This thesis consists of original poems as well as translations of contemporary Ukrainian poet Anastasiia Afanas’eva. My poems are written to expose issues often left unnoticed in the realities of everyday life. The deeper themes embedded in my work include issues of love/power, cultural identity, sexuality, labeling/reality, and family. Most of my poems are written in an unadorned style relying on a turn of thought or starkness of representation for poetic effect. Though all of the poems are vers libre, their style varies significantly throughout, reflecting my desire to experiment with different ways of writing. All of the work explores norms in society in an attempt to figure out how we as people communicate and come to understand ourselves while experiencing constant pressure on the multiplicity of our existences.
HUT ON CHICKEN LEGS

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
by
Alla Vilnyansky
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2012

Advisor ______________________
Keith Tuma

Reader ______________________
Cathy Wagner

Reader ______________________
David Schloss

Reader ______________________
Vitaly Chernetsky
Contents

Sandbox..................................................................................................................1
This is the good part.............................................................................................4
Cartoon..................................................................................................................5
Freud......................................................................................................................6
Field.......................................................................................................................7
Strike......................................................................................................................8
Nurse.....................................................................................................................10
Love Tiff...............................................................................................................11
I have been thirty...............................................................................................12
Not a flood..........................................................................................................13
Red.......................................................................................................................15
Family...................................................................................................................16
Pine.......................................................................................................................17
Gray......................................................................................................................18
Void.....................................................................................................................19
Puma.....................................................................................................................20
Game...................................................................................................................21
I Wish I Knew You.............................................................................................22
Apples...............................................................................................................23
As I sit by my lover’s bed...................................................................................24
“When in Rome, do as the Romans, or you will be murdered” –Anonymous
Poetry Play: Sandbox

Opening Scene: the playground is empty aside from two small children (age unknown) playing in the sandbox. The sun is shining down upon them in an awkward slant.

Girl: Can I please have the sand bucket?
(Echo) Mogu li ya imet’vedro, pozhaluista?
Translator: Am I allowed to have the bucket please?

(Boy sits in silence.)
(Girl gives boy strange look.)
(Boy is oblivious.)
(Girl molds the sand in front of her into a small heap.)

Boy: What’s that?
(Echo) Chto eto takoe?
Translator: What is this?
Girl: Can I have the sand bucket?
(Echo) Mogu li ya vzyat’vedro peska?
Translator: Am I allowed to take the bucket full of sand?
Boy: Sure.
(Echo) Konechno.
Translator: Of course, without reserve.

(Girl tears bucket from boy’s hands and begins to use it as a shovel.)

Boy: You might want to use this!
(Boy hands girl toy shovel.)
(Echo) Mozhet byt’, vy budete ispol’zovat’ etu veshch’?
Translator: Maybe you will use this thing?
Girl: I don’t need it.
(Echo) Mne ne nuzhno eto.
Translator: I am not in need of this thing.
Boy: Ok.
(Echo) Khorosho.
Translator: Good.
Girl: Where is your mom?
(Echo) Gde tvoya mama?
Translator: Where is the mom that belongs to you?
Boy: Somewhere, I don’t know, she will come.
(Echo) Gde-to ya ne znayu, ona pridet.
Translator: Somewhere, I don’t know, she will arrive here.
Girl: My father will pick me up.
(Echo) Moi otets voz’met menya domoi.
Translator: My father will take me home.
Boy: I don’t have a father.
(Echo) U menya net ottsa.
**Translator:** I don’t have any father.
**Girl:** Why not?
(Echo) Pochemu?
**Translator:** Why? (Accusatory.)
**Boy:** Can you give me back the bucket?
**Girl:** Here!

(Girl hands bucket over to boy. Boy starts to fill it with sand, gets distracted. Girl stares at boy with curiosity.)

**Boy:** What?
**Girl:** Nothing.
(Echo) Nichego.
**Translator:** Not a fig.

(Another boy enters the scene, his mother has just dropped him off—saying she will be back in a half an hour.)

