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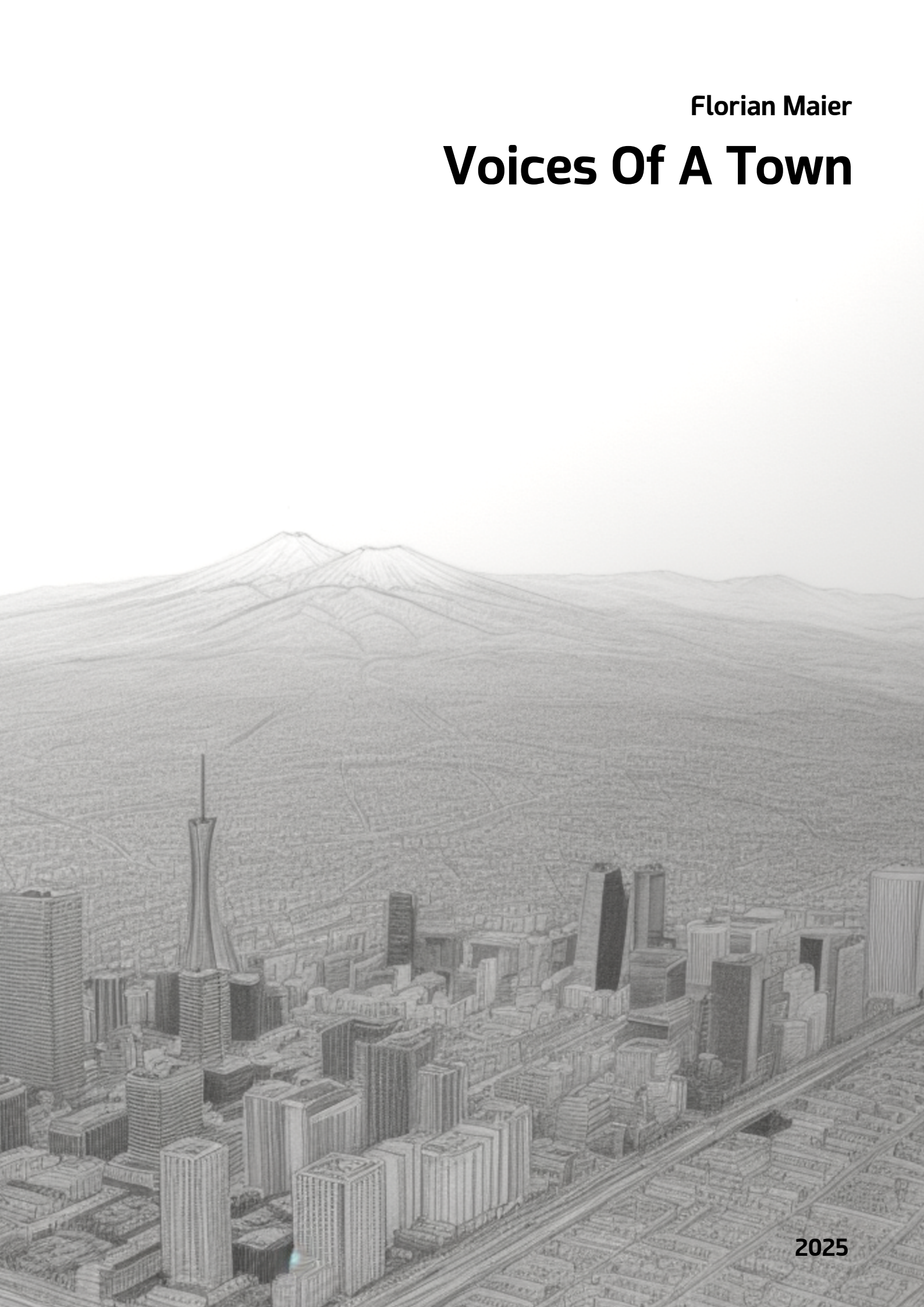
Voices Of A Town



2025

I Hear You

1

It was just before midnight when the door of *Marufu Style* ramen shop clicked shut.
The rain had eased, but you could still hear the soft ticking of drops falling from the awning onto the pavement.
Inside, it was warm and muffled—
the kind of silence that only settles once the last guest has gone, and even the day's noises seem tired.

Natsuki Shiraishi turned off the lights above the tables, to keep anyone from getting the idea they could still come in and order something.
She stood for a moment behind the counter, staring into space.
Her hands rested on the wood, the sleeves of her sweater pushed up past her elbows.
A thin film of steam clung to the windows, where now and then a drop traced a slow path downward.
In the glow of the counter lights, the ramen shop seemed smaller than usual—
almost as if the walls had drawn closer.

Natsuki simply did what needed doing—
in a rhythm she hadn't created herself, but to which she submitted without complaint.

