Nineteen Songs in G Minor

By Frankie Maclane

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1. Ash Before the Rain

From before the naming of salt I keep my ledger closed…
I am the frost that stays after the noon bell tolls.
What men call mercy feels to me like iron in a well,
or a phantom molar aching in a mouth nobody knows.

Not the lantern on the hill—
only the cold grease congealing at the wick’s sill.

Yet even that is merely skin,
a coat I hung behind the door before the storm blew in.

I watch old men feed gulls by the grey harbour,
and I know their wet breadcrumbs weigh more
than every theorem I ever proved behind a locked door.

And I ask the empty cup:
which shore did I leave behind?

Cut cleanly from the flock,
growing six-foot-three in a room with one sock.

Staring at the harbour lights through rain,
striking a match to kill the stain,

I pace between the window and the unnamed street,
folding the guilty and the innocent into one sheet.

The black tide asks for no excuse.
The winter sun hangs like a noose.

I ask: was that the temple horn, or just a ferry’s groan,
I ask: whose name is carved inside the bone,
I ask: why bow to cedar and stone as if I had a home,
I ask: what does a man become when left entirely alone.

You may watch my shadow now and then as if
remorse and pride were separate things…
And tell yourself: yet grief and guilt
are one and the same…

And then you may realize that
for a solitary man to remember and to bleed is the same.

That for a man:
to remember and to bleed is one and the same…

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2. The Wooden Spoon at Midnight

Before the first cedar was felled for the ark I learned to wait…
I am the rust beneath the painted gate.
Clarity to me is a razor laid flat across a slate.

Never kin to the silver tide,
there is bitterness on the wooden spoon I cannot hide.

Still, that is not the root of me—
that is merely ash blown off a lightning-split tree.

I pass a window where a woman rocks her child,
and I know that small warm breath
outweighs the dark I reconciled.

And I whisper to my boots:
where does the fugitive sleep?

Exiled by my own decree,
one-point-nine-zero of winter geometry.

Counting the red taillights along the wet hill,
crushing the filter onto the windowsill,

I walk out from the house of no return,
making the judge and the judged in one furnace burn.

The deep gorge holds no regret.
The pale moon is a snare set.

I ask: is this repentance, or just the fear of dawn,
I ask: which shelf holds the life I pawned,
I ask: should I kneel to the wind like a creature spawned,
I ask: what is a debt when the creditor is gone.

You may measure my silence as if
cruelty and solitude were two different doors…
And whisper to the dark: yet exile and choice
are one and the same…

And then you may see that
for a ghost to hide and to seek is the same.

That for a ghost:
to hide and to seek is one and the same…

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3. Low Tide at Oriental Bay

The sea pulls back from the retaining wall,
leaving black kelp like torn cassocks on the stone.

Three in the morning—
the ferry’s red masthead light blinks twice,
pauses,
blinks twice again,
a mechanical pulse that belongs to no body.

I stand with my collar turned against the southerly,
analyzing rigorously the thin grey horn
of a caterpillar drowned in the gutter water,
while a white cigarette paper unravels beside my boot.

Maybe I was the one who howled in the dormitory dark
before the gates were bolted;
maybe I am only a man who forgot how to sit at a crowded table
without counting the exits and hiding the matches.

Either way, the salt dries white on my heels.

In the black water beneath the pier,
a flatfish shifts in the silt—
unseen, unjudged,
asking nothing of the moon.

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4. Cold Tea on a Lacquered Tray

Two cups on the table.
One has never been lifted.

Since winter began, the plum branch outside the glass
has held a single bud
that refuses either to open or to die.

They say an unseen adversary cannot cross running water,
yet here I sit beside the kitchen tap,
listening to a slow drip
measure the distance between what I ruined
and what I tell myself I meant.

My shadow on the plaster wall
is taller than the doorframe,
bent slightly at the neck
like an old scholar—or an executioner
resting between turns.

I lift the cold cup.
The bitterness sits cleanly on the back of the tongue,
sharp as a broken hourglass
held up to the morning light.

If someone knocked right now,
I would not answer.
If no one knocks before dawn,
I will walk the empty ridge until my missing molar aches.

