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## The Last Days of Oliver Descantes

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Shadows lighten,  
dampness lifts,  
the path line expands . . .

. . . a rolling bushy blanket  
meets the horizon  
below.  
Tiny buildings  
float on puddles  
of lighter green,  
    some placid,  
    some larger and rippled.

I strip my feet  
feeling the wind  
cool my toes.  
I grip my knees  
rubbing small muscles  
ligaments  
to catch the jolt  
of my weight,  
support  
to take me down.

Clammy and calm  
I see  
the Burlington water tower,  
Camel's Hump  
in the pinking sky.

Ruth Wick

## *The Last Days of Oliver Descantes*

### Wednesday

Oliver Descantes wanted to be a writer. There was just so much to express, so much he wanted to say. But Oliver wasn't completely convinced that just "wanting to say things" was enough reason to be a writer. Oliver knew about graphomania, wondered constantly, when he was writing words on a page, if he was the next addition to the list of a million graphomaniacs. But what this worry really did was make Oliver find other explanations for his wish and need to be a writer.

Oliver wondered, for instance, if he liked to write because he was a very lonely person who needed to talk to someone, even if that someone was a piece of paper. Oliver knew he was lonely, and he knew he had friends. He realized that he had not been able to maintain a decent relationship with a woman, and he knew that there were some things he could only tell a piece of paper. *Things he could only tell a piece of paper*; this he found a valid, if not a good reason for wanting to write.

Oliver also found it very peaceful being alone sometimes, with just pen and paper, writing. He liked being with himself. He was his own best friend. He had a sense of himself. Not many people understood Oliver like Oliver understood Oliver. Sometimes he would fall asleep over a sentence he'd been writing. Not because it was boring. Because Oliver was happy.

That was it! It must be a combination of those two things! Oliver made a point of enumerating his "reasons why I write:

1. I like talking to myself on paper when I'm lonely.
2. I'm happy when I'm just with myself."

The list looked a little skimpy, not to say dumb to Oliver, and so he decided not to show anyone.

In fact Oliver generally didn't show anyone any of his writing. Oliver loved to write fiction, Oliver loved to write poetry, but he hadn't shown anyone his stories or poems since he quit college two years earlier. Oliver took one course in Creative Writing his freshman year at Caddefield College--in his second semester--but he wrote so much for that class he flunked out of school. He only got a "C" in the Creative Writing course, and he wrote more than anyone in the class, majors included. The instructor, Mr. John Malapit, (whose first volume of poetry *My Interior Spaces*, Oliver never read) thought that what Oliver wrote was stupid, or, as he described it, "fairly adolescent." For instance, one poem Oliver submitted to Mr. Malapit was titled

### Why I Write

by Oliver Descantes

I was trying to explain to myself  
Explain the insufficiency of love, of life  
or words

When it all began to seem terribly  
insufficient--

And so I scrapped that too.

There are several routes to failure here:

Roethkean terms would have love  
as some region vast, funnily  
unapproachable, deadly frustrating,  
non-disconfirmable and of course,  
*there*: a bit of Existentialist,  
Roethke, I think.

My hero, Dylan said: "I love  
you more than blood," and  
this strikes at my  
terrible, cursed insufficiency;

He really can't find  
the words for love, and so he will  
sacrifice all for it.  
The rub, my readers, is here.  
We have two ways to go, with two easi-  
ly  
discernable paths, parallel and distant:  
Love or  
Die, and explain why.

As Oliver always waited with anticipation of Malapit's response, so it was with this poem, which Malapit handed back the next day in class with this comment:

Oliver,

This poem I think needs much reconsidering. For though it may be of some interest to you, it's really not much of a poem at all. Instead it strikes me as being prose with a key, the key being, one guesses, the title. Which brings up a concern all true writers should have when writing. Bluntly stated, If you, as a writer, are wondering "Why I Write" I, as a reader, may be wondering "Why Should I Care?" This consideration may be harsh, but worth your time. Consider also line structure; there seems too little of it here. The Dylan lines, along with the last four lines, seem a riddle to me; have you given your reader enough of an experience in this poem, or is what comes out rather privileged, and therefore not the proper material of poetry? And can Dylan's words hold the page? One more thing: To the educated reader, the Roethke section seems a bit odd. What *do* you mean? Have you *read* Rothke? Please feel free, as always, to reconsider and resubmit a re-write of this poem.

