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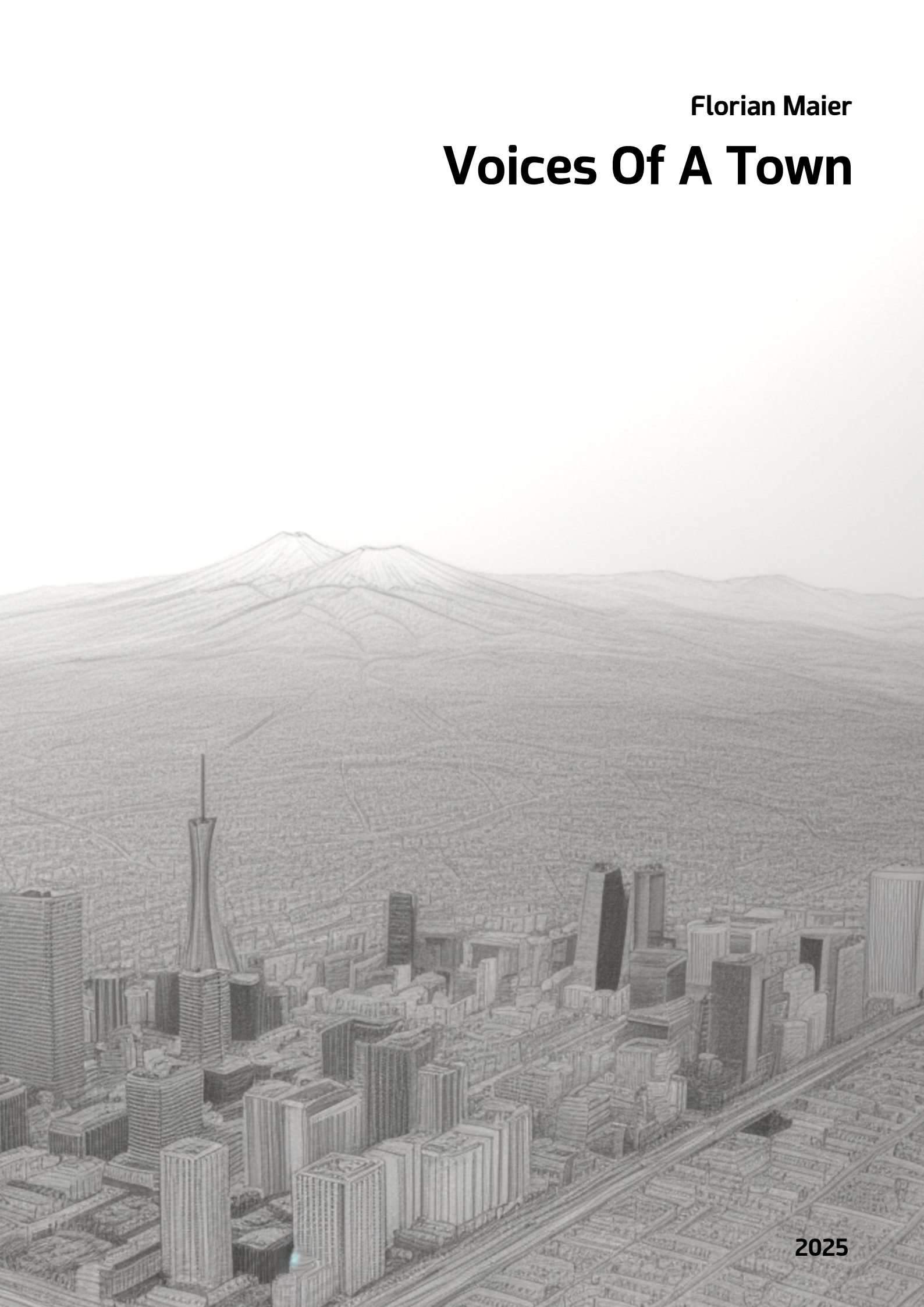
Voices Of A Town



2025

Rest

1

He sat on the backrest of the bench, not on the seat.
Feet on the damp wooden slat, arms wrapped around his knees.
He would sit like that for hours sometimes. Not because it was comfortable, but because it didn't feel like staying—it felt more like waiting.

Ren came here almost every morning, just before seven, when the park still held more shadow than sound.
He brought no book, no coffee, and no intention.
Only himself—and an old notebook filled with graph paper, where music staffs overlapped with fragments of text and rough sketches.
Sometimes he wrote in it. Most of the time, he didn't.

The sky above Ryokuchi Park was clear and cold today. The runway at Okadama Airport lay still; only now and then could you hear the distant rumble of an engine, like someone dragging a whetstone across the sky.
It had snowed a few days ago, but the snow hadn't lasted. Now the ground was damp and partly frozen. The transition from winter to spring in Sapporo was never a clean one. The seasons moved here like people in a hallway that was too narrow: cautious, tentative, always in each other's way.

