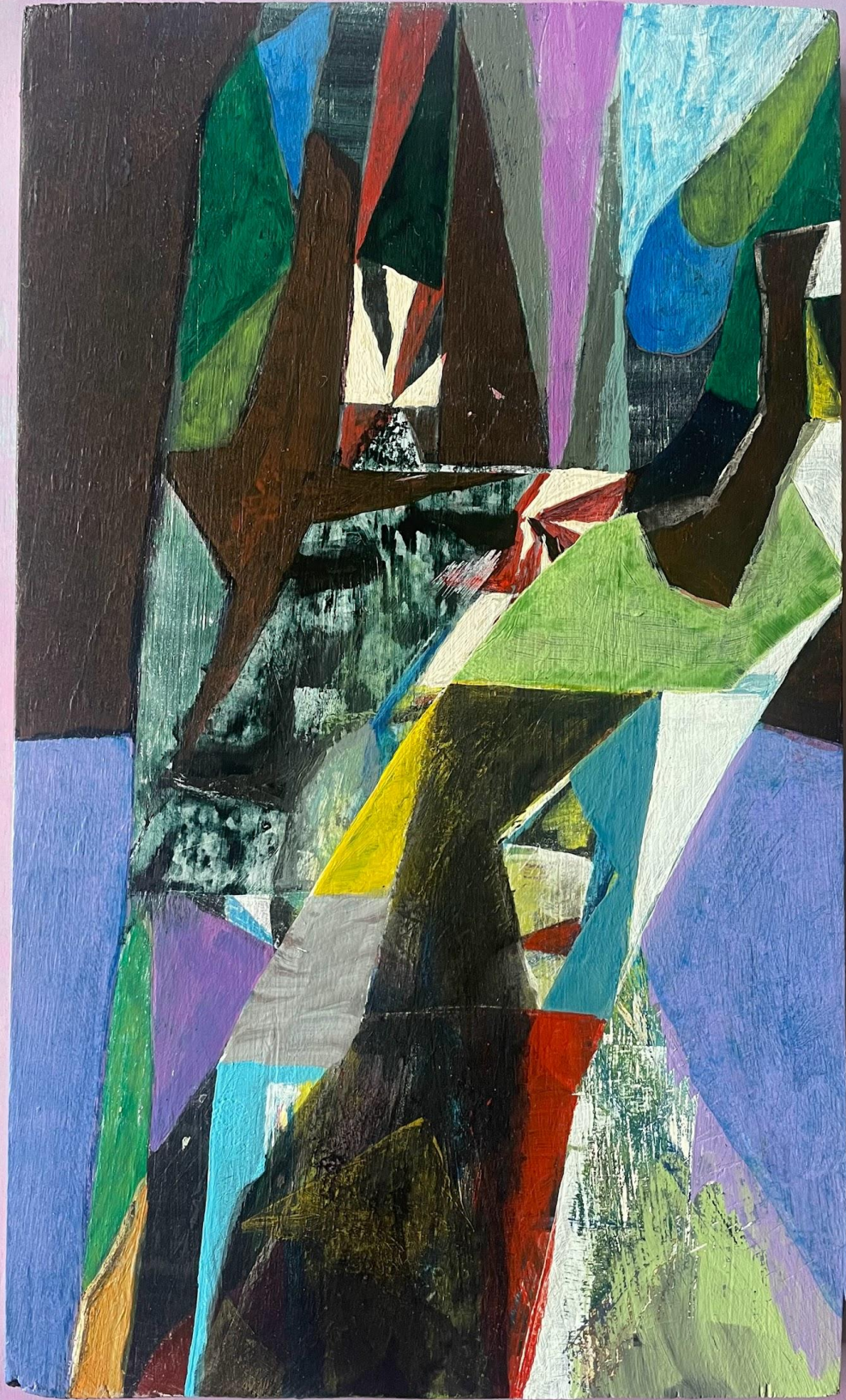






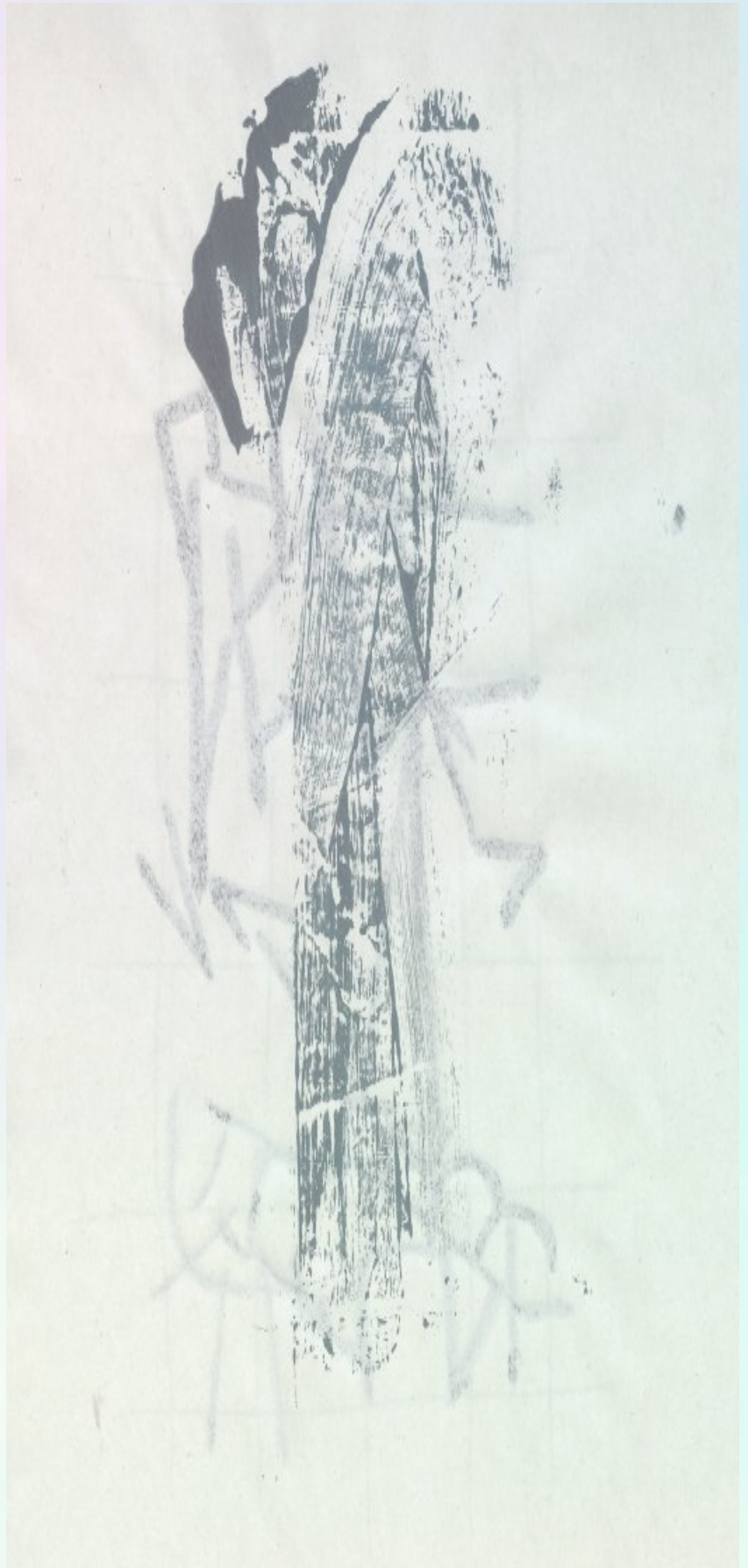
I try not to make it all about me, but it's hard. I'm selfish and I'm simple. I find myself increasingly hunched over and clenching. I scowl and tremble. Every day I make myself stand and open up my chest, stretch out to the sky and apologize. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't know how I've got it all knotted up so bad. I didn't really keep track of the steps that I was taking, and now I can't figure out how to undo it. But I'm inside of it, so I've got to deal with it. And I've really only got between six and seven to get it back to a decent place. At seven I have to start getting ready for work.



The air smelled like the neapolitan candies that Grandma liked. A cube of chewy sugar, chocolate, strawberry and coconut. My brother didn't like them but I did. I was and am more like an old lady than he.

Then it smelled like a styrofoam container of dirt and earthworms, the plastic lid punctured repeatedly, the underside sharp and grating when raked across your palm.

Then it smelled like this farm that I worked on in Indiana. There were two dogs, one near death and the other in jubilant motion at all times.



Handwritten Chinese characters in a highly stylized, cursive script. The characters are densely packed and difficult to decipher, but appear to be a form of shorthand or a specific dialectal script. The text is written in black ink on a light background.