C-/D+,

John Malapit

Oliver's initial reaction to Malapit's comments was a mean-spirited one: Oliver wanted to tell him that, *as a writer*, Oliver didn't care if Malapit cared why he wrote; Oliver just wanted a "B" and out of Malapit's pompous class. But of course it wasn't true; Oliver was enough of a grapho-paranoiac to realize he *did* care whether or not Malapit cared. And so the vindictive impulse remained inside Oliver, or rather perhaps outside, viciously tempting him.

And when he didn't make the "B" in Creative writing that might have kept him in school, Oliver left Caddlefield without saying goodbye to John Malapit, "the" only editor he was ever to have. Oliver went home resolved to be a writer, however unsure as ever about why.

Later that Wednesday evening, Oliver Descantes thought

"I don't know why I didn't make grades at school; I let my mind wander and there will never be anything for me in the world with an uncertain mind. Except maybe a fiction writer, except they must have trained minds too and I lucked out to get Malapit and what did he know about fictive minds he was a goddamn poet and

all he cared about was holding down whatever traditions maintained his conception of "poetry" which doesn't mean fiction and he didn't even know that I never intended to use Roethke "precisely" or "wisely" or "incisively" or "poetically" or any of that crap I was trying to assert though I guess it wasn't very convincing that Roethke, Yeats, Keats, Bates it doesn't matter who says it it's what they say but I should've known someone who's as egotistical as Malapit "the name is what counts yes because what is a piece of art without the artist and I . . ." no he probably wouldn't have the gall to make any claim like that but he'd sure think it and that's it of course Malapit another victim of "I" the "I decade" and here I me am falling into it myself."

And usually at times like this, when in conversation with himself, Oliver would tell himself to shut up and turn it into fiction, turn it into poetry. Sitting in his room, late at night, watching t.v., reading a book, writing letters to no one in particular, oral letters — newsy, psychic, dumb letters Oliver thought. And he would try to set it down on paper, *make* something of it; time could pass very quickly this way. But on this night Oliver Descantes' grandmother called upstairs as he was sitting down to write. "Oliver, are you asleep?" she yelled, and though he wasn't, Oliver responded that he had been, and thanks for waking him up. Then Oliver dressed to go to work.

Oliver worked as an Earp Brothers security guard at a packaging plant on the north side of the city. He worked midnight shift, midnight to 8am, and lived with his grandparents, who housed him on the condition that he support himself, which he more or less did. Oliver's grandparents wanted him to go back to school. Understandably. Oliver's parents willed enough for Oliver to go to school, and Oliver had flunked out. His grandparents made sure that the money was reserved in case he decided to go back, and until he did, he was to support himself.

This seemed fair to Oliver. As he drove to work, Oliver mulled over, again, the advantages and disadvantages of working for Earp Brothers. Upon arriving at the plant, Oliver went to the front-gate guard-shack to have his weapon--a .38--checked. And Oliver felt again the joke of his carrying a gun, and the dread of spending another night with that joke. There had never arisen a situation in which Oliver even thought of using the gun, but still he was required to wear it. And it didn't feel right. It was only when he walked to the back of the plant complex, to his post at the south gate guard-shack, that Oliver felt right.

Usually when he arrived at his post, he sat down and began writing. It was in the abeyance of third shift that Oliver found time to do his work. There was no television, no radio, no people, just his small, stainless steel and plexi-windowed shack, the plant's lights, and the flow of smoke and chemicals pouring from the top of exhaust tanks behind him. Every two hours Oliver had to walk a beat, and inbetween the first beat and the second, since all was secure, Oliver wrote.

Pike Callahers' Short Story

by Oliver Descantes

Sometimes when Pike looks in the mirror, he can im-

agine his face in the bedrooms of every teenager in America; he turns his head slightly, and sees the worn skin of his cheek, how loosely it hangs from his hairline. Pike turns back to face himself head-on, thinking that this is the image he wants her to have of him; not a profile. Pike looks into his eyes and feels her warm skin against the back of his eyeballs; she is back there, he is trying to see her, feel her, use her, give her two eyes with which to be looked at. Pike wonders: 'Can she see me?' He is too worn even to believe she could love him and so these days Pike simply tends to take it for granted. Pike tends to imagine self-pity is too perpetual for another to understand; those doubts love the mirror, love to be suspicious of her, love to resign her to another lost relationship another thought-filled night, alone in some room, his self-love too great and ironic to escape. And Pike will picture her then, he will see her when he looks at his dark walls, he will feel the warmth and spirit of her eyes, her energy will flow through him like a moment of anger and hate, he will know all that is written now; Pike will go again to the mirror.