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5. Ledger of the Night Watch

Every house on the hillside has killed its porch light
except the one at the end of the cul-de-sac
where an old man’s television flickers blue
like a ghost trapped inside a glass box.

I know the weight of a brass key
that no longer fits any lock in this city.

Once, before the eclipse ended,
I believed that naming a thing
meant owning its soul—
that I would have traded mine on the spot, like Faust,
starving for the nothing inside a crowded room.
Now I write equations in the margins of unpaid bills
and cross them out before the ink dries.

Is it remorse that keeps me awake at this hour,
or the quiet pride of surviving
what broke gentler men?

A moth strikes the windowpane three times,
falls to the sill,
and lies still—
wings dusted with silver powder
like ash from an altar nobody tends.

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6. Frost on the Cedar Rail

Before sunrise, the harbour fog
erases the hills across the water
until nothing exists beyond ten paces.

I like it best when the world shrinks
to the size of a single breath.

No flock to follow,
no shepherd's crook tapping at my heels—
only the long, quiet stride of a man
who made a pact with silence
and is no longer sure
which of them holds the leash.

Behind me, the wooden steps creak once:
merely the timber cooling in the dark,
or footsteps that stopped
just short of my shadow.

I do not turn around.
To look back is to admit
there is something left to lose.

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7. Pine Needles in the Gutter

After the southerly blows itself out,
the street smells of crushed macrocarpa
and wet iron.

I walk with both hands buried in my coat pockets,
turning an old coin between my thumb and finger—
worn smooth until neither emperor nor god remains.

They told me once that hell is a furnace;
I think it is merely a long hallway
where every door opens onto the same grey afternoon,

and the only voice you hear
is your own throat clearing in the dark.

Yet when a blackbird lands on the telegraph wire
and shakes three drops of rain onto my sleeve,
I stop breathing for a second—
afraid that even my stillness
might frighten it away.

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8. Ink Stone

A drop of water on black slate.
Grind the stick slowly,
circle by circle,
until the liquid turns thick as winter pitch.

Whatever I ruined, I ruined deliberately;
whatever I saved, I saved by accident.
That is the arithmetic I carry
when I cross the empty square at dusk.

People pass me with bags of bread and oranges,
their faces lit from below by small glass screens,
hurrying toward warm kitchens
where someone knows how they take their tea.

I watch them disappear down the steps.
My fingers are stained to the second knuckle—
not with blood,
though the difference feels academic
once the lamps go out.

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9. The Ferry Wake

From the upper deck, the harbour looks like hammered lead.
White foam boils behind the stern,
tearing the water open for a hundred yards
before the sea closes over the wound
as if nothing ever passed.

That is how I learned to live among men:
leave no wake that lasts longer than a cigarette,

offer no name that cannot be folded
and slipped into a breast pocket.

Beside the railing, a child drops a red mitten;
I bend down, pick it up,
and hand it back to the mother without a word.

She smiles and says thank you.
For three blocks after I step onto the wharf,
the warmth of that small woollen glove
burns against my palm like a brand.

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10. Bamboo Lattice

Moonlight through the blinds
cuts the bare floorboards into seven narrow bars.

I lie awake on my back,
one-point-nine-zero of bone and memory,
listening to the refrigerator hum
like a distant choir singing a single note
they forgot how to resolve.

Perhaps I fell from somewhere high
before the foundations of the mountains were laid;
perhaps I simply walked out of a house one Tuesday
and kept walking until the streets forgot my shoes.

Either way, the night is clean.
Nothing asks to be forgiven.
Nothing asks to be loved.

Only the wind shifts in the flax outside,
rasping leaf against leaf
like dry palms rubbing together in the cold.

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11. Ash on the Bible Leaf

In a rented room above a closed bakery,
the radiator knocks twice
and goes silent.

I pull open the bedside drawer—
not to pray,
only to see if the gilt edges still catch the streetlamp’s orange glow.

A speck of cigarette ash falls onto the thin paper,
settling right across a verse about mercy.
I blow it off gently,
the way one blows dust from a sleeping child’s cheek.

If I am the adversary,
why does the sound of rain on tin
make my chest ache like a bruised rib?
If I am only a lonely man,
why do I lock the deadbolt twice
before I can close my eyes?

