

Bryan Zhang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Vestavia Hills High School, Vestavia, AL

Educator: Kevin Zhen

Category: Short Story

Feathers

“Here, take the keys and go unlock the front door,” mom instructs, placing the jingling keychain in my palm. Looping the keys around my finger, I grab the silver door handle and hop off the car onto the damp driveway. Leaves crunch beneath my sneakers as the trunk flips open. The warm, humid air tickles my nose with each breath; withered leaves from the morning’s showers flutter to the pavement like sodden feathers. One by one, my parents follow me out of our black SUV, reach into the trunk, and emerge with their arms stuffed with groceries.

Dad hobbles in. “Thanks, you can head inside now.

“Got it,” I respond, running my fingers through the cold keychain.

“Wait,” Dad says, the wrinkles under his eyes tightening, his face becoming stern. “Don’t let the bird get out the door. I got it last week.”

I nod and hurry across the lawn onto the slippery sidewalk. Below my feet, a faded orange doormat lies with the “Welcome Home” text now stained by years of mud. After prying the storm door open, I flick through several keys, their silver blades either too long or too short until the door finally jiggles open. Distant chirping of my budgie rings through my ears, his talons scratch across the hardwood floor, the fluttering of his wings growing louder, closer. Mom stumbles through as I sway the door open — a bag of bird seed peeking over the edge of the wrinkled plastic bag.

“Go clean the bird’s cage. Change the seed too if it’s out,” he commands, handing me the bag as I shove off my shoes. “Wash your hands first though.”

“Alright,” I respond.

Wind breezes through the doorway; clouds darken and scurry across the pale sky. The trunk slams shut in the driveway as the car locks, the bright yellow headlights fading off. The ruffles of feathers being preened wafts in my ear beside me. Budgie perches on the edge of the dinner table. I step from the cold hardwood floor to the freezing tiles in the bathroom. Soft thunder glides through the air. Raindrops dive onto the windows, splattering rain across the glass and drenching the backyard. Budgie chirps as he spreads his pale blue wings, leaping onto my shoulder as I snatch the bag of seeds. Thunder slashes through the sky and shudders down the walls. Budgie jumps and shivers.

Dad ambles in through the side door, the sounds of rain beating against concrete and the garage door humming shut blending together. “Seems like we got back just in time, huh?”

“Guess so,” I say, kneeling beside the shiny black bars of the bird’s cage. Still on my shoulder, the budgie puffs and ruffles his faint blue and white feathers, singing with a mixture of chirps and screeches as he glides his wing along his beak. He looks up. I slide the cage door open and reach my hand in, unhinging the small round bowl from the edge of his perch. Inside, shells and pits of eaten and half-eaten seeds blanket the dish, the occasional sunflower seed and millet kernel seeping through.

“Oh, by the way, when you dump the seeds outside, don’t get rain into the house.” Dad hollers from the kitchen. Dull scratches on the sideboard ring in my ear. Hopping from my shoulder to my hand and down onto the floor, the budgie swivels his head to the side and peers out the glass door. I rip the bag of bird seed open. Standing up, I grab a clean, stainless-steel bowl from the cupboard and shake the blend of pellets in, setting it on top of the cage. The pile of old seeds lay in my palm as I open the back door, tossing the shells into the grass, budgie squirming in my hand. A thin, wet figure drifts in front of the door. The budgie twitches, scampering to the tile.

“Dad!” I shriek.

Crouching beside the doorstep, a thin, lanky cat shifts from leg to leg, its black and brown fur matted by rain. Its amber eyes whirl from my face down to my arms, then finally to Budgie. Once a thin oval, the pupils of the cat’s eyes shrink to small black specks, flooded by its yellow retina. Crouching on its hind legs and pushing against the wet grass, the cat twists his mouth up to expose sharp white teeth. Claws shoot out from each of his front paws.

Shifting back once more, he pounces, eyes stuck on the small blue budgie, claws hacking through the rain. Loud shrieks erupting from his beak, fluttering emerging from his wings, he collapses on the living room floor, chest rising up and down. The cat, whiskers twitching as his teeth sink into the budgie's frail wing, pounces, claws, hisses. My fingers grasp the bronze doorknob, slamming it toward the thundering yard.. Hisses and growls hum in the cat's throat — the door shoves him back into the pouring rain. Weak screeching bursts from the budgie's beak, blood staining his wing purple. His tail shivers as he raises his wings and flaps, shrieking, frantic, desperate. He remains lying on the cold floor.

"What happened? Is the bird hurt?" Dad yells as he rushes to my side.

"A cat jumped through the door!" I say, a river of blood gliding down the budgie's wing.

"What's wrong with you? I told you to..."

"Sorry," I respond. "I didn't see the cat!"

"Well now all we can do is take him to the vet," Dad replies, eyebrows furrow on dv