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Salem

Caitlin Scheresky

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Salem

Caitlin Scheresky

Runner-up, 2024 John Little Fiction Scholarship

Mercy watched her breath form clouds as she rubbed her hands together in the prison cell. Water trickled down the dank walls, pooling onto the floor where it could but coat the already freezing victims of the claustrophobic dungeon. The bottom of Mercy's skirts soaked through and clung to her skin, only further intensifying the freeze. The sound of rats squeaking and women moaning in pain echoed throughout the tiny cell. She was running out of time, rotting away slowly in this prison, and she knew she wasn't the only one. Her body ached as pus and thick red blood leaked from her calf and shivers overtook her body. Despite the biting cold of the room, Mercy's leg was hot to the touch. Infection was imminent, if not already present. Iron rattled as a woman's legs gave out across from Mercy, the chains around her wrists solely supporting her frail, malnourished frame. Mercy could count the woman's ribs even through the loose clothing hanging from her. They were all dying in here of hypothermia, disease, or another man-made hell.

Mercy's mind wandered to years ago, before the trials, before she saw how time fought through her father's bones and face. She was young then, so young, a child of the small Salem Village and her father's little twin. Their unruly dark hair and matching eyes were a source of pride for Mercy, knowing the playful glint in his eyes as they played was thanks to her. Illness had long come for her mother, a beautiful woman of only

twenty years, when Mercy was just a babe. The cough, the fevers, ravaged her mother's frail body, still weak from childbirth. When her soul had finally left her earthly body, the villagers whispered that it had been a mercy that she had died. It had been just Mercy and her father for all her life, their family extending only when Mercy discovered a beautiful dog, all chestnut and bold youth, chained to the fence of an abandoned house. When she brought him home, the son her father never had, Mercy spent night after night nursing the wounds on his neck and paws, sharing bits of her dinner. Mercy knew that her father didn't approve of the new addition at first, but "hound" quickly changed to "boy," and then finally to "Juda."

If only Button were here. Mercy's little black cat would at least remove the threat of disease by killing the rats running about the women. Although, with how desperate the women in the prison were, Mercy could hardly guarantee Button's safety, much less with her leg in its current state. A young girl of only four years sniffled in between wails for her mother, her cries echoing off of the walls and between Mercy's ears despite the lack of empty space. She remembered watching the pair be pulled off of the streets, tears cutting through the grime on the woman's face as she fought to reach her daughter. Mercy remembered standing next to her father then, his hand on the back of her neck reassuringly. The girl fought, too, against the man holding her, struggling free from the bewildered man's grasp and falling at Mercy's feet. Bright crimson blood shot from the girl's nose as her head bounced against the dirt path, and Mercy had to bite her lip and squeeze her hands into fists to keep from reaching out to her, to pull her to Mercy's chest and pet her hair, wipe away blood and keep her safe. Mercy, too, remembered watching as the woman was pulled from the dungeons months later, all bones. Her daughter's screams for her mother stormed up from the dark staircase behind her and landed right in her mother's ears. She begged for mercy, for her daughter. The crack of her neck echoed in the silent streets moments later.

There was nothing Button could do to free Mercy now. It had been a week since she had seen her kitten, in the winter forest. She could still see the two of them together, still barely imagine the warmth of the fire against her skin. Mercy licked her cracked and peeling lips, tasting the remnants of dried blood. She held onto that taste, the sour burn chasing across her lips like liquid fire. If she tried hard enough, she could pretend, trick her mind into thinking her hands were mere inches from the wild flames.

*

The fire had crackled, casting a red glow onto Mercy. Heat and smoke weaved its way through Mercy's clothes and Button's shiny fur, surely clinging to both. The small clearing Mercy and Button had found in the forest was perfect; it was both far away from Salem Village to avoid any spies but close enough to come and go without arousing any suspicions, and deep into the nearby forest to lose any followers. No one would find them. The thin pendant around Mercy's neck, a thin silver cross, glinted with the light of the fire and swayed softly against her collarbones as she prepared. Mercy could hear the pendant click and clash against her skin, against her father's smile and warm hands, against the sharp caw of the crows she used to feed all those years ago.