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12. The Empty Platform

Last train gone.
Only the yellow safety line
and a paper cup rolling slowly toward the tracks.

I stand beneath the fluorescent tube,
watching my breath turn to smoke
and vanish into the rafters.

All my life I have wanted two things at once:
a door no one could ever break down,
and a hand heavy enough to knock it off its hinges.

In the dark tunnel ahead,
a signal light switches from red to amber—
not a welcome,
merely a machine
counting the distance between two shadows.

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13. Gravel Under the Heel

Before the baker lights his ovens,
the alley behind the church is paved with wet grey stones
that crunch like salt beneath a heavy boot.

I know every shortcut where the streetlights are broken.
A man who has nothing left to hide

still walks fastest in the unlit stretches—
habit outliving the crime
the way a severed branch still puts out three green leaves
in a jar of tap water.

Through a basement grate, warm yeast rises into the freezing air.
I stand over the iron bars for ten seconds,
letting the heat touch my chin,
then step back into the wind
before the baker unlocks his door.

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14. The Unstrung Guitar

In the corner of the room,
the lowest string has gone flat by a half-step—
G sagging toward F-sharp
every time the southerly rattles the sash.

I do not tune it.
There is an honesty in things that refuse to hold their pitch
through a long winter.

Once, I thought clarity meant cutting away
everything that trembled;
now I sit on the edge of the mattress
and strike that single slack wire with my thumb,
listening to the dark wood body
carry a low, bruised vibration
long after my finger leaves the string.

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15. White Heron on the Breakwater

At low water, a single white heron
stands motionless on the concrete tetrapods
where the harbour meets the strait.

The swells slam against the blocks,
throwing spray twenty feet into the grey air;
the bird does not even blink.

We are alike in one respect:
neither of us belongs to the warm inland valleys
where cattle stand knee-deep in clover.

Yet when the heron finally lifts its wings
and beats slowly toward the open sea,
it leaves no guilt behind on the wet stone—
only a single white feather
caught in a crevice of black tar.

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16. Counting the Stairs

Forty-two steps from the street to my landing.
I have counted them in summer heat,
in horizontal rain,
and on nights when my own name tasted like copper.

Halfway up, the stairwell window looks out
over a corrugated iron roof
where a ginger cat sleeps curled inside a rusted satellite dish.

Sometimes I pause on the twenty-first step—
neither down in the city
nor locked inside my room—
and wonder whether the devil fell
because he hated heaven,
or because he simply could not bear
the noise of so many voices singing in unison.

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17. Cold Water from the Tap

At four in the morning, the pipes shudder
before the water runs clear.

I cup both hands beneath the stream
and splash my face until my skin goes numb.
No baptism, no witness, no white robe—
only municipal rain gathered from the hills
and pushed through iron mains to wash the sleep
from an unrepentant eye.

In the small mirror above the basin,
water beads along my jawline like sweat or tears;
even at this distance,
I cannot tell which one the body is producing.

18. The Unposted Letter

Folded twice.
No stamp. No return address.

It has sat beneath the paperweight on my desk
since the equinox,
containing three sentences that could either
burn a bridge to ash
or build one across a gorge I have stared into for years.

Outside, the evening ferry sounds its low horn
clearing the heads.

I pick up the envelope,
hold its corner an inch above the ashtray flame,
watch the paper brown without catching,
and lay it back down untouched—
content, for one more night,
to remain the sole keeper of the verdict.

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19. After the Last Lamp Goes Out

When the harbour lights finally click off
one by one along the curve of the bay,
the water does not become evil—
it merely returns to what it was
before anyone built a wharf or named a star.

I stand by the dark window,
six-foot-three of quiet dust and stubborn breath,
smoking the last cigarette down to the cork.

Call me the adversary if it helps you sleep;
call me a fugitive outrunning his own shadow;
or call me nothing at all—
just a man who built a house out of solitude
and still leaves the porch light on
in case a stranger loses his way in the rain.

The tide turns in the dark without a sound.
Neither forgiven nor condemned,
I open the latch,

step out onto the cold cedar deck,
and let the night air take whatever is left.
