



**4th Annual Ben Strauss
Higher Education Grant 2026
2nd Place**

**Christina
DiCrisco**

*Je Te Laisserai Des Mots
I Will Leave You Words*

I've written this essay a thousand times in my mind. Each is perfected and performed to an invisible audience at my pretend podium with staged enthusiasm. In those rehearsals, my voice does not shake, the pit in my stomach doesn't ache, my mind doesn't run through each emotion my family will face. In those rehearsals, I am a story-teller. It's precision at my podium, not a daughter grappling with her composure. Nevertheless, each essay lays petrified in my chest, the words never leaving my crowded mind. It's not that I'm afraid of public speaking nor being heard. You can ask my dad, I've never been one to keep an inside voice. Rather you should ask my mom, she'll tell you how loud I am in person but how soft I am on paper. I've perfected my words over the years, constantly writing to no one and crafting cards for all. So why is it that this passage lays tarnished on the tip of my tongue? I know the next steps, yet I



can't pick up my pen. I know what I'm supposed to say, but syphoning four years of my fathers cancer journey into one short, black-and-white sheet of paper feels impossible. It's like trying to stuff a storm into a single envelope. It's chaos in the same way my room has always been, items delegated neatly but lost in the whole mess of my memory. Understanding has never been my issue. It's fitting things into given spaces that doesn't work for me. There are answers that sound right on paper, but I've never been good at staying within the lines.

Even the versions that stand steady at my podium know how to follow that typical structure. Introduction, body, then conclusion. Staying within the word limit. Saying just enough. Crafting a perfect existence into a perfect essay. In reality some things don't have the privilege of sorting themselves that cleanly. Some things don't have the energy to be organized at all. I think that's all my issue is, a simple structural problem. An issue with wording and finding the right way to say it because every time something heavier begins to shape, it melts away. It rounds itself out and softens into something easier to hold. Something that fits better within the margins. Something that replicates a response because knowing the answer and saying it are not the same act. Perhaps it's just the permanence though, I've always been a perfectionist. Scarcity has kept my stickers laminated in their original positions for twenty years now. Petrified in perfection, they lay in fear that one shift will avalanche their sticky existence. If I could, I'd preserve them with bubble wrap too, capturing every second in a perfect reflection. I'd freeze time, plead to hold each moment in little globes. Because at least with them in my grasp, I can still identify each expression before they slip away.

Inside those memories, emotions can be triangulated and irregularities spotted. If something doesn't feel right, I can turn off the noise and pinpoint a solution quite quickly. Years of tracking appointments, tones, and pauses between words has trained me to scan like a radar. I trained myself to track everything: my eyes to catch shifts, my hands to move ahead of yours, my chest to keep time with each unsaid word, to anticipate emotions before faces reveal them, all to steady the world around me. Quick enough that I become my own solution to problems unseen. Fast enough that sometimes I forget I'm not supposed to have all the answers. Only, puzzles have never been my strong suit. In the heat of a jigsaw, my fingers fumble faster. Pieces scatter across the table, corners jammed together, colors clash, edges refuse to meet. I tug one piece and



thirty fall into my lap. My mind runs ahead, tangling itself, seizes completely. Nothing fits. Nothing slows. Nothing works, unless I'm with my dad. He always excelled at those types of mind games, he sits and the chaos softens. He works as if it's just another Tuesday, headstrong as the pieces threaten to spill onto the floor. I watch him as my pulse slows and my heart settles. Eighty percent is done before I even try. The last twenty percent is mine and I adore dancing around his fingers, gently shuffling shapes into their final place. My fingers fly in this last stretch. I want every piece, every corner, every color, perfectly in place before the night ends. I grip the pieces too tightly, toss them too quickly, tear through his tempo to prove I can match his pace, but then I noticed there's only one piece left. Everything in me stalls: my breath shortens, my hands clench, and my urgency evaporates into something I can't name.

I settle back into my composure, noticing how his steady rhythm mimics my quickened pace. I imagine this is how my mom once felt watching me, a subtle smile tugging her lips and a familiar pride pressing over her chest. I shock myself with a shake of my head, declining my dad's offer to place the last piece. It's not that I don't want to finish the puzzle, I'd simply rather watch the way your face settles into content. To see the gentle pride I've learned to read without context. It feels like nothing and yet it means everything. In those moments, time feels negotiable. It stretches, bends, and softens just for us, it becomes something we can hold between us instead of something that will carry us further apart. I never stayed for the puzzles, I stayed to watch you, to see how you keep smiling when life is breaking apart, to learn how to hold on when nothing feels steady, to carry that with me for five more minutes. And five minutes of peace have never gone so fast. Five minutes has become a unit of measurement in my life. Not hours, nor days, just fragments small enough to hold without breaking. Five minutes of normalcy. Five minutes where I'm not calculating medications, moods, or the subtle shift in tone that tells me something has changed. Five minutes where I am just a daughter sitting beside her father, no translation or treatment needed, because we've always had a quiet understanding of one another.

Like I mentioned, the beginning has always stressed me out but now I beg to be thrown back into the overwhelming sea of puzzle pieces. To take away all the small squares and make them unknown once more. Take me back, so that we both might be petrified in our perfect



places. The spot where you are at the head of the table, erasing my stress with each steady success of a correct puzzle piece. The spot where my only responsibility was to learn, only this time I'd patiently watch you. But life is not patient. Life has never asked for permission before it changes. It does not wait for the right page or the right pen. It does not care if the sticker has found its perfect place. It simply insists on moving. Perhaps that's why I've always loved the ocean. It's never ending. No matter how often the water goes out, a wave always returns to kiss the shore. No matter how many times I want to give up in the ocean, that's when I see your steady hand solving every problem. Maybe that's what growing up has felt like, it's not the inherent ability to solve puzzles, but being handed the pieces anyways. Being expected to recognize patterns I have never seen, to assemble something whole from fragments that do not look anything alike, or to become the anchoring hand in rooms where I still feel like a child myself. It's truly your talent, the way you navigate the unknown, but it's a niche talent that you haven't passed down to me.

I fear I found my niche in notes. In the subtle way my words can veil so much more than the surface shows. I told you I've written this a thousand times mostly because I don't want the ink to petrify a reality my soul already knows is true. The words never make it past my lips because I don't want to mess them up. I don't want them to squish with my shaking voice. Instead, I put them here, on paper, where they can lay perfectly in the lines and lies of ink blots. I leave the way I love you creased gently on thin paper. I'll leave you words so my perfectly tailored facade doesn't falter. So the veil doesn't shake. So the daughter doesn't break. I'll leave you notes because it will always capture our fleeting love. In notes, I can control what is seen and what is hidden. I can give you the version of my love that is steady, unfaltering, and uncomplicated. I can let you read pride without forcing you to hold the weight of fear. I can let you see strength without exposing the fractures deep beneath it. So I'll keep writing. Not because the words come easy for me, but because they choke me completely. Because somewhere between these lies and lines, between what is said and what is carefully left unspoken, there exists a version of us that is entirely whole. A version of us where puzzles are just puzzles, where five minutes is not fleeting, and where ink does not feel so permanent. I will always leave you words.