Oliver stopped there, looking up to his own reflection in the glass shack. He couldn't decide what Pike would or should do next. Oliver loved writing from the different perspectives of his fictive characters, but often had less fun creating situations for them to act in. Oliver Descantes thought about school again, how he needed that formal training if he ever wanted to be a good writer, and not just a person who wrote. He was frustrated by his feeling that he wasn't good at writing. He needed something to be good at. To get him out of his rut. Something.

#### Thursday

Thursday afternoon when Oliver Descantes woke up he packed up a back pack full of his manuscripts and headed toward the University Library on the south side of the city, close to where he and his grandparents lived. He was going to the library to read and browse but he carried his writing just in case (though just in case of what Oliver didn't know). Oliver went to the University Library half expecting to see his old girlfriend, Jean, and half hoping not to. It was with this approach-avoid ambivalence that Oliver always chose the University Library to kill a day. Jean was in summer session at the University and so Oliver walked around campus with his eyes pre-occupied to avoid confrontation, and yet looking for her. They had seen each other on campus only once since they terminated their relationship. It had been a quick and passing hello, about a week earlier. However Oliver didn't see her on his way to the library, and with both relief and dissatisfaction he headed for the stacks.

But every college woman Oliver saw reminded him of Jean. They had met in the Library the summer after Oliver flunked out of Caddlefield, both of them scanning the stacks for the same volume of Cathy Omizar

stories. For a few precious months following, Jean and Oliver saw each other constantly and became involved, taking Oliver's mind off his failure at Caddlefield. Or at least for a while.

In September, when Jean went back to school at the University, Oliver felt a surge of envy and jealousy, and a self-critical reaction to those feelings. Oliver couldn't get his mind off it, and it spiraled into self-perpetuation. At work one night, Oliver felt too bundled up to write about, or write out of his feelings, and he faked sickness so he could leave the plant. Driving from dawn until late the next afternoon, and unable to think of anything else, Oliver lost track of what he was doing, ran out of gas, and had to hitch-hike 350 miles back to the city. For twenty-four hours Oliver was not seen, and everyone close to him felt pretty shook up by the whole experience. Oliver needed to confide in Jean the guilt he had for his excursion; and he did, admitting that he had felt, while driving, vaguely suicidal. And their relationship was never the same after that. It was close to a year before the relationship finally ended, bitterly; Oliver couldn't look at Jean now, or talk to her; when he did he couldn't help resenting the way she reacted to his confession.

Now with relationship and his self-hatred behind him — and yet always in front of him — Oliver sat again in the stacks of the University Library. Sat listening to the lights and hoping Jean would find him there, on the floor under Cathy Omizar. But when Oliver realized this was where he was sitting, he got up and walked back to his desk. Oliver didn't want Jean to find him there at their meeting place; that would be embarrassing, it would look immature. And Oliver had already done his share of immature things since he and Jean had broken up. So consumed was he with resentment for Jean, that for months after their breaking up, Oliver would ask every girl he met, almost initially, if they considered themselves part of the "Me Decade". If they replied that they had no idea what Oliver was talking about, Oliver would say: "Okay, put it this way, what song do you like or enjoy more, Frank Simatra's 'All the Way' or, say, any song by Joni Mitchell or any feminist singer?" Of course no one knew what Oliver meant by this, and so finally he'd spell it out: "Okay let me just ask you this: What person is the number one priority in your life?" And if the person said, well, naturally, themselves — then Oliver at least knew where they were coming from; if the person said well, most times, the person I love — then Oliver knew he had found a kindred soul. Oliver found few kindred souls though, and, needless to say, few dates in those bitter months following his breakup with Jean.