Mercy's face stiffened and relaxed, but remained void as she pulled a small bundle out of the pocket in her skirts, the thyme, mint, and lavender swirling together with the smoke in an unholy dance. The tips of her fingers burned as the flames bit at her hands, reaching out and absorbing the bundle of herbs. The fire cracked and grew before sighing in violent pleasure. Button sat across from her on the opposite side of the fire, her black tail mirroring the wisps of smoke. As Mercy lifted her arms and began the whisper, both her and Button's eyes turned bright white, power surging from each other and blending into the flames as they grew to kiss the trees above the pair. Wind circled around them, crows screaming and desperately flying away from their perches in the trees as they danced and swayed with Mercy and the fire. Mercy's pendant began to float just above her collarbones and pulled toward the fire. She wrapped her fingers around the cross, closing her eyes before ripping it from her neck and throwing it into the flames. The fire devoured the metal with a starving need, the cross melting against the coals. Warmth enveloped Mercy and she continued the spell, feeling Button's power flowing through her as it combined with her own. And then Mercy heard the dogs.

Mercy's favorite place to hide was at the abandoned house she found Juda: once a beautiful house reaching two stories high and coated in a deep red shade, now only a shell, the exoskeleton of a family torn apart by the plague. Along the house stood beautiful, lush trees casting shade down over the house when the sun was positioned just so. Mercy quickly found herself spending hours under those trees, absorbing the same en-

ergy as the green life around her, watching the time pass with the clouds. When spring took its full form, Mercy began to see the makings of crows' nests at the very peaks of the trees, in between the knots of the trunk and branches. The crows were loud, their young much louder, to which their parents fought to reclaim order. Mercy watched the life unfold into the brisk spring nights, lulled into several slumbers by the sharp caws between family members, only to be woken up by the same families as they joined her on the ground, softly pecking and cawing at her peculiarly. Mercy always enjoyed rubbing their feathers as they curiously circled her before settling around her.

A few weeks after finding Juda, Mercy returned to the house with the much healthier dog in tow. After finding her place under the trees, Mercy pulled a small piece of bread from her skirts. Juda, already curled up into a ball, lifted his head curiously at the food. As Mercy began to spread the crumbs for the crows, Juda prickled. She rubbed his head in an effort to keep him calm, eventually soothing him into an uneasy sleep. After a few minutes of Juda's light snoring, the murder joined her beneath the tree. A smile crawled lightly across Mercy's face as the youngest of the family, a crow she had affectionately named Cecilia, hopped closer to Mercy, pecking the bits of bread into her mouth. Mercy reached out her free hand slowly as to not frighten her young friend with a sudden move.

Juda moved quicker than Mercy could stop him, pouncing onto the young crow and gnashing his teeth into her frail, growing body. Mercy could only stare at where her dog stood, where his jaw and teeth clamped shut mere inches from her fingertips still outstretched. Copper and salt filled the air as Cecilia's oily black feathers became slick with her deep red blood, dripping between Juda's teeth and down his neck to settle in a puddle below. Mercy's face contorted into an empty horror as she heard her beloved murder cry for their lost child before diving down to attack her killer. Sharp claws attacked Juda's face and body, and Mercy watched in mute terror as Juda's yelps became louder, as his blood joined Cecilia's. A particularly vengeful attack peeled Juda's left eye open like a grape, fluid pouring out down his snout and into the blood below. And just as soon as they were there, the crows had gone, as had the body of Cecilia. Mercy regained control of her body to the sound of Juda's blistering cries, and she quickly jumped off the ground to reach him. Mercy's father had been enraged when she carried the yelping dog into their home, promising to

keep Juda indoors until he had healed. But Mercy hadn't stayed inside, and where she went, the murder followed.