**Boy 2:** Hello, my name is Alex, can I play with you?
(Echo) Zdravstvuite, menya zovut Aleksyei, ya mogu igrat s vami?
**Translator:** Hello, I am called Alex, am I allowed to play with you?
**Girl:** Of course.

(Boy 1 shrugs and begins vehemently to work in the sandbox, in minutes constructing a small tower and working on what looks like it will be a sculpture of a tortoise.)

**Girl:** Wow, how did you do that?
(Echo) Wow, Kak ty eto sdelal?
**Translator:** How did you make this?
**Boy 2:** Look, this is what you do.

(Begins to show girl how to build tower.)

(Echo) Posmotrite, vot kak vy dolzhny eto sdelat.’
**Translator:** Look, this is how you must do it.

(While Boy 2 is busy showing Girl how to build a similar structure out of sand, boy one kicks over his creation.)

**Girl:** Hey!
**Boy 2:** Why did you do that?
(Echo) Pochemu vy eto delaete?
**Translator:** Why are you doing this?

(Boy 1 remains silent.)
(Boy 2 moves over to opposite end of the sandbox.)
Boy 1: Let him play by himself!
(Girl looks distraught)
Boy 2: Well I better get going.

(Boy one walks off.)

(Echo) Nu, luchshe uiti syeïchas.
Translator: I think it’s time to go.
Boy 1: Retard!
(Echo) Durak!
Translator: Fool!

(Girl’s father comes to pick her up from the playground.)

Father: And who is this? Would you like to introduce me to your new friend?
Girl: This is Sergei.
(Echo) Eto Sergei.
Translator: This is Sergei.
Father: It’s very nice to meet you Sergei.
(Echo) Eto ochen’ priyatno vstreit’ya s Vami Sergei.
Translation: It is very pleasant to meet with you, Sergei.

(Girl looks away)

Father: Are you ready to go?
(Echo) Poïdem vmeste?
Translator: Let’s go.

(Girl stands up and walks off with her father.)
(Boy 1 continues to play.)
This is the good part (remember)

you are a poet
a poem can’t…
listen
Cartoon

My father makes square shaped airplanes
from farmer’s cheese
puts a cold towel on my arm
soothing two bee stings
points to a truck:
“If you don’t eat
Crocodile Gena
will steal you.”
Freud

It was always the same
in a small room
Don’t eat me
let’s play cards

How often do you have dreams that you are trapped?

He is always in the room
playing
Queen of Hearts

“Books know
what your dreams mean”

Is there blood?
“No.”
Good.
Field

Do you recall playing baseball
white stripes
upon trampled grass
sand colored dirt

Were you the kind of player
who missed all the pitches
tagged out before you hit home

did you wait reticently
on the metal slabs
scorching from sun
talking with friends

finding comfort in the feel of the leather glove
--
I had a crush on the player who was
perpetually throwing the ball
Strike