Oliver realized he had his quirks when those quirks effected his writing. Sitting at a desk in the University Library, he filed through some of the writing he had done since he and Jean had ended. All effected by his bitterness. All of it too close, or too far away. One poem Oliver re-read was especially self-pitying:

No need.  
She came  
Proud of her kinesis,  
her sensual anatomy

of potential violence  
jactitating love,  
making him delirious  
O so delirious.

And she sprayed the "love"  
of the "New Woman"  
woman, girdling her life  
with a limp self-knowledge.  
(He thought of dependence.)  
A coquette of needs,  
She said "I  
need only me."  
And he left  
crying  
uncontrollably.

Oliver shook his head as he read the poem. He had been serious when he wrote it. It had been a serious poem, then. Now Oliver wondered if any part of it was salvageable, or if he should just keep it for memory's sake. Grinning to himself, he thought of a good title for the poem, one that would take the edge off of it: "If A Woman Had Written This It would Be 'A Feminist Poem.'"

Then Oliver thought of a scheme. Going to the poetry room of the library, Oliver went through all the poetry periodicals, searching for a particular poetry journal Malapit had mentioned once in class. Finally, he found it: A Woman's Place. Oliver quickly copied down the periodical's address, grabbed his books and started for the Post Office; he would title the poem "A Feminist Poem" sign it Olivera Descantes (a housewife-poet, Oliver thought, who writes between noon and evening pasta) and send it to A Woman's Place. And he had the stamp on the envelope and the lip sealed before he realized the absurdity of it, the dishonesty of it, how, even if it were published, it would be a shallow triumph. And so Oliver just stuck the envelope addressed to A Woman's Place back in his back pack, and went home for dinner.

(Months later, when Oliver's grandmother went through his belongings, and came upon the envelope, she assumed that it was a bill Oliver owed to a magazine, and mailed it. Some weeks later a note addressed to Oliver came back to the Descantes house, from A Woman's Place. Oliver's poem was rejected.)

Lying down on his bed that Thursday night, waiting to go to work, Oliver forgot about poems he'd written and thought about things he wanted to write. This was a peaceful way to spend an evening. Oliver's stories, the ones crystallizing in his mind, were all perfect, so perfect that it didn't matter to Oliver that they probably wouldn't come out even publishable. For at times like this, Oliver was lost; he drifted into a light sleep; a writer's sleep.

And only his grandmother snapped him out of it: "Oliver, are you awake?" Oliver yelled back down that, yes, he was, but thank you for the reminder anyway. On the way to work, Oliver felt both his normal amount of dread of walking that boring beat, and also an anticipation



for getting a chance to do some work on Pike Gallaher's story. At the front gate guard-shack, Oliver talked to the supervisor for a moment, and had his .38 checked; then the long peaceful walk back to his guard-shack — the soft rain of chemicals on his shoulder disturbed but a little.

Once there Oliver turned on the lights. With them on Oliver couldn't see outside too well — nor could anyone see in — but Oliver's reflection showed in the plexi-glass windows. These mirrored windows interested Oliver, and he wrote

Intoxicated, Pike stares right through himself. He says nothing, sees nothing, thinks nothing. It is now *is now* that a surge of sensations flow up through his back to his shoulders cold as he surges forward now *now* throwing his fist through the window pane in front of him shattering it still not harming his hand. Pike is breathing hard as he withdraws his arm from this broken reflection and with reason now and purpose Pike grabs a jagged piece of glass, cuts his palm, but not bad enough as he lifts the edge to his face and tears at himself in a rage, scraping down ripping eyes his eyes closed and now opening, to feel wetness and see window and blur and closed again now and now fear and wetness and shivers cold shivers and open again and darkness and fear and finally Pike runs not knowing how he's harmed himself but sensing it's over, it's over it must be over, something must be over. Soon it will be over.

