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Two Poems from *_Nana_*: "Algorithm: Old Age"; "Last Visit"

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Cover Page Footnote

These two poems are drawn from a limited edition chapbook, *_Nana_*, published by Moses Ink, Raleigh, NC, 2005.

Two Poems from *Nana*

ALGORITHM: OLD AGE

I.

Preparing for the Hospital

Nana, like a nervous bird,
head working, eyes jerking
up down, up down,
right left, this way, that,
looking for anything that moves,
twittering, twittering
"Ooooo, I think he's out to get me,"
left, right, right, left,
"He's got something up his sleeve."
Flies back and forth, from bank
to bank, disorganized, losing
things (pocketbook, keys)
picking uncontrollably
at her coffered nests, picking,
gathering her eggs together
to give to her grandchildren.

"Sometimes I think I'm your mother,"
she says, tugging at my sleeve.
"I've outlived both my daughters.
That's the way it had to be.
But whoever heard of such a thing!"
Right, left, she pauses just
a moment, then in hushed tones:
"You and Jean were my favorites.
I cared for you before you were born!
Even before your mother died
they brought you here whenever you
were ill. 'Take them to Sarah's house!
Take them to Sarah's house!' your father
would shout, and they brought you here
for me to take good care of you.
They didn't want to care for you!
(Listen: I think your father murdered
your mother. Ssshhh. Just a minute.
Stevie, don't say nothin now!
After all, he's still your father.")

I take her to the funeral home
(hushed and flowery and dark)
where she picks out her coffin
like a piece of furniture--
"No, no, I don't like that
color; I want something darker.
No, no, that looks too cheap."
I take her to the vaults to inspect
her accounts. I take her to the lawyer
to examine her will. She goes to her grave
before she is due, like her husband,
grandfather I visited
in the nursing home just once
before he died, when he cried:
"Sarah, get me out of here!
Sarah, take me home with you!"

II

On the Operating Table

"I had to care for that man day and night.
Every evening I'd come home from work
and feed him, bathe him, dress him, lift his legs
onto his side of the bed, and when
I took him to the hospital the nurses
asked: 'how could you take care of him
all those years, a little thing like you?'
Yes, but that's exactly what I did.
Look at that. I had to put him there!
He kept falling down on his head!
I couldn't lift him up anymore!

"If not for him at home, I would have gone
dancing every night. That's right. The mayor
wanted to dance with me. He wanted me
to marry him. 'Where were you last night?' he'd ask.
Things would have been very different,
I can tell you that. I used to bring
the mayor a jar of chicken soup, or bake
a cake. 'You are the best cook,' he'd say.
Yes, that's right, I'm not lying: He'd say,
'Oooo, what a wife you would make.'
Yeah, what a wife. What a life.

"I had to go and work hard all my life.
Even when I was a little girl
in Poland, my mother would make me clean house.
What could I do? Nothin'. I was the oldest!
I had to watch the others while she was out.
Then I had to clean all around.
That's the way it was there, in those days.
You had to do what your mother said.
And when we came here to America,
she sent me into Boston to find a job.
I worked in a chocolate factory!
Just a minute! I had to stand up on
my feet all day making chocolate.
I didn't get home 'til eight or nine at night.
And then do you know what I had to do?
I had to wipe all around, clean
everything! Yes, that's right. Them were
the depression days. My mother worked too.

"I worked hard all my life, saving
for my own children. All right,
God saw fit to take them both away.
You grandchildren will get the money instead.
You're my children now. I never spent
a cent on myself! I wanted a car,
but he said 'what do you need a car for Sarah?'
And that was that. I could have learned to drive
and gotten around myself, but he was too
nervous. He was a sick man! It was the same
story with a house. Now I'm stuck
in a little apartment. Look at that.
I pay five hundred dollars every month
for two tiny rooms--and you can't even
open windows or adjust the heat. Either
it's too hot, or it's too cold. I can't
even have anyone up! Where
would I put them? Where would they all fit?
And what if I take sick? Who will find me?

"And another thing. When I moved
I had to sell my piano. There's
no room for nothin there. I got this little
organ, but it's not the same. I used
to love to play--what's his name--he's Polish?