After Charles Bernstein

Strike because the sunset looks more like open flame
Strike because you have never lied, not to anyone, but you have been lied to
Strike because the old ways and the new ways aren’t dissimilar
Strike because there is no difference between a thug and a businessman
Strike because you missed out on burning man
Strike because every day is a masquerade
Strike because you don’t know how not to be a part of a collective, but you don’t necessarily want to be a part of “The Collective”
Strike because you can buy almost anything
Strike because your bosses are being worked over
Strike because the machine needs to be fixed but no one is capable
Strike because someone else has taken a lick of your ice scream cone
Strike because children are selfish and adults are apathetic
Strike because demons have put on halos
Strike because it’s not the work that is killing you
Strike because no one told you how it was supposed to be if it was supposed to be
Strike because the only airline that serves its passengers a good meal in coach is Delta
Strike because striking back is a knee jerk reaction
Strike because while you are throwing out the rest of your pizza someone else stands or sits or sleeps with hunger and you have no control over that
Strike because some people don’t have the time to defend their dignity
Strike because power is a maze
Strike because you weren’t able to save enough money for a trust fund for your nieces
Strike because you can’t tell the dust from the conversation
Strike because you are not on the winning end of the losing game
Strike because you have abandoned someone and you wish you could have them back in another form more suitable to you today
Strike because you don’t want to be a sellout
Strike because it’s easier than listening
Strike because somebody told you that you could, and you really can’t
Strike because the tree fell in the metaphorical forest
Strike because you told them you were going to and delivered what was expected and it was still a surprise
Strike because words aren’t always enough to prove a point
Strike because that could be your last chance
Strike because you are not allowed to have emotions
Strike because win or lose it is all a game
Strike because you got a ticket to the show but flaked or had an emergency and couldn’t go but if only you knew how it would change your life you would have made sure you were present
Strike because you have had thoughts of your own and were chastised for them
Strike because you are stubborn
Strike because you don’t like the flavor of American chewing gum
Strike because you didn’t hold out for the better offer
Strike because you are afraid of being humiliated
Strike because it’s only a drop in the water
Strike because you are not sure if the water is polluted but you would really like to be given an honest answer
Strike because somebody had their fill but forgot their wallet
Strike because you just printed off 1000 pages but threw your plastic juice bottle in the recycling bin
Strike because fall makes you uneasy, waiting for seasonal affective disorder
Strike because you are not sure whose wrongs are worse but you are capable of feeling them
Strike because you don’t know what else to do
Strike because you don’t like doubt
Strike because you did your best to be on time and it was still too late
Strike because it’s so quiet you can hear the sound of your hamsters urinating
Strike because you love the blues
Strike because you don’t REALLY know what love is
Strike because you can’t get a refund on your lifetime prescription of denial
Nurse

Though we have been apart
for over three years
I still cut his toe nails
whenever I see
he has procrastinated at the task

I remember having the stomach flu
at his company Christmas party
my father shaking his hand good morning,
sleeping in my parents’ basement

holding a piss cup to my dad—
the unqualified nurse
Love Tiff

They were on the curb. The man, standing a few steps away from the woman, grabbed her by the arms. She was yelling.

A couple arguing in the street. The man and the woman both screamed. He shook her. She struck him.

Someone phoned the police.

It took them another two hours to clear off the street.
I have been thirty

I have turned
into the person
who speaks
about weather
in the elevator

I sit in on a workshop
on “long and short term goals”
conducted by a woman
who I later catch in the hallway
pacing aimlessly

on the white board
the word “anxiety”
written in Chinese
Not a Flood, but What’s Left After

I.

A train crashed, leaving
my friends and me like antique dolls
draped over our seats.
I looked at their faces to see
if one of them was me.
Had I survived?
I couldn’t face myself.
I couldn’t face my mom.
Two visitors on boats, old women
beside the train station.
Dried apricots and sunflower
seeds. I was afraid
none would taste good.

II.

Small pebbles in the water
beating against rocks—
I brush my teeth and spit
out blood. Insidious,
penetrating, people want,
want something. I open
my mouth, say “no.”

III.

I hang my hopes in front of you, on a clothes line.
The wind blows them down.

IV.

In Lviv, two stores
only for buttons. They asked me to
pay for each cup of tea.
I sat, sipped, stared at
the newly-wed couples
making their way
through the streets.
V.

At night the restaurant
next to our hotel, covered
with a clear tarp. Topless
girls on the stage.

VI.

In front of the opera house
a fountain
the city made under water
then drained.

VII.