Ren had pulled his scarf up to his nose—but not because of the cold. He just didn't like when people could tell he wasn't fully present yet.
In truth, he didn't like being looked at too long at all.

He watched an old woman walk the bend with a small dog—the same pair as every morning. A child's toy on the bench across from him had toppled over during the night—a plastic airplane, now nose-first in the gravel, staring into the ground. Something moved in the bushes behind him, probably a crow. Ren didn't turn his head.
He had become good at noticing things without reacting to them.

He'd been back here for nearly three months.
"Just temporary," he'd said, though no one had asked.
He had finished his music studies in Tokyo before they finished him. Or maybe it was the other way around—he wasn't quite sure anymore. Either way, he had stopped. Not in anger, not in drama—just stopped.
Like a note that fades away without resolution.

Now he was back.
Back in his hometown—the city where everything had started, but nothing stayed.

He had no friends here anymore, no stage, no direction.
Just the quiet sense that he had closed a door somewhere without knowing whether it would ever open again.

Ren pulled the notebook from his jacket pocket and opened it.
A blank page.
A five-line system, unwritten.
He tapped the paper once with his pen, as if to check whether it was still real.
Then he wrote—small, hesitantly, at the very top—a single symbol:

𝄽

A rest.
Pause. Not an end.

He closed the notebook, tucked it away, and was just about to rise—
when he noticed her.

The woman sat on the bench across from him, perfectly still, her upper body leaning forward slightly, her hands folded in her lap, as though holding something that must not break.

Her face was expressionless, and yet beneath her eyes, tears ran—slowly, without sobbing, without urgency.
As if it weren't an outburst, but a state of being.

Ren didn't look at her directly. Only with the kind of glance one uses when they don't want to intrude—but can't look away.

Something inside him grew quiet.
Not out of pity.
More like a musician realizing someone else is playing now—and choosing to hold back.
He remained perched on the backrest of his bench and didn't move.
Not yet.

2

He didn't know how long she had been sitting there before he noticed her.
But now she was there—visible in a way that had nothing to do with attention.

Ren remained on his bench for another moment, perched on the backrest, feet cold, notebook back in his pocket. Then he stood up.
Not because he had a plan—it just happened, out of that vague feeling that

sometimes you can't keep sitting when someone else so clearly can't move on.

He didn't walk directly toward her. At first, he made it seem as if he were simply passing by, slow steps, keeping a respectful distance from the bench where she sat.
Only when he was level with her did he stop—
as if it had just then occurred to him that she had fallen out of rhythm.

"Are you all right?" he asked.
His voice sounded more cautious than he'd expected. Not unsure—more like it didn't want to impose.

She didn't lift her head right away.
Her hands were still folded in her lap, but her gaze was empty.

"Yes," she said, very softly. Then, after a breath, she added:
"It's nothing anyone can fix."

Ren nodded.
Not because he understood, but because he sensed it wasn't something to argue with.

He stepped back half a pace, as if to return the space his question had taken.
But he didn't walk away. He remained standing by the bench.

"I've seen you before," he said at last.
"Running here in the park."

Slowly, she raised her eyes and looked at him for the first time.
It wasn't a guarded look, and it wasn't surprise either—
more a quiet recognition, as if she had known someone was watching, just not who.

"I run every morning," she said.
Then, almost apologetically, she added:
"Three laps. Always three."

Ren didn't smile, but something in his face softened.

"I count too," he said.
"But for me, it's usually just one."

A brief silence followed.
Not uncomfortable—more like it made room.

She turned her gaze forward again and, after a moment, shifted slightly to the side on the bench. Not much. But enough to be understood as an invitation.

Ren sat down carefully beside her.

A little distance between them, but not too much.

They said nothing.
The park was quiet.
A plane moved slowly across the sky; the rumble reached them with a delay.
Ren barely noticed it.

“I cried today,” she said quietly.
“For the first time in a long while.”
It wasn’t a confession—more of a statement.

Ren didn’t respond immediately. He looked down at the ground and then said:

“I saw someone today who didn’t try to hide it.
For the first time in a long while.”

She nodded,
and a faint smile flickered across her face.

3

“I think you’re carrying something,” she said at some point, without looking at him.
It wasn’t small talk.
Not the kind of thing you say just to keep a conversation alive.
It was more like a question that had grown out of a moment of closeness—like a thought that had sat too long on the tip of the tongue.

Ren gave a small shrug.
“I’m trying not to run away.”

She gave the faintest nod and let the silence hold.

“From the things that once mattered to me,” he added after a breath.
“Sometimes the things you love become the ones that hold you back. Or paralyze you.”

She still didn’t look at him.
But he had the sense that she carried his words with her.