It started with a thin black feather on her doorstep. Mercy had already known that the birds had visited her, but Mercy's father had barred her from visiting the abandoned house after the accident. Then it was a single black body, a mangled, bloody corpse on her windowsill. Cecilia, now rotting and coated in a layer of flies and maggots, stared back at Mercy with empty eyes. For weeks her father would find the birds' feathers outside their home. He angrily swept them up, and he found Mercy a cat to protect her from the birds, who she quickly named Button. Mercy hid the body of Cecilia in nearby trees every time it reappeared on the sill, but the murder would return the body to her each day.

On the final day she saw the crows, she went outside to walk around town with Button. Mercy opened the door to exit her house, only to find her lawn completely black. Dead crows covered the land in front of her, all contorted in painful positions. Wings broken and thin, airy bones breaking through skin and feathers, blood soaking onto the ground. On that day, Mercy's father gave her a silver cross to wear as protection. Mercy knew this was revenge, revenge against her inaction, her inability to protect the sweet innocence of Cecilia. Salem Village buzzed for weeks of the incident, of the wretched smell, of the poor young girl that was Mercy. It hadn't mattered, because the crows never returned, and Mercy never again spoke.

The sharp scratch of a key clicking into the lock and the creak of the cell door opening tore Mercy out of her thoughts. They could be here for anyone in the cramped room, filled to the brim with exhausted, sick, starving women and children. The lack of space for most of them to sit down, much less relieve themselves sanitarily, caused the room to reek like feces and rot. The women had to eat something, of course, and the rats were known to bite. A small part of Mercy wanted to pretend she hadn't known so well of that fact, her stomach churning just slightly. Instead, she focused on the glow of the men's torches as they gained on her place in the forest and the all too familiar sound of her father's voice as he led them to her.

A rough hand on Mercy's arm dragged her out of the cellar, and she looked emptily back at the women she was leaving behind. Only time would tell how long they'd be in there, fighting for survival. There was no mercy in Salem Village, and there hadn't been in a long while. Mercy

limped through the dungeons, each step sending a fiery agony through her leg, and yet she stayed silent. Her feet skinned the stone from one stair to the next, each step akin to that of dragging the women and children she left behind by her ankles. Tripping on her way up the stone staircase, her captor, a man likely in his thirties but aged by the burden of sentencing innocent people to their deaths, grunted before pulling her up faster, likely to leave a bruise on her arm. He pushed open a heavy oak door, pulling her into blinding light. The door slammed behind her and Mercy fell to her knees at the lack of support from the man. She finally left the dungeons of Salem Village, but as her eyes adjusted and focused onto a tree at the base of a hill in the near distance, she knew she hadn't truly escaped.

Mercy saw the resentment build in her father's eyes after the day the crows fell. She saw it in the way his fists clenched and jaw tightened at the sight of Juda's scarred eye. She saw it in the way he avoided her, the way he wouldn't allow Juda near her anymore. She saw it in the rage that plagued his face when he discovered her reading through her mother's journals before ripping them out of her hands and throwing them into the fire that warmed their house. She saw it in the deep lines worn into his face, eyes sunken into his skull, an undead walking. Mercy knew the village blamed her too—they held their sympathies for her and her father, for their poor Juda, but what gossips they were at church.

How easy it had been, with the whole of her small world against her, to seek out her mother's grave in the burying place. Despite the separation she felt from her mother, the comfort of a love that could not be stolen from her pulled her to her gravestone. Mercy had found her mother's journals, her world of healing spells and protection charms long ago. Mercy had hoped that she would inherit the same. As Mercy and Button watched, though, a crow landed on the peak of her mother's gravestone. It made no noise, wings silent as death. Instead, a blistering screech came from the gravestone itself as invisible hands etched claw marks into the stone. Mercy held Button to her chest, squeezing her eyes shut at the noise.

As soon as the noise had started, though, it was gone, having only been heard by the girl and her cat.

The pair looked up, skin prickling, and gasped at the sight of the

crow, now only a skeleton, perched dead on the stone. The wind shifted, pushing the bones into the ground at their feet, dissolving into a pile of ash at contact. Mercy stared in horror at the ash as it blew with the wind into her hair and Button's fur. It wasn't until she looked at her cat that she realized what the moment had done. Button's eyes glowed amber-yellow, and the cross at her neck burned her skin. Mercy looked back at the grave-stone, placing a palm to the newly carved words at the place where the claw marks had been, where the crow, her mother's familiar, had landed.

