



**The Million Ring Circus:**  
**Valery Oisteanu's *Perks in Purgatory***  
New York: Fly By Night Press, 2010

Reviewed by [David St.-Lascaux](#)

If you're wondering what people you pass on the streets of New York are thinking about, poet/artist Valery Oisteanu's *Perks in Purgatory* provides a comprehensive catalog of answers, simultaneously answering the questions of why one should always – *or never* – talk to strangers, depending.

That's because *Perks* is lush and rococo, a surreal stream-of-consciousness, grapholalic, damn-all set of raw reflections by a poet who's been around the cultural block, who has *seen* things, *thought* things, who has *opinions*. Too much for one sitting, *Perks* is a collection of poems to be taken in small doses, over time, in a *receptive* mood.

*Perks* is divided into five sections that roughly correspond to *places, people, sex, manifestos* and *other* (not their real names). Divider pages are illustrated by Oisteanu's collages in black and white; the collection's cover ("St. Joan of Arc") illustrated in color by Angelo Jannuzzi.

The first section, "Travel Beyond Imagination," reveals an active, unedited, pinball-and-kitchen-sink mind. In "Barcelona Tango," Oisteanu shells the reader with images, impressions, scenes and local artists, including Federico Garcia Lorca, Joan Brossa and Eugenio Granell. Poems set in Mexico, Romania, Crete, America and Belgium follow. The glue is hard to find; in fact Oisteanu's poetry may best be described as free-form documentation of the infinity of random choices, sensations and impressions available at every moment – and everywhere – on this lush, headlong-relentlessly-rushing-into-the-indifferent-future planet:

*Watching Belgians through a photo camera*  
*Passing the Atomium court that has 9 atoms*  
*Huge as a large building representing 9 provinces*  
*God save the king!*  
*And especially the mussels in Bruges!*

Oisteanu's "Surreal Friends" may be the collection's strong suit. These are homages to dead artistic personalities (all male but one) and *objets d'art* (including Jackie Curtis, Philip Whalen and "Brancusi's Marble"). The reader is assumed to either share Oisteanu's historical firsthand

knowledge (unlikely; a biographical encyclopedia most helpful, or the addition of scholarly notes, with amplifications) or else be prepared to set out upon an educational adventure into a Twentieth Century world of Romanian surrealists, inspirational *collagistes*, Beat poets and Frida Kahlo. In the Holocaust-recalling “If Death Was Not Enough || To Benjamin Fondane,” Oisteanu closes:

*... we will not surrender  
poetry falls like a waterfall of crystals.*

“Surreal Friends” doesn’t include (but might have) “Romanian Derangement,” the collection’s most poignant poem, a reflection on Oisteanu’s father’s death. As it closes,

*Everyone has left in a hurry  
Through the chimney, and out into the endless sky.*

Given his roots in the affairs of the Twentieth Century, Oisteanu is unsurprisingly engaged in current events and politics. Terrorists and 9/11 (“Megalopolis in Apocalypse”), “The Great Quake of Sumatra” and the Republican National Convention in New York in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, criticism of American democracy and the art establishment are all passionately invoked.

Strikingly, the memoiristic subtheme of *Perks* prompts the question of whether it would be better as an extravagant prose poem of continuous narrative, with discontinuous thought fragments separated, say, by ellipses or virgules – to apply an accretive, mosaic approach verbally analogous to Oisteanu’s visual collage. Not, perhaps, since Oisteanu writes in lyric-like, unpunctuated phrases. Still, it would be interesting to reconfigure “The Season of the Birds (In the Year of the Rooster),” set in Colombia, in fluid format, so maybe:

*La Costa Caribe is reverberating with the singing of exotic birds... echoes creating the sounds of incoming jet planes... birds are quarreling in the morning... in Petropolis, in Barranquilla... in the sculpture palace of Elsa and Bruno, they blend with the rhythmical flaps of the helicopter...*

*Perks* includes “Erotic Dreamscapes,” territory Oisteanu obviously enjoys, self-describing himself in “Arising from the Bed of the Goddess of Love,” as a “sexaholic.” This section’s tales of international sex tourism and recreational drugs ends with “Welcome to My Party House,” which contains the collection’s titular reference:

*Enter the gates of the Purgatory  
Body covered with ancient erotic drawings  
A knife hangs at the window*

While perfectly fine, these lines, by Oisteanu’s own standards, must compete with European precedents – Sacher-Masoch, Bataille, American expat Miller, Nin and Réage – a daunting task. Oisteanu is convincing because he’s probably not making his adventures up. The Limerick-crude “The Creation of ‘The Pussy’” is ribaldly humorous, but perhaps not for a serious collection in today’s politically correct world.

Some of the most telling passages in *Perks* are in passing. Oisteanu's mature acknowledgment of individual insignificance appears in the form of an atonement in the lamentive "Yom Kippur 5764" (2003):

*Forgive me for doing it so wrong  
After six decades of searching  
I have no questions and I have no answers*

And in the nostalgic "Potato Sex-Tool-Box," the poet literally reflects on time's personal destruction:

*Suddenly I see a reflection in a broken mirror  
Everyone is explaining that fixing a mirror  
Is a no win, no win situation*

The final section of *Perks* is "In My Own Words," which contains the autobiographical "Les [sic] Visible." This poem commences with the appearance of numerous luminaries – William James, Virgil Thompson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Ray Johnson, Rudy Burckhardt, Charles Henri Ford and Leo Tolstoy – and proceeds to disappear Oisteanu, with a twist. While erudite and elucidating, these historical/biographical references ultimately risk reduction to name-dropping and non-poetic list making, even when pertinent, as here, to illustrate examples of floccinaucinihilipilification and extinguishment.

*Perks* ends with "The Potato Sex-Tool-Box," which is probably intentionally unresolved. Better, however, to close with the optimistic hortatory "The Night of Shooting Stars," which begins:

*A flying island becomes visible over the horizon  
As a white temple appears through the liquid fog*

and ends:

*Start exercising your soul muscle  
And leave your dark prejudices behind.*

Macrocosmically, perhaps *Perks* isn't poetry *per se*, but a superset in which poetry resides: the recorded thoughts, recollections and associations of a transplendent mind. While *Perks* isn't structurally novel, linguistically rhythmic or deeply demanding, it is provocative in its single-minded, life's-for-living hedonism and its candid scan of a traveled poet's brain. Its adherents, no doubt, will enjoy the trip, or else be busy taking their own.