He was my favorite. What's his name?
Chopin! I used to love to play. I don't
play it anymore. It makes me sick.
Now I paint, but the place is even
too small for that. When I finish one
I have no wheres to hang them up. She said:
'Doesn't this cat look real?' 'It's Angora,'
I said. 'Look at that fur! And the eyes!'
I made eyes beautiful. When they saw
this, there, in class, they couldn't get over it!
'Oooo, Sarah, did you do this? It looks
so real! You could be an artist, Sarah!'
Eh eh eh. Look at that. Look.
That's what they said to me, so help me God!
You could be an artist! Yah. Nana
the artist. Nana the artist. Nana the artist.
'Paint me one, paint me one,' they hollered.
How did I do it? I'll tell you how I did it.
I copied the picture on the postcard, that's how.
But what else could I do, watch TV?
I have arthritis, don't paint anymore.

"When I was at Filenes, there, downtown,
I worked in boy's underwear, men's suits,
lady's coats. I had to take two buses,
then a streetcar. But I made them sales,
ten or twelve every day. That's right.
'Look at her,' they would say, those others
there. They never seen nothin like it.
Eh eh eh. Ten or twelve good sales
a day. And I wouldn't cheat nobody.
If it didn't look good or didn't fit,
I'd tell them, and they would thank me and come back,
buy something else from me. That's right.
Your Nana did that! The other girls would say
'That dress,' or whatever it was, 'looks good on you!'
And the customer would come back
upset two days later and return it!
'Oooo, look at her work,' they'd say.
'How does she do it?' I'll tell you how I did it.
I was honest. People trusted me.
And they'd come back and ask for me
to wait on them. Everybody knew me.

"And the supervisors from the other
stores there, came and watched and said 'we want

you for our store,' and tried to steal me away.
But I wouldn't go. I belong right here, I said.
They gave me a raise and put me in the lady's
coats department, and said `don't ever leave.
You're the best worker we've ever had.'
Eh eh eh. I handled thousands of dollars
a day, from all the mink-lined coats I sold.
I didn't cheat no one, and I never took
a single dime, unlike them others there,
They knew it, and so did the supervisors.
`Come to our department,' they'd say, `come
and work for us!' Why should I, I'd tell them.
I'm making bigger sales for you right here!
I'm staying put. I'm happy right where I am.
I was a fool to leave that place! But him there,
waiting at home, helpless as a baby.

"Well, all the supervisors there loved me.
All the other girls would cheat and steal.
They couldn't even cashout the register!
I could see right away they were
having trouble, and so every night, I'd go
to them and show them how to do it right.
There's twenty dollars missing, I'd say to them.
What did you do with the twenty dollars?
The next night it would appear again
in the register. `Look, she even
balances the books,' they'd say to me.
Eh eh eh. I was managing the place.
Look at that. Sometimes I didn't get home
until it was eight or nine at night.
I swear to God on my mother's grave!
And I never once took anything
that didn't belong to me. I never took
nothin, and I never asked for nothin.
May God strike me dead if I am lying."

And while she's under anesthesia
the funeral director calls me on the phone:
"I'm very concerned about your grandmother.
She cancelled all our funeral arrangements!
I don't mind losing the business. She hurt me
when she said I was a thief. I stole
her grave plot. What would I do with it?"
And as I lie on my bed, arms folded
across my chest, and think of her lying

on the table, all that she has been,
her bird-like body folded in a coffin,
tiny filaments burning in the corners
of her eyes, electric candle eyes
in her head, I am paralyzed.
But it is not the time for her to die.

III Recovery: At Home

"God brought me back
so I could see who the real crook is.
Downstairs they said it was a relative.

"Someone's listening to our conversation.
That lifeline I'm wearing around my neck--
it's a listening device.

"Just a minute. They'll see that cheese
and dried milk I stole in my refrigerator!
The government is going to stop my checks.

"I'm in a real fix. I know what's what.
He stole my dead daughter's dresses.
I never even had a chance to wear them.

"My towels are missing, then my bedclothes--
I had to have Jeannie buy me new ones
so I have what to wear.

"Now my thermometer and my underwear
are gone. Everything's disappearing.
Pretty soon I won't have nothing left to leave you.

"And another thing. He's taking my mail,
and he's reading it to see what's what
to see what I've got. I know what's what.