"Show them Mercy."

Mercy's footsteps were light as air as she ran through the thick of trees. Her earthen skirts ripped as fabric caught onto stray branches, but she forced herself to run faster. Behind her, a stampede chased her further into the trees, flaming torches illuminating their path. The deep, ferocious snarling of dogs sent a shiver down Mercy's spine, but she couldn't stop. Only a few more minutes and her curse would've come to fruition, but there was no time for that now. Her only goal was to escape. Branches snapping loudly under her enemies' feet and their collective screams—"Kill the witch!" and "Get her!"—snapped her out of her anger and back into her mind's racing plan for survival.

Two dogs, a few cats, several women. All dead at the hands of the insanity that plagued Salem Village. Mercy knew her chances of escaping were slim, but she had to try. She had already been fighting for the lives of her and Button in Salem Village, especially after those animals had been accused of witchcraft and killed. Even being seen with her cat would've been enough to accuse her of committing witchcraft, so Mercy and Button had resorted to living near the forest, away from the majority of the people of Salem Village. Without Button, she had no chance of garnering the power to cast her curse on the village.

So many of her friends, innocent lives, dead. The people of Salem Village deserved persecution, and the victims of Salem Village's hysteria deserved to rest. Stomp, crunch, yelling. Mercy's ears began to ring, and her eyes flicked to Button. One of them deserved their freedom, at least.

And as the snap-snap of the dogs' jaws became louder, Mercy moved slightly slower, watching her Button escape into the forest. Snap, snap, snap. Sharp pain assaulted Mercy's leg and blackness nearly enveloped her vision as a dog with a scarred face and one missing eye tore into her calf, pulling Mercy to the ground. The other dogs quickly caught up

and circled her, barking in her face and deafening her, followed suit by the villagers. Blood poured from Mercy's wound as the dog's jaws clamped down harder.

The last thing in her vision, before she passed out, was the view of her familiar running through a burning forest, golden eyes glowing.

Noise assaulted Mercy as the people of Salem Village screamed profanities at her through the streets. Had the man not been accompanying her, she silently mused, they'd probably stone her to death. It wouldn't be beyond them by any means, these people killing in the name of the Lord. Dust met her lips as a villager pushed her from behind and she slammed against the ground. Mercy's eyes blurred and her head spun, but she made no sound. The man somewhat gently grabbed her left elbow and pulled her to her feet, directing her through the mob to Proctor's Ledge.

She had known this was coming. She knew the risks, and yet she couldn't have seen herself doing anything else. They hadn't been doing anything wrong, the women and witches of Salem. Those girls had warped the outspokenness and intelligence of the women they accused and sentenced so many to a painful, traumatic death. Those they accused of witchcraft, whether accurate or not, sentenced not only the accused but the whole of Salem Village to a slow, torturous death.

Mercy heard her father behind her before she saw him. His infuriated, violent screams at her for daring to defile his wife's gravestone reached the ears of Salem Village with ease. Before Mercy could explain, could put her hands up in forgiveness for a crime she hadn't committed, her father's rough, cupped palm crashed against her cheek. Mercy's ears rang as she hit the ground. Her head shook, eyes glazed black and opaque, before returning her vision to her father. He screamed, called her the devil, but Mercy couldn't hear him. It was as though she didn't exist in her own head anymore.

Instead, she stared at the message on the gravestone, eyes blank but solid in understanding.

Blood poured from the ear her father had hit, her eardrum completely burst. Sharp pain shot from her scalp as her father grasped her by the hair and pulled her through the burying place, through Salem Village and all of its eyes, into their house, greeted only by Juda's sharp bark and

glaring, black eyes. Only three weeks later, on the eve of the full moon, did Mercy finally make her escape into the forest.