*“Do you know that story about the Native Americans not being able to see the ships on the water when the Europeans came? I don’t think it’s true, but it’s been said that they literally couldn’t see these enormous ships, because their minds didn’t have any conception of a thing like that. They had no frame of reference for it at all. I think that’s how it is for people the first time they hear the Honkbar record. When I first heard it, I didn’t have any kind of template for it in my mind. So I couldn’t really hear it.”*

This is how Tom O’Dea discusses the record that he would go on to devote his life to championing. A twenty-seven minute collection of eleven songs, recorded at a kitchen table in 2031 by a former biscuit eatery manager, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Much is in fact unknown about Honkbar Steenstra. Here’s some of what we do know: He was born somewhere in the American south in 1982. He was employed by the Biscuits n Biscuits Corporation between 1999 and 2032. And on the evening of June 1st, 2032, after performing all eleven songs at the Boots Roost in North Platte, Nebraska - his only ever live musical performance - he walked out an alarmed emergency exit and has never been seen again.

O’Dea worked at the Biscorp corporate offices with Honkbar. His initial impression was of an odd guy, but one who was good at his job.

*“He came to HQ after having worked in the restaurants for a long time. A lot of us never put in hands-on time with the biscuits, but he knew that side of it. I can’t remember his job title exactly, something in Biscuit Assurance or Education. He was super passionate about the biscuits, and a weirdly good public speaker. You kind of fell under his spell when he gave presentations, and pretty soon you cared about the biscuits as much as he did. It’s crazy, when you consider what talking to him one on one was like. He was a little bit of a mess, really shy and sensitive. I always kind of thought he was going to start crying.”*

Unbelievably, Honkbar initially composed the songs as potential jingles for Biscuits n Biscuits. The word “biscuit” appears nowhere in any of the lyrics. Nothing remotely breakfast related, in fact.



Honkbar, *Honkbar* © 2032 Not Biscuits Records

When Honkbar submitted the recordings to the advertising executives, however, the response was somewhere between confusion and indignation. On the face of it, these were incomprehensible, melody-less, chorus-less dirges. Dark and plaintive, with sparse, off putting instrumentation. An out of tune ukulele. Sad bleeps and bloops from a deconstructed Playskool Alphie robot. What sounds to be a haunted house sound effects record played backwards. All nestled within a constant, cicada-like drone of tape hiss. The execs didn’t go for it, and sent Honkbar to visit O’Dea in Human Resources, the closest thing they had to a mental health professional.

*“He was pretty shook up. He thought he was being punished, or that they weren’t going to let him work with the biscuits anymore. But really I think they just didn’t know what to do. What he had brought to them was so startling that they knew some kind of response was required, so they sent him to me. That’s what HR is for at companies like that; if one of the employees gets a little too human, they need, you know, resources.”*

O’Dea assigned Honkbar some worksheets and online courses and the matter dropped. He didn’t think much about Honkbar or his songs for the next year and a half, until one day in 2032 when he was cleaning up some files on his company laptop.

*“I was trying to find this recording of a*

*comedy song somebody had emailed me. I can't really remember what it was, something about dicks and butts, but I wanted to find it and scrub it from the hard drive so it couldn't get me in trouble. I was looking through the MP3s when I found one that was just labeled 'honkjingles' or something. I had no recollection of what it was, so I clicked it, and my life completely changed."*

O'Dea had played a few minutes of the recordings before his initial meeting with Honkbar, mentally filed it under "weird guy did a weird thing and needs help being less weird at work," and moved on. But listening to the record in full, without context or preconception, was revelatory.

*"The lyrics, if you want to call them lyrics, wrecked me. I had never heard a human being state so plainly the ways in which they were broken, and that they were asking you, specifically you- the listener, to love them despite it. And then going on to really articulate what love should be, what human beings' obligation to one another should be... And then laying out the repercussions when nobody fulfills that obligation. It fucked me up. I played it like nine times and had to go lie down."*

*"I had never been a music guy, and definitely not a weird music guy. I grew up with, like, REO Speedwagon, Baha Men, stuff like that. But I kind of knew intuitively that there wasn't anything else like this out there. There couldn't be. It was a Saturday, but I had Honkbar's address from his file, so I drove over there."*

Honkbar's given address led to a corrugated roll-up door on the backside of a derelict industrial building in North Platte's shittiest sector. O'Dea thought it had to be a mistake until he noticed a small, hand painted cardboard sign inviting visitors to 'Please come inside.'

