving it naked and exposed. Then she wiped her mouth with the back of her arm, stood, and started walking down again. She needed water.

It wasn’t 30 minutes later when she started feeling the cramps. Her stomach gurgled. Soon, she couldn’t even walk. She lay on the moist dirt, curled up as pains raked across her midsection. Moaning, turning, she couldn’t find an escape from her boiling intestines. Her head swam with it, and sweat ran down her face as she rocked on her heels over and over, letting forth a fury from her bowels that left her weak
and shaking. By nightfall, she’d collapsed in her own filth, passed out in her soiled, ragged dress, the moon caressing her forehead in the only comfort to come that night.

It was the sound of a scritchy scratchy fiddle that finally roused her from her sleep in the morning. Despite the roughness of the playing, she could make out the tune of “Boil them Cabbage Down”. Though the night before Sarah never would’ve envisioned wanting to eat again, the young words floating her way started her thinking of hoe cakes and cabbage, and she opened her eyes. The sun was high in the sky, and she knew she must’ve overslept. Tenderly, she raised up on an elbow.

“I thought you was never waking up! Whad’ya eat all them berries for? You know they wasn’t ripe yet!”

Sarah turned towards the voice and squinted at the sight of a red-haired boy perched atop a fallen log, a tiny fiddle in his right hand. He popped upright with alarming speed, bounding towards her. Sarah knew she must be a sight. She tried to brush off her skirt and rise, but her eyes filled with gray stars, and she quickly sat back down again.

“Easy now,” he said kindly, “Here, let me fetch you some water.”

Sarah watched him retreat into the woods. She felt disoriented, with no clear sense of the direction of a creek or river, much less a town. As she brushed debris from her hair, she noticed a trembling in her hands. Soon the boy was back, and he held out a metal mug of crisp water.

Sarah couldn’t help it. She started gulping the water. Suddenly every inch of her body was crying of thirst.

“Whoa, you’d better slow down,” the boy said, a grin stretching across a face full of freckles, “I don’t think you want a repeat of last night.”

Sarah shakily lowered the mug. She hoped the boy hadn’t been around last night to witness her shame.

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

“I’m Tom,” he said, pointing to the right, “I come from that hollow over there, but,” and here he lowered his voice, “I’m out hunting sang.”

Sarah looked at him oddly. “You’re a sanger?” she asked, and without waiting for a reply she continued, “But the ginseng ain’t even ready until the summer is drawing closed.”

“I gotta stake out my patches early,” he said, and gave her another grin. He certainly was a smiley sort of kid.

“I’m Sarah,” she said, and her stomach gave a giant rumbling. She hoped it wasn’t a revolt against the water.

“Come on, Sarah,” Tom said, reaching out a hand to help her up. She found herself pulled to her feet, and sticking her arms out for balance, found that she stayed upright. “I know where we can dig us some potatoes for lunch, not far from here. Old Man Hans’s patch. Used to be he was one a the best
moonshiners in these parts. He died a couple of years ago in a feud, but his garden still puts out potatoes, e’en without ‘im around.’

As Sarah tentatively took one slow step at a time, Tom displayed boundless energy. He didn’t remark on her trudging, but instead picked up a stick in his free hand. He began tossing it up in the air, running ahead to catch it. Sarah had a moment when she worried of the fate of his fiddle, what with him bounding from place to place, but soon she realized how incredibly agile he was in balancing out his leaps and tosses. He must be quite the flat footer, Sarah thought to herself.

True to his word, after ten minutes they approached an old cabin. The roof was rotten and sagging, a hole gaping in the middle. Sarah could see the old wooden garden fence to the plot at the right of the house, the trees cleared of poplars, oaks, and pine to allow in the sun. It was terribly overgrown, and Tom whacked mightily at the weeds as they approached, sending several crows into alarmed flight.

“Just over to the left is where all the potatoes were,” Tom said, bouncing up and down on his heels. “I haven’t looked for any in a good while, but I always find something. Seems like the deeper you dig, the more interesting the finds are. Why once I found an arrowhead! Must’ve been Cherokee!”

Sarah imagined finding an arrowhead. Why yes, that would be something. She knelt in the dirt by Tom, watching as he began pulling the roots of weeds and grass, displaying a rich dirt interspersed with rocks. Sarah begin sifting through the dirt slowly, idly tossing rocks towards the fence.

Tom loosened an old potato, “Here’s one!” he exclaimed. It was a little shriveled, but Sarah didn’t care. She was suddenly ravenous, and she figured at this point a shriveled potato would taste just as good as a fresh one. She began pulling at the dirt faster with her hands. Deeper and deeper she pushed her hands into the earth, until finally she could feel the solid firmness of a potato. It was a lumpy old thing when she pulled it out, and she carefully brushed it off on her skirt. Turning it over, she examined the find in the palm of her hand, and her mouth dropped open. For there, in her palm, staring right up at her in the wrinkled ridges of potato, was the face of Granny Rose.