Stack the chairs.
Take the leftover bowls to the sink.
Refill the chopsticks.
Empty the trash and carry the large garbage bag out the back door behind the building.

All these little tasks followed a rhythm she hadn't created—
but that somehow soothed her.

While she swept the floor, the thoughts returned.
Not suddenly—more like a thin thread slowly unwinding from a tangled knot.

She used to sing, almost daily.
At night, leaning with her back against the living room door, while someone else washed pots in the kitchen.
There was a time she believed singing was like breathing—
something you just do, without thinking.

But that was long ago.

Back then, there had been another voice beside hers:
her brother Kazuki's.
His voice had always been there for her.
Sometimes, she still heard it—not loudly, but like a presence.
As if something had been etched into the walls of the house,
something that only emerged again in silence.

Since the accident, things were different.
She didn't hear him anymore.
And she had decided to stop singing—
not because anyone told her to.
But because singing without him felt like betrayal.
And because she feared her voice might eventually drown his out for good.

She remembered fragments from back then.
The guitar on his bed.
The half-finished chord sheet.
The day he asked if she'd come along—
and she'd said no.
Not out of defiance.
Just because she was tired.
Because she thought they'd talk again tomorrow.

But there was no tomorrow for him.
And no song would ever sound the same again.

All that was left now was her own voice.
And it sounded foreign to her.

She put the broom away, picked up a cloth, and wiped down the counter.
As she did, something shifted—a folded sheet, half-hidden beneath the chopstick holder.

She paused.
At first, she thought it was a receipt, or something a guest had carelessly left behind.
But as she lifted it, she noticed it was heavier than regular paper.
It was folded carefully, with clean, deliberate lines—almost like a letter.

She meant to set it aside—somewhere to be sorted into the trash later—
but then her eyes caught the handwriting.

Black ink, neat and steady.
She recognized it as a song lyric.
Simple words, unadorned.
And music notes, drawn by hand in pencil—

precise, but not mechanical.
As if someone hadn't written them, but heard them directly from the page.

She read the first line attentively.
Then the second.
And she felt something stir within her—quiet, but deep.
In her mind, the notes began to form a melody as she kept reading.

Below the final measure was a line.
No signature. No name.
Just a note:

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

She suddenly remembered the young man who had eaten at the shop earlier that evening.
He had heard her singing—something she'd been deeply embarrassed about.
He'd been kind, and told her her voice sounded beautiful.

She stood there for a long time.
The paper in one hand, the cloth resting on the counter, the light above her softly humming.
Somewhere outside, a car passed through the wet street, and she heard water splash as the tires hit a puddle.
Inside, there was nothing.
Not even her breath.

Eventually, Natsuki finished her tasks, picked up her bag, and turned off the lights before stepping outside and locking the door—
the folded sheet with the song still held tightly in her left hand.

2

Days had passed.
The sky above Maeda Forest Park was open and bright that afternoon,
but the trees still stood bare—
their branches reaching into the spring sky like forgotten veins of a winter that hadn't fully let go.

The paths were dry, soft with moss in places.
Birds could be heard, though not seen—
and the air carried that cool undertone that lingers between seasons.

Natsuki had set out without a destination,
but her feet had somehow chosen the park on their own.

Not the central field with its wide lawns,
but the narrow trail leading up to the small clearing above the western pond—
a place where few people ever lingered.

In her jacket pocket, the folded sheet with the song.
Since finding it, she had carried it with her.
Not out of intention—
more like keeping a photo in a wallet,
rarely looked at,
because the meaning outweighs the image.

She hadn't forgotten the song.
Not a single line.
The melody had settled deep inside her,
had taken on rhythm and feeling
before she'd even noticed.
Sometimes she hummed it to herself,
almost without knowing.

But she had never sung it.
Not yet.

Now, she stood in the clearing.
There was no wind.
No one in sight.
In the distance, the soft gurgling of the pond could be heard,
and occasionally, the scratch of bird claws sliding along a branch.

She pulled the paper from her pocket,
unfolded it slowly—
as if she needed to bring the weight of its words back into the present,
piece by piece.

Her fingers trembled slightly—
not from the cold,
but from the moment that was forming.

And then, without planning it,
she sang.

Softly,
fragile,
carefully.
Not a performance, not a presentation—
just sound.

The first note came like a breath of air—

barely audible,
but real.
The second followed, firmer.
And with each note, her voice grew clearer.
Not louder—
but truer.

It wasn't flawless.
But it was hers.

She sang the first verse,
and the words didn't pass through her—
they came from her.

In that moment, there was no restaurant,
no routine,
no guilt.
Only the sound of her voice—
and the sense that she was being heard.

Not by anyone in the park,
but by someone who had once heard her every single day.

She paused before the final line.

And she felt it.
Not as a shiver.
Not as a vision.
But as a certainty,
gently given to her by her brother:

I hear you.