"He made copies of my keys while I was in
the hospital, there, and when I go to the doctors
he comes in he takes what he wants.

"Yes, that's how he'll get his money!
As if to say, 'you won't marry me,
so I'll get it this way, a little at a time.'

"Your uncle Nathan only saved my life
to make it seem like he cared.
They should have left me there for dead.

"Just a minute. He picked me up
and dropped me on my brains.
I don't know if I'm comin or goin.

"Things don't look too good right now.
Nana's in real trouble.
I'm a prisoner in my own house.

"They'll throw me in jail, and you children
will get nothin. Somebody's up to no good.
I know all about it. Somebody's a rat.

"And another thing: when I had that stroke,
and those others, there, what's their name,
instead of the hospital took me to the bank vaults.

"That's right. They went through my papers,
threw everything out, and now
I don't know from nothin.

"I need new locks on my mind, by the looks of it.
God took sweet Nana away,
and left this bitter shell. I don't trust nobody.

I keep my cash pinned to the inside of my
bra, and when I need cash
I have to get undressed somewheres.

"You children don't care about me;
nobody cares about me; all you want
is the money. Nana's not stupid.

"They're stopping my pension.
They have a lawyer; they're after my money;
they don't want you grandchildren to have it.

"I can't buy any more medicine there.
How do I know? I know.
There was something in his voice that told me.

"It must have been in all the newspapers
I can't show my face anymore.

Without that medicine, I'm licked.

"What! What can I do?
I can't even go to the bank.
They've frozen my accounts.

"They're building a case. They've got a lawyer.
They're watching me, as if to say,
if we can't have your money, no one will.

"You don't believe me?
Nana's still sharp.
I know what's what.

"Just a minute! I called the doctor,
and told him that they said I was paranoid;
he said they were after my money!

"I should commit suicide.
That would take care of everything.
For three years I was looking for my purse.

"Then suddenly it appears. Them there,
they brought it back in the middle of the night
to make me crazy.

"I shouldn't have let Jeannie write checks
for me while I was in the hospital.
That's how they found out.

"I wanted to give you children something;
by the time they're through, they'll be nothing left!
You children won't get a cent.

"Nana' had a hard life.
I'm in hell now. This is hell.
And it don't look good."

IV Breakdown: Telephone

"I am, and I'm not."

"Sometimes I eat, sometimes I don't."

"I don't feel like it."

"Same with the medication."

"Yes, and no."

"Yes, I am not taking care of myself."

"That's just the way I feel."

"And that's that."

"No, I'm not sleeping neither."

"I think I know what you mean. I know all about it."

"Dos ponin fun an alt'n man iz a landkarte tzum keyzer."

"Oh, I forgot you don't speak."

"The face of the old man is a map to the grave."

"Yah, Nana. Nana Nana Nana Nana Nana! Yah."

"I don't know what else to tell you."

"Stop it? Yes, I'll stop it."

"What was I going to say..."

"I have nothin to say."

"I don't know from nothin."

"And that's that."

V

In the Nursing Home

"I'm there--yes, here,
in the nursing home,
and they're gonna go through my apartment
and take everything out
and they'll be nothing left
for you children.
I'm sitting there, with them there,
downstairs, watching the TV,
and suddenly I hear
'Nana how could they do this to you.'
I'm not lying. So help me God, I hear,
'Nana, how could you do this to us.'
Somebody's up to no good. Somebody's a rat.
They came and said get your things
together, we're leaving, and
they took me away, and
that was that. They put me in here,
and I didn't say boo, and now I'm stuck.
I told her to take my best china!
One mistake after another.
Everyone's wearing my clothes but me.

"And another thing. You should hear
them razzing me here. No, it's not good.
They don't treat me with respect here.
I come in, and they all get up and leave.
As if to say, we don't want you here.
As if to say, 'You're a Jew, aren't you!
You don't belong here!' See that?
And they won't let me eat my lunch...
Who? Them there, the others!
What can I do? What should I do?