And Oliver stopped there, knowing it was bad but still rather happy. He wondered why it was that often the things he most enjoyed writing he thought were of the worst quality. A bad sign for a writer, Oliver thought

"Another bad sign. But at least I can judge what's bad and good in my writing or at least I *think* I can, though I'd never know since I never show anyone anything. I should've gone back to school if writing is what I want to do and it is and not only that I could have saved myself getting messed up with Jean she thinks I'm some weird neurotic depressive 'Oliver what am I supposed to think you almost killed yourself because of me, you think that's not a tough thing to live with, I have to live with myself and be happy about myself and I have to handle being the cause of your suicide.' "

And Oliver had stood in front of Jean then, speechless and guilty, as she said that, and yet something told him "wait, something's all screwed up here" and now Oliver was thinking

"god, the bitch! all she could do was think of herself how it effected *her*, the great 'me' of all time and listen to me I'm just as bad; here I am thinking about *myself* actually I'm the selfish one the great 'me' "

and Oliver was bundled up again. He was spiraling and couldn't get the hate off his mind thinking

"Okay just shut up and put it down on paper"

And he sat there, in the gate guard shack, staring at the piece of paper in front of him. He didn't know where to start. There was a white piece of paper, and his right hand holding a pen. Oliver was nervous, afraid;

he felt the burden of the paper, and its whiteness, absorbing his stare. It was too much, there was too much to say. Oliver Descantes could not sort out the guilt and the resentment, or darken the page with it. Not yet. He sat there looking at the page blankly — not knowing what to do, when he heard a blast from behind him and startled himself with is reflection in the window; It was a chemical exhaust tank behind, blowing out its waste. Oliver got up and walked his evening beat.

### Friday

It could be said of Oliver Descantes that his ambitions as a writer were greater than his abilities. But this only means Oliver might have written a long, long time. For Oliver, writing was a means of asking questions of himself, and trying to figure things out. It was a way of making his life a little easier to live. Oliver never had a writer's block for any length of time; for whatever his limitations as a thinker or a writer, he *was* a producer. And so his possibilities seemed ahead of him.

But Friday morning had not been a good one for Oliver. He did not get much sleep after he came home from work; every time Oliver began to think that he was over Jean, over his suicide rap, beyond his own perpetuation of those thoughts, something triggered the whole spiral again.

In the afternoon, on his way into the University, Oliver saw Jean. He spotted her the minute he walked in the library; she was off to the left of him, in the reference section, looking something up. Unconsciously, Oliver stood for a moment inside the door, staring at her. She looked very good, of course; Oliver seemed hung in suspension for a moment, gazing, until she looked up and, suddenly nervous and self conscious, Oliver turned quickly to duck away.

For no reason at all, he walked into the poetry room. Once inside, Oliver realized this was not the place to be; he had walked in on the middle of a poetry reading. Oliver scanned the faces seated circularly in the room, and they noticed him. Except for the one person seated in the far corner, the person who was reading. His was the only face Oliver recognized: Josiah Spock, a television actor who played Admiral Zirek on the old show Galaxy Tripping. Oliver had an idea Spock wrote poetry; he'd noticed him reading some of it on a talk show once, but Oliver hadn't listened then. He had to now.

“don't leave me.  
the two of us will fly  
now.  
don't let go,  
i won't.  
our lives, our lies  
the earth  
is no longer  
below us.  
they are gone.”

And the people in the room clapped, with Oliver just getting seated as Spock spoke: “Thankyou. I'm a great believer in the ability of people

have to endure."

He spoke in such a completely gentle, sincere, non-actorish voice, that Oliver was taken back a bit.

"Sometimes it's people enduring love, or just loneliness, but it moves me, and so I write poetry about it. I'm also very moved by the poetry of W.H. Auden. I think it's a very special thing when someone writes poetry you can relate to, and though I never had the privilege of meeting Auden, I've always considered the poet a friend. And so then, this poem tries those two loves and is titled

To A Friend (Mr. W.H. Auden)

The Winter comes  
We have nothing to do  
but love.  
Wars have been fought,  
Battles raged.  
We are tired  
but to you my friend I  
say  
*Luxe de l'esprit,  
Mon amour, mon ami."*

The room clapped heartily, except for Oliver, who was looking around him, at the people clapping. Spock went on:

"You know, it's my belief that the best poetry is that which says the most in the fewest, most simple words. This is what I'm trying to do with my poetry. My hope is that by writing of my own experience at its most basic, simple level, I will reach the most people and they will be able to relate in some way with what I say. (awkward pause) Excuse the rhyme. Anyway, this poem tries to do that.

what i know  
is nothing  
but myself."