“I studied music. Composition.
Everything in my life was built around that.
And then… I don’t know.
At some point, I was only counting.
Bars, structures, mistakes—

suddenly the music was gone."

Another pause.
The kind that doesn't hurt,
but hangs heavy in the air.

It held the two of them still for a while.

"I listened to someone," she said at last,
"who started listening to himself too late."

Ren looked at her, puzzled.
Her voice was calm. Not sad—
but as if it carried something that had been quiet too long.

"He counted because there was nothing else left," she said.
"And then, eventually, there was nothing left that counted."

Ren said nothing.
His face hardly moved—
and yet, something in it shifted.

She continued, almost as if to herself:
"I think you don't have to know whether something will be okay or not.
It's enough to notice that it's still there."
She looked down at the gravel beneath her feet.
"Things you ignore for too long... eventually disappear."

He looked at her again.
Not in question. Not in doubt.
More like she'd said a sentence he had heard once before.

"Maybe it's the only thing you can do in time—
keep something from disappearing."
She turned to Ren and looked at him calmly.
"Not count. Feel."

Ren held her gaze.
It wasn't what he had expected.
But maybe it was exactly what had been missing.

The woman looked forward for another moment,
as if weighing whether anything else needed to be said.
Then she stood.
Not abruptly, not in haste—
more like someone unsure whether they were still needed.

Ren didn't watch her leave.

But he knew she was truly gone—
not because he couldn't see her anymore,
but because there was nothing left to say.

He sat on the bench a long while after.
And at some point,
he took the notebook from his jacket
and began to write.

4

Two days later, Ren sat on the floor of his room.
Not out of distraction, but because the table was too small, and his notebook had spilled across several loose sheets.

The music was there now—imperfect, but honest.
A simple melody, carried by just a few bars, with lyrics that sounded more like feeling than poetry.
He hadn't meant to write it; it had come together little by little, ever since he'd met the woman in the park.

And now that the piece was finished, he didn't know what to do with it.
His voice wasn't enough to sing it himself. Not bad—just wrong for the song.
It wasn't his.
This music was meant to be sung by someone else.

He played the melody into his laptop, listened back, then deleted it.
Set the notebook aside, chewed on the cap of his pen, got up, and paced restlessly around the room.
As evening fell outside, he finally grabbed his coat and scarf and stepped out onto the street.
Not to go anywhere—just to get away from the stillness of his room.

A few blocks away, tucked into the corner of a narrow side street, was a ramen shop called *Marufu Style*.
A tiny restaurant with fogged-up windows, the kind that smelled of broth, steam, and people.
No one really knew who or what "Marufu" was, but the soup was good.
Ren knew the place.
Most locals ignored it—which made it all the more appealing to him.

He sat down at the counter.
The stools were made of pale, slightly worn wood. Four red-lacquered seats, a small cubby with chopsticks, and an open kitchen behind.

Ren quietly ordered a miso ramen, then rested his head in one hand and watched the steam rise behind the counter.

It was warm here, in a simple, kind way.
There was no radio playing in the background—just the clatter of bowls and the sound of running water.

Then he heard her singing.

Softly—almost like she didn't notice she was doing it.
She hummed a few bars at first, then sang a single line, gentle and unforced.
It wasn't a song he recognized, but he was struck by the way she sang it.

Ren lifted his head.
The voice came from a young woman working behind the counter—maybe in her early twenties.
Her black hair was tied at the nape of her neck, the sleeves of her jacket rolled up.
She stood at the far end of the counter, half-obscured by steam, rinsing bowls with small, rhythmic movements—
as if they were part of a song only she knew.

Until she sensed she was being watched.
She stopped abruptly and turned.

"Sorry!" she said quickly, visibly flustered.
"I sing sometimes when I think I'm alone."

"You don't have to apologize," Ren said.
"It sounded beautiful."
He said it without a smile, without polite sweetness.
He said it like someone telling the truth.

The woman looked down, embarrassed.
"I'm not even good at singing," she said, and turned back to her bowls.
She kept washing—like she hoped the topic might rinse away with the water.

After he finished eating, Ren paid in cash and thanked her politely.
Then he slid the stool back and stood.
Before leaving, he placed something on the counter:
a folded sheet of paper, neatly labeled, with handwritten notes to a melody and a matching lyric.

There was no title at the top—only a handwritten line:

"It fits you. Sing it. Give it life."

He didn't wait for a reaction.

He stepped out into the dark, pulled his scarf up over his mouth,
and felt the shop's warmth linger around him for a moment,
until the door clicked shut behind him.

He didn't head straight home.
He just walked—
not fleeing, not with purpose.
Just in motion.

His notebook was in his jacket again—
this time, not empty.
And something within him still echoed.
Not triumph.
Not certainty.
But for the first time in a long while,
he was feeling again.

Not counting.