We stacked words. For dinner
I ate cement.
You tried to pick it
from my gums with a bent paperclip.
Red

may I have a glass of water?

we don’t pick parents
another childhood

wanting to be
another person

a vase does not ask for
the clay it is made of

a flower
blossoms

feigns distance

a boom box in a desert
a Dali painting all
bewilderment

this is a dandelion, maybe
Family

I only stole from you
a lil’ bit
Pine

heartwood rusts
between needles
and posts
rubbed hands
inhabit the
cold
Gray

you may live through a war
then wait too long
at the grocery store
checkout line
Void 2666

After Roberto Bolaño

When you spend a lot of time reading about senseless murder this is how it feels:
first surprised
then intrigued?

finally droning through the pages you begin to question
the intentions of the author

She is choked
her hyoid bone broken
5 ft. seven, hair: blond
her checkered skirt
rolled above the knees

in her rectum they find semen
a numb
sensation takes over

Nothing
at the bottom
of evil
Puma

Twenty-seven letters in the alphabet
can I have a cigarette
the curtains
red is the color of love

*

I can’t breathe, it’s too late
the paper is white
for a good laugh

*

I can’t breathe it’s too late
27 letters in the alphabet
can I have a cigarette
the paper is white
Game

It’s like that game
trying to ascertain
how many jelly beans
are in a jar
*Sizing up the vessel*

No one asks about
the color, texture,
flavor
I wish I knew you
You have the prettiest gloves
you have the prettiest gloves
I can’t breathe it’s too late
stripes and stars

*

You have the prettiest gloves
It’s a good laugh
at the train station

*

Twenty-seven letters in the alphabet
can I have a cigarette
the curtains
red is the color of love

*

I can’t breathe, it’s too late
the paper is white
it’s a good laugh
Apples

When you fucked me
I was fifteen pounds fat
you tried to stick
your dick in my mouth
I was dead
breathing
but I couldn’t feel
it
was
like excrement
or eating
you had an apple after each time
they were small
and you only ate two

I wanted to rip them out of your hands
and throw them at your head
instead I just lay there
and let you
As I sit by my lover's bed

*and let out nonsensical phrases*
I must stick with men
who won’t shovel the snow
men with aspirations towards abstraction
higher than the twin towers
Sears

what does this tree
the way it bends signify?

to make it as a poet
you must fail
at virtually everything
*
on my 25th birthday
my mother took me to Sears
to get photos

a mother and daughter photo shoot
I couldn’t smile unless the camera
woman held up squeaky toys

“to parents we are always children”

*
After having moved to another city
broken an engagement
developed a smoking habit
(not necessarily in this order)
I am still a child

Honey, your father wants the same shots
would you like some strawberries?
Telegram

Put together (carefully)
the letter was signed –

a small worm crawling
out of the corner I had
yet to secure shut
I misspelled the word
oh "dear," too much dumb luck
Merry The One

The meeting was unexpected yet natural. An afternoon at the local coffee house, some time to kill.

He was perched wide-eyed in front, a leather jacket. Somehow the conversation turned to his girlfriend.

“You see,” he said
“The thing with me is I would like to rent a van, and drive cross country. She wants me to help take care of her parents.”

I wonder how many coarse words and disappointing moments have led this man to say he would rather climb into a dirty van than marry his girlfriend.

I told him “to be a man.”
“You see,” I said, “there are different kinds of feelings. There is the vague sensation that you have found the person you want to be with and then there is “the one” who helps you prepare dinner.

I wonder how many coarse words and disappointing moments have led this man to say he would rather climb into a dirty van than marry his girlfriend.

I told him “to be a man.”
“You see,” I said, “there are different kinds of feelings. There is the vague sensation that you have found the person you want to be with and then there is “the one” who helps you prepare dinner.
Rubble

If you are still
unashamed of your lifestyle concrete
troubles the debris
your tongue a white mesh
my smile stretched thin
a mess, a new one
flesh fibers in the rubble
S/hell

when you crawl naked
sometimes into a
brighter bigger space
or into a small dark hole
that you are afraid to leave again
for fear of dying
Tsk

don’t lie
unless it is out of the desire
to protect someone else’s
feelings, and even then, remember
what you get is not
what you gave

don’t look down
unless you are standing in a tower
on an impenetrable slab of glass
do not go
unless you are called
some good ol’ Ukrainian wisdom
really applicable
for example –the Nazis called the Jews

keep promises
the ones
you didn’t feel like
making especially
Hut on Chicken Legs