My hands are tied. I'm a prisoner here!
Prisoner underwear, prisoner slip.
They don't touch me because I stink!
They don't even let me go to the bathroom!
I'm swill! Swill! My mouth is like a toilet.
I don't have underwear what to wear.
Here comes the freak, they say.
Here comes the chiseler, they say,
and they look at me like I'm crazy.
I'm no chiseler! I never stole in my life!
She came in here looking for her pocketbook;
they think I'm a thief! How do you like that?
And she says this radio belongs to the state.
Where's the little radio I came in with?
They tell me I belong to Norma now.
I don't know what to believe anymore.

"So, they come in the middle of the night
when I'm sleeping, and go through my purse,
and throw everything out,
and I don't know what's what.
Everything is black in my eyes.
They put me in here, and I have nothing left.
I've got black in my eyes,
and I can't see anymore.
Where's my piano? I want to play my piano!
Where are the pictures? Who's got the cat?
What did you do with it? Don't send me
no more paints! I can't paint here! Why?
Why can't I paint here? I'll tell you why!
He says I can't paint! Who? Him there!
I don't know whether I can paint or not.
Listen, they'll steal it, and I'll be out of luck!
I'll just make an expense for you!
Nana's in here for good, by the looks of things.
I'm done for! Nana's done for!
I want to get out! I want to get out!
I don't like it here! I'm gonna die in here!

"Yooou! You thief!
You did this to me!
You killed my daughter!
You put me in this jail!
You left me here like a prisoner,
and you ran away! Here's the keys!
You might as well clean out

the rest of the apartment
while you're at it!
Sure, sure, everything's there;
everything's just as I left it.
What choice did I have!
They came and took me away.
I should have stayed right where I was!
I'm disgusted. I don't know
what I'm doing or saying anymore.
Who's got my money now?
Yah, you're paying the bills;
that's your story. I can't even
go out anymore! My name is mud.
It was in all the newspapers!
They won't give me a bath!
They drag me out of my room,
and they strap me in
to an electric chair that goes all around
the water there, until I feel
like I'm droppin dead.

"Jeannie's trying to put me away for good.
They're coming anytime now, and
they're going to take me to Alcatraz.
What do you think? She's after my money!
She wants to clean me out.
But I'll fix her but good.
I'll put a curse on that money
and no one will enjoy it.
I'm gonna get myself a lawyer--
I'm writing letters,
and I'm putting it in my drawers
where someone will find them.
Here, I'll read what it says there:
'Help! My granddaughter Jean
is trying to kill me.' Here's another one:
'Help me! I need a lawyer.
Jeannie is trying to steal all my money.'

Yes, I like it here all right.
Everything is black in my eyes.
They're gonna come in here
and check my drawers and take me away.
There going to send me to Auschwitz!
They're on the other line now.
They're listening. You don't believe me?

I'm smarter than you.
There are a lot of things
you don't know about, Stevie.
No, I don't like it here.
I don't like it very much at all.
God doesn't care about me anymore.
My whole life's been a waste.
The best thing for me to do is die.
Yah, Nana Nana Nana Nana Nana!
Stop it? Yes, I'll stop it.
Nana's a chisler! Nana's a rat!
Nana the rat. Nana the rat. Nana the rat."

LAST VISIT: THE NURSING HOME
(for Nana, d. February 13, 1995)

She tries to figure out her age.
We look at some old photographs
in the room she no longer knows
as hers. I pick the broken glass
from the warping picture frame,
point to my wife and son and dog
waiting outside her open door—
her eyes dim in recollection;
reset her clock, knocking her cup
of old teeth water onto the floor.

I tell the nurse it's time for us to go.
But I leave the way I want her to go—
not by the elevator, painful, slow,
her hand attaching to my elbow, sleeve,
her withered voice clutching at my name,
but quietly, quickly out the balcony door,
leaving behind the gray halting walker,
her white hair disappearing around the corner

as she hops and skips and jumps across the courtyard
of red and yellow pansies, runs up the hill
to the circular park and across the small green field
toward the orange-white watertower
checkered like her faded table cloth,
the Old Soldier's Home overlooking
Chelsea (first childhood memory)—

finally free from the shallow grave of her body,
a child at last, again, rising above the Boston skyline,
on the Tobin Bridge the tops of each light pole in rows
splitting, sprouting white and silver seagulls' wings,
stretching, lifting, soaring out over the harbor,
bodiless, wings paired and pinioned, calling
calling back from high above the Bay,

spittle flying into ocean