

# The Weight on the Bench

By Nolan Chen – Poolesville High School

I sit on the black bench, my hands gently poised above the field of monochromatic keys. Golden rays of summer sunlight illuminate the room in hazy shades of comfort. As my fingers begin to run across the piano, the bench shifts in weight: a silent presence joins me. I momentarily pause to look down at him. Deaf as he was, he somehow still listened along to my practice.

When I stumbled through sight-reading in October, he was there, meowing loud enough for the neighbors to hear. I'd lightly scold him before resetting my hands and trying again. He was there when I completed a Liszt piece in January, stoically sitting nearby. He'd walk around me on the bench, inconveniently switching sides. And again in May, as I nervously dressed for competitions, he watched me distantly from the cushioned armchair. He'd been there for it all, and I'd never questioned it or considered what it meant.

In early spring, he was still there. Still switching sides on the bench, still meowing so loudly. I didn't know then that these would be some of our final moments together, nor did I think to savor the weight of him beside me.

Summer arrived quicker than expected. He had aged significantly, his movements sluggish and forced. I painfully watched him adjust his stride to match his fatigued body, watched him struggle to stand up. Each day, I lost a little more of him, until there was nothing left to lose.

At first, I didn't feel much. The house was quieter, but I continued through my daily routines, unchanged. Thick clouds carried my mind, holding me aloft in undesired ignorance. Gradually, I noticed the little things—his empty food bowl, quiet and cold; the medicine unused; his fish plush, still on his bed. Each remembrance stacked upon itself, pummeling the clouds until they finally broke. I'd thought the memories would comfort me, that they would bring me solace and peace. I was wrong—I'd never hear his meow again, never feel his roughened fur, and most of all, the bench would remain still, never shifting in weight.

Today, as I walk to the black bench, I open the curtains. Orange-yellow afternoon sunlight, reminiscent of better days, seeps through. Yet the walls are illuminated without comfort. I sit again, and I close my eyes. Somewhere, I can faintly feel his presence, can still hear his distant meows.

The piano sounds the same, the notes feel the same. The rhythm, too. But it somehow feels empty, as if a piece is missing. The bench no longer shifts. He couldn't hear a single note I played, yet he made the music matter. I once thought that musical perfection was everything, that practice, skill, and talent were all it took to be the best. I'd never noticed the weight on the bench next to me, never thought of the overly loud meows, never valued the presence that needed no words or hearing. Skill means nothing without someone to share it with.