Our house had no rules
breadcrumbs on the bed
makeup on the stove

you asked that I read by a lamp
I spilled kerosene on the floor
Bouquet

I’ve always hated plastic flowers but as I grow older I realize that one does not always have the time or patience to sustain a living thing

I have these white carnations that my mother gave me peeking out of the too tall vase they are lined with gold trim on the petals green stems, hidden in the crystal designs
Dedication

My copy
of *The Book of Frank*
by the man himself
it opens with the lines

“this book is dedicated
to all poets everywhere”
which upon first glance
makes me feel all warm
and fuzzy inside
Prayer

no matter where I go
I can’t get away from humans
with their damn sensual pleasures
and cow eyes
let us be perfect
the wanderer

the forward thinker
the seeker
to seek
what?
to get further from truth
he wants us away and not closer

perhaps this is a lie
and you are sick
boiling in a pot of your own stew

sick as me
sick without a reason to be

or perhaps you are happy joyous
as an ignorant clam

waiting till someone
can pry you out of your shell
and leave you homeless again
Revenge

I would wish you harm
but no good will come of it
so I love you instead
twice as much
which is more
than I love myself
Mancan

a woman can’t assert herself
the way that a man can
pull up your pants
tie your hair
put a smile on your face
or they will tear you apart

Whose will
Whose will
Four translations of poems by Anastassia Afanas’eva

Hedgehog

1.
Look what is happening on the expanse of earth. There is none, only a sieve: anything smaller than its holes falls into an abyss
And that which is larger—lies shining, under a bright bush at night a lost phone
no one is around to answer.

2.
The void grows and grows, and stands at full height all of its glass height, simply as the word “yes.”
It grows like a flood impossible to conduct like killing a hedgehog as the killer is followed by its shadow all of his life.

3.
Who fell in your hole? Who is capable of discerning? I would make a speech, but there is nothing left but to run, a long time ago, here and on board with us.
He who will find deep waters here is capable of drowning. He does not believe what he is told:
There is not a drop around, only sand

He, who in a city sink,
learns the fate of the river.

4.

The void grows and grows
its large pink skinned fruit.
He cannot say where he is from
and who he is and why.

I afflict his smooth skin with my touch,
and later spit straight into his forehead.

The spit flows down his forehead as if on ice,
these passions for him are out of place.
His face is deprived of flaws.
He is not able to mourn or laugh.

Here, he has dried out,
and all that is left is more shine.
He is smooth, white and has so much gloss
that I begin to suspect: he is flat,
and this is what makes life sweet for him.
In a three dimensional world,
he knows neither volume nor depth.

5.

Look what is happening:
for those who were helplessly drowning
the earth opened its black chasm.

About them, we cannot speak,
for they are completed.
And behind them,
dropping to the bottom—the praise.

6.

Look how your hill has grown in,
where there was a creek,
now there is moss.
Where there is a stream—there is a gap, the gap reliably patches itself with grass.

Your places release that, which made them yours and they become nothing more than places.

A bench, behind which there is nothing.

See how life outlives us: the life that you carried like a nail inside flies like a spear at an impossible height, losing weight in flight.

Your skin tightens, for this is how you are made. Look at how everything has healed, and that which towered from every side, like a gigantic ocean, in the white sink murmurs, and when you are irritated by the splash you turn the faucet off.

7.

Look at what is happening on the earth:

It has become smooth, growing with pavement like grass and the roads with a new black highlight your whiteness.

And the air, gigantic inside of you pierces all of the openings through, along your spine the void is hammered in with a glass nail.

It is impossible to return to the place where there is nothing left to return to someone who is no longer there. You can’t call this person, and in any case there is no one to call.