And again there was applause, and this time the soft mutterings of "Ahhh's around the room, as some revelation broke through. And though he thought to himself "God, I *don't* believe it," Oliver also couldn't help being moved a bit by Spock's sincerity, how absolutely different he was from his television persona. And Oliver left the poetry room then and walked out of the library, but as he did, he didn't even think of Jean, he thought of Spock.

Spock was really a pretty good actor, Oliver decided. "And he really believes what he writes is the best thing to be writing. Of course, so do I which means we are writing for basically the same reasons — both of us graphomaniacs but god I gotta be better than he is though Spock was really speaking to those people and the man is obviously published which only means nothing makes sense of else everything makes perfect sense and I haven't figured it out yet"

And Oliver went around like this most of his walk home. Or at least until he saw Jean, again, this time as she drove past him heading the same

way, about two blocks from Oliver's house. She was alone, and drove past him fast, without noticing him and, in an intimidatory way, looking like she knew where she was going. "Doesn't have the suicide burden hanging over her now," Oliver thought, walking up his street to his house. Oliver knew he was still bitter, and unfairly so, towards Jean only he couldn't help it, and didn't feel like trying. There was just so much he wanted to tell her, Oliver wanted her to know how she had misjudged him.

All night, in fact, sitting around waiting to go to work, Oliver fought off the urge to phone her. But there was no way. Finally, Oliver found himself so full of things he wanted to tell Jean, tell someone, that he couldn't even sort them out to himself. And Oliver decided that he had better try writing again, try explaining himself that way.

#### Explanation

by Oliver Descantes

When lost  
I leave  
and drive random highways. This  
(You may have heard)  
is good therapy  
for the perpetual self hater  
The marching taps  
of the road branding  
my tires kick me in the butt,  
the rhythm of their incentive  
timing my response.  
And I see strewn dead dogs  
flashing by me  
on the side their  
tendons on the road  
A lost companion somewhere.  
The calm of their rigor  
easy on their face.  
These peripheral images  
work their kinetic ways  
on me  
I have loaded  
the weight of self love  
the freedom of self hate,  
my pity can conjure  
eight year olds burned  
alive  
the charred red pulp  
and underneath  
their dead skin pistons  
jam moans and  
screams I've never heard before  
up through their squinted eyes  
and disfigured mouths  
these pistons

I have heard  
and spoken with  
my self  
jabbing my sadness  
driving the message  
home.

When Oliver finished the poem, he had looked over it once before his grandmother shouted. "Oliver, you haven't forgotten work, have you?" and Oliver responded yes he had, and thank you. And he rushed to get his uniform on and out of the house. Friday night he brought only the poem and a pen with him to work.

On his way there Oliver Descantes mulled over lines of the poem; it was on his mind. He couldn't wait to arrive at the back shack so he could look at it again. It needed editing and Oliver could do that the minute he got to the back shack. Pulling in the packaging plant, Oliver parked his car and walked up to the front gate to get his gun checked. His gun didn't even bother him tonight, Oliver was so anxious to get back to the poem. He chatted only for a moment with the Earp Brothers supervisor and then started the long walk back to his post. Tonight the walk wasn't peaceful, it was ecstatic; Oliver thinking

"I need to trim out some of it, maybe; I'll have to see. I want it to be at its best if I want to show anyone and god, who would I show? I haven't shown anyone anything in so long maybe I'll show Malapit, right, I'll send it to Caddlefield and have Malapit look at it, see if he thinks it's any good; maybe I'll try to do something with Pike Callahers too there's no use just holding on to this stuff and Malapit will probably hate it but I've got nothing to lose, I'll send a note along with it, thanking him for taking the time to do it, I might as well do something with it."

And Oliver might have thought then about the letter he wanted to send to Malapit but as he approached his shack he noticed that the lights were on inside. Someone must have been inside. Oliver reasoned it must be an employee of the packaging plant looking for something; the plant stayed open working 'round the clock. And Oliver opened the door to the shack and faced a young man about Oliver's age who, Oliver thought, seemed too young to be an employee. "Can I help you find something?" Oliver asked, and the man didn't answer — he just looked at Oliver. "Are you an employee here?" Oliver asked, and this time the man said "no," and as he did, Oliver looked down and saw that the man had a gun, and Oliver realized that he, too, had one. It was then that Oliver Descantes heard the blast.

Jeff Hamilton