Natsuki lowered her gaze,
as if bowing—
not to an audience,
but to the moment itself.

And she heard him again:

Sing it.
Give it life.

The words, written on the song sheet—
but spoken now in her brother's voice.

She closed her eyes as the tears rolled down her cheeks.
She stood there for a long time,

until the tears had run their course.

Then she looked up at the sky with quiet gratitude,
breathed deeply—
and began to sing the song again.

This time,
with a voice that held nothing back.

3

Natsuki stood still for a while among the trees,
the sheet music in her hand,
listening to the silence.

After she had collected herself,
she began to sing the song again—
this time with a voice that held nothing back.

When the final notes had faded into the leaves above,
she sat down on a low, moss-covered stone at the edge of the clearing.
Her gaze drifted over the branches, over the still-bare twigs stretching into the sky like thinned-out thoughts.

And then she saw him.

The boy was sitting a little way off, half hidden behind a gnarled tree trunk.
Maybe twelve, maybe thirteen years old.
A sketchbook rested on his knees, a pencil in his hand, rising and falling again and again.

He wore a gray hoodie,
his shoes were caked with mud,
and his backpack lay carelessly on the grass.

He had noticed her—that much was clear.
While he sketched, he looked up from time to time, studying Natsuki with quiet curiosity.

For a moment, she considered leaving.
But when the boy realized she had seen him,
he stood up,
grabbed his backpack in one swift motion,
and walked toward her with a slightly hesitant gait.

“Was that yours?”

She looked at him, surprised by the directness of the question—
and by the seriousness in his tone.

“No,” she answered truthfully.
“But I think it found me.”

The boy nodded, as if that made perfect sense.
He glanced down at his sketchbook, then back up at her.
He stepped closer and said quietly:

“I’ve seen you before.
Here, a few weeks ago.
You weren’t singing then.
But now... it was different.”

He opened the sketchbook, flipped to the most recent page,
and handed it to her without hesitation.

On the page was a sketch—unfinished, but striking.
It showed her standing in the clearing among the trees,
head slightly tilted,
the sheet of music in her hand.

“I think you can not only see it,” he said,
“but hear it too.”

Natsuki looked at the drawing for a while in quiet reverence for the boy’s talent.
She was struck by the restraint with which he had drawn her—
and how, despite that, he had captured exactly what she had felt.

At last, she handed the book back.

“What will you do with the drawing?” she asked.
“May I keep it?”

The boy stared at the sketch for a moment, thinking.
Then he said:

“I’m sorry.
I think someone needs to see it.
Someone who needs it.”

Again, Natsuki was surprised by his directness.
What he’d said wasn’t arrogant,
not overly significant—

just quiet, with a kind of resolve one rarely sees in children.

She gave him the faintest smile.
“Then you should hold on to it.”

The boy nodded, tucked the sketchbook into his backpack,
politely said goodbye,
and slowly walked down the path between the trees.

Natsuki stayed near the clearing a while longer.
Something inside her had grown quiet—
not empty,
but like a room that had been closed off for a long time,
and was now letting in light again.

The boy had asked nothing, demanded nothing.
And yet, he had taken something with him.
Something she hadn’t shared in a long time.
Something that would continue on.

4

The path out of the park felt different than before.
Not because the park had changed—
but because something inside her had grown quieter.

Natsuki walked slowly,
the folded song sheet tucked once again into her jacket pocket.
It was strange—
even though she had sung it,
even though it had been heard,
it didn’t feel used up.
Quite the opposite.

It felt as if the song had only now become whole—
as if it were finally opening, like the delicate bud of a flower revealing its bloom.

When she reached *Marufu Style* that evening,
the street in front of the entrance was empty.
The sky above the rooftops had begun to turn a soft evening blue,
and the first lanterns shimmered in the reflections of the windows.

She unlocked the door, stepped inside,
and switched on the light above the counter.

The room welcomed her
with its familiar mix of wood, food, and memory.

Before starting the preparations for the next day,
she walked to the mirror in the small staff restroom behind the storeroom.
Not to fix her hair.
Not out of vanity.

She just looked at herself.
Looked past the reflection of her face.
And for the first time in a long while—
she recognized herself again.
Not completely.
Not fully.
But enough to stop looking away.

And then she said, softly, with a smile:
“I heard you.”

It was the first time in a long time she had spoken to him—
not from pain,
but from closeness.

For the first time, his memory wasn’t only linked to loss—
but to something that remained:
warmth,
courage,
and the sound of a song.

She held the smile,
stepped out of the restroom,
flipped the sign on the shop door to “Open”,
and began getting the restaurant ready for the evening.

Her steps were calm,
and she felt more at ease than she had in months.

And in her pocket,
the song was still there—
but no longer as a memory.

This time,
as a beginning.