Do not turn back to the roads on which you have already passed, you walk on the past as if on a hedgehog.

And another water is calling.
**Untitled**

***

The air is cut in two by the morning sun.

To left—March, and to the right, in the shadow—winter.

Into the shade crawls a dark blue, gray, blue-black, frosty wind
the crunch crawls into the shadow, untouched snow with traces of dog prints
the desperate stance under a winter sky, hunt for white uncatchable butterflies,
the cold of hands, not belonging and rootless,
standing in the dark, as if you had turned your back to God,
a ravine in front of your eyes
other signs of winter—retreating into the shade.

A girl in a red jacket goes out into the sun, her dog,
meeting a passerby in an orange down jacket, red headed boy,
desperate bravery, happy leap into the suspense,
of the unknown, other signs of prosperity,
strong, like birth, and visible, like the sun—
growing in March, because life grows
always in places where there is light.

So I thought about what would happen if everything became clear
if the boundaries were marked, and the mixing was abolished,
the mixing of the incompatible, but still connected
in one and the same.

How I wanted to fly, like a plane, so that I could see from atop, the whole godly grid—
the place of my small knot in everything that has been weaved,
so that I would know how many kilometers of thread respond
to my small movement.

How one person becomes reason for another,
how a small event is preceded by something of significance,
by virtue of which it becomes significant.

How two things form a third, how it is transformed
and how it exists subsequently in everything that follows, how what follows cancels
that which precedes it, while depending on it fully.

How he places things, and meshes details.
I wanted to see what shape and contours our collective lives have if we looked upon them as a whole, and not from the small vantage point of our own existence, but from a fantastical airplane, like wheat fields from a satellite.

Oh how I wanted, and in the natural human inability I, connected, I inseparable felt:

I—am small,

I—am big.
Untitled

So many echoes surround us
It is impossible to discern a voice
To the left and to the right

As if it walks around in a circle
Reflecting itself
And everyone has long ago forgotten
The person who exclaimed

What word happened?
Did you call for help
Or praise the sky and the earth—

We will never recognize it
And we will never see.
Lost in the orbit of blind sound
Repetition of repetitions, doubled without the double
We attach to the massive noise our inarticulate whispers,
Cheers, screams

The earth sounds with voices
The air is filled with voices

I will stand up as straight as I can and close my eyes
I will stand quietly like the water and trees—
And in the helpless stance become stronger

To greet another silence I will pour out with more silence
I will be filled with the encountered and we will become one
As if that voice that is impossible to hear
Unable to find, secret
Everything of utmost importance I will tell you in silence
And what is not important will multiply, be told by the echo
Untitled

Unprecedented density around
As if time has closed the circle
As if there is no air
And instead—there is light
Light dancing as if it were a bumble bee
Light playful as if it were me
Light thick, like honey
The light that calls you

The call deep as the water itself
Accurate call, like your words,
That comes from the very deep
And shines at the top
And the whole light
Reflects a glare

On the shores of the river
From afar you can see
In a warm circle you can see the coming together of river and time
It is too bright to speak clearly
Just in passing
About the width of the water sliding
On top of it
Lock

that
I am no more than the shadow
of your own misgivings

run home
wiggle a key
Fate

there is of course
a difference between
a smile and a shit-eating grin
no one tries
to ascertain
Epigram

Had I not done this; had I fallen victim to my obsessions once more this day would have hit me like a funeral procession at a child’s christening, but I did not repeat the mistake, and so this day comes as a ray of sunshine upon one who has always been blind. It is a beautiful day, indeed. It was in a movie called “Riding in Cars with Boys” that I first heard a life described this way. The lines went something like this: “One day can make your life, one day can break your life, all of life.”
Untitled

my mom was
she was crippled by fear
then & now
sex is politics
G-d is love
Voyeurism

i make rooms
with my eyes
i brighten them into being
a trip to the museum
could save your life
Irony

last time we spoke
she said she understood now
that she was completely alone

I had no time to talk