Mercy was stopped in front of the tree she had seen before on a raised wooden platform, forced to stand on her bad leg as the villagers continued to assault her. The man quickly stood at a distance from Mercy, as though he expected just what Mercy did. A rock slammed into her cheek and again into the knee on her bad leg, sending her to the ground, bleeding and bruised. She was right, she laughed to herself as she spat blood and tooth fragments onto the dry ground. They would stone her. She stood to her feet once more, fighting her body's urge to curse them with a spell strong enough to kill them all. She would do this, and she would be free, and the rest of Salem Village would be cleansed. Button would assure this, wherever he was.

The man that had brought her to the tree spoke to the mob, but Mercy couldn't hear him or the screaming of the angry crowd. He was likely describing her crimes of witchcraft, painting her as a villain to bring themselves peace for what they had done. Her hands were tied behind her back, fingernails digging crescent moons into her palms. The man finally looked back at her, and another approached in a black robe with a rope in hand. She stared forward as the second man wrapped the noose around her neck, scratching her face and neck and leaving her skin raw. He then tied the rope tight, but not restricting her breathing. They wanted a show, after all, and anything too quick wouldn't be rewarding enough for the blood-hungry villagers.

Beyond the crowd, Mercy's eyes found a familiar golden pair of eyes and smoky tail. A satisfied smirk grew onto her face. At the sight of this, the villagers screamed louder. A laugh escaped Mercy's body, then completely overtook her frame. Mercy curled down into herself as she laughed, choking slightly as the rope remained stagnant and temporarily closed her windpipe. She coughed, then smiled, and then her laugh, maybe bordering a cackle, began again. This was the peak of her symphony, the madness and hysteria that the village associated with those guilty of witchcraft, now expelled back at them tenfold in an unholy encore. Fire burned in Mercy's eyes now, though the villagers were too blinded by their lust for her neck to notice.

Mercy's eyes shot over to a man standing in the back of the ravenous crowd, the years visible on his face like vicious tally marks. His harsh eyes

were sunken and set, dark eyebrows furrowed in a poisonous anger with hints of sadness betraying him. She smiled at him, all canines and spit, tilting her head to the side as she watched the man pull his dog into a sitting position. She continued to laugh as the first man quickly glanced at the violent mob, then Mercy, and finally at the man in the robe. The man nodded. Beads of sweat formed at the crown of his head, and he quickly pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead while the man in the robe approached Mercy.

Blood dripped down Mercy's palms, through her fingers and onto the wooden platform as she dug her stubbed, bitten nails deeper into her hands.

Confused, reluctant, and fearful faces peppered the crowd, although most still shouted for her painful demise. Why was she laughing? Why did she seem to enjoy, to excite at the thought of her death? Maybe realization graced the minds of those select few, but Mercy didn't know, nor did she care. She continued to laugh as the man in the robe placed a cloth bag over her head. The darkness brought heat, heightened her senses.

What did these people know of honor, of the unyielding love of God? Nothing. They knew the dark poison, the infestation of fickle mortality and fear. She merely pitied them for being so dull. Mercy laughed harder, inhaling sharply and pulling the cloth into her mouth. It dried her already parched mouth, and Mercy's heart stopped. A life of childish giggles, warm hugs, and playful barks flashed behind her eyelids. A life where her mother survived, where her father's soul hadn't shattered with her.

But just as quickly as her heart had stopped, it had restarted, a gasp of air filling her lungs before sharp laughter shot out again, blood coughing up in bubbles against the cloth as she tore her throat raw. She continued to laugh as they pushed her off the platform, her laughter dying with her as her neck snapped. In the distance, the first of the buildings began to go up in flames.

There was no God in Salem Village.

Caitlin Scheresky is a junior at UND majoring in English and pursuing certificates in creative writing and writing, editing, and publishing. She is the managing editor of *Floodwall*, UND's student-run campus lit mag, and the president of The F Word, UND's feminist organization. She loves sugary lattes, her cat Meelo, and rewatching *Avatar the Last Airbender* and *Legend of Korra*.