*"I opened up the door, and it was like a biscuit oven in there. So hot and dry. And almost completely empty, just a big, wide open space. This huge bank of windows on one side, a lot of which were broken. I didn't see anyone, or even any signs of anyone living there, and I was just about to leave when he... I don't know, emerged? He was wearing an old Biscuits n Biscuits uniform. The shirt and the pants. Polyester, way too hot for the environment. And, mind you, he hadn't worked in*

*the restaurants themselves for years at this point. He had relatively normal clothes he wore to work, I'd seen them. This was his day off and he was choosing to wear the uniform. It's what he performed in, too, when he did the concert.*

*"I spent a lot of time with him there that day. I remember there wasn't anything to sit on. So we were just standing there, and I was rambling on and on about the effect the recording had on me. At first he thought I was there in a Biscorp capacity, he thought they were going to use them for the commercials after all. And I tried to let him know it was so much bigger than biscuits, so much more important. And, somehow, without even really thinking about what I was saying, I told him that I wanted to help him get this record out into the world. That I would distribute it and promote it. And that's what I've done ever since. I'm not going to stop just because he's gone."*

In short order, O'Dea set about the task of making a record label from scratch. He initially sought Honkbar's input on creative decisions about things such as mastering and packaging, but soon realized that, while he seemed happy to be along for the ride, the artist had no real interest in the practical side of the venture.

*"His concerns were really different from mine. I wanted to get this thing into record stores, get people writing about it, maybe book a tour. He'd keep asking things like if my mom had heard it. Or if my mom liked the jelly at the Fixin's Station at Biscuits n Biscuits. Lot of stuff about my mom."*

After months of tireless proselytizing, people did start to take notice. It was still way too weird for any major-label interest, but some serious critics had heard it and were impressed, and a curator putting together a show called *Very Outside* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis had written to inquire as to the possibility of Honkbar performing at the opening.

*"I was more excited than he was. He literally didn't want to take the time off work. He had accumulated, like, twelve hundred hours PTO, and I had to promise him that he wouldn't get in trouble for using one day to make the drive out there.*

*"I got it in my head that we should do some local gigs before the Walker show. He didn't seem*

concerned, but I wanted to make sure that he could faithfully deliver an approximation of the record in a live environment. Because I thought this could be really important; there are like, real ass art people at the Walker, so I wanted him to take it seriously. And that's why I booked the Boot's Roost show. Which... I think if I hadn't done that, he'd still be around. I think it was too much. I poisoned the whole thing."

The Boot's Roost is pretty much exactly what you would expect from a working class Nebraska bar that sometimes hosts live music. Video poker, pickle cards, specials on aluminum buckets of domestic beer. A big, sun bleached vinyl banner that just says 'GAME DAY!' And a tiny "stage" in one corner with a small karaoke apparatus tucked away next to it, on which Honkbar gave his first and last concert.

"He was really excited in the car ride over, but I was a little nervous that he didn't understand what we were doing. I had to remind him to bring his ukulele and the electronic stuff. I tried to communicate to him best I could that I hoped he would perform the record, but at some point I just made peace with the fact that he was going to do what he was going to do. He was the artist, not me, and I had to trust him."

But Honkbar understood the assignment, and, according to O'Dea, he delivered beyond his wildest expectations.

"The place was full of all these people that were just trying to have some fun and forget about work. They didn't show up because a weird little guy was going to be playing music, and they would have been within their rights to not give a shit. But once he got on that little stage and sat down, cross legged on top of a bar stool, and started doing the first song... I've never seen anything like it. A couple drunk guys yelled some stuff at the beginning, trying to be funny, but it didn't take long at all and he just had everybody... completely enraptured. There was no applause between songs, it wasn't necessary. Complete silence. There was, like, a collective understanding. Honkbar sat up there and got inside of people. He just climbed into them. He became them, and they became him, and everybody became everybody else.. People were crying. One guy threw up, he couldn't

handle it. But that was okay, too.

"And then, when it was over... it was all over. He finished the last song, looked out at the audience for a while, got down off the stool and walked out that fire door. The alarm started blaring, but I don't think anyone really noticed for a long time. I was as dazed as anybody, so it was a little while before it occurred to me to go find him. When I went around back, I found the ukulele resting on the yellow Biscuits n Biscuits shirt, folded up nicely, sitting there by the dumpster. And he was gone. He was very gone."

The following Monday, when Honkbar didn't turn up at work, O'Dea went to the police. They conducted the bare minimum of investigation and shrugged it off as a voluntary absconson.

Which it may well have been. His body was never found, nor have any records of a Honkbar Steenstra surfaced in any public documents.

"I went down to see his family a little while after it happened. His mom and his sister. I'm not going to say where they live, because some people who have gotten hold of the record are pretty fanatic, and I don't want anyone showing up at their house. They were just as hard to read as he was, only a lot less sweet. I don't think they trusted me at all, especially when I started talking about trying to give them the money the record's made. That was a long time ago, and we've sold a lot more since then. I don't really know what to do with the profits except to put it back into spreading the word about the album."

O'Dea resigned from Biscorp not long after the Boots Roost show, and now spends his time fulfilling orders for the record, fielding inquiries from fans and critics (no, he's not Honkbar), and generally maintaining the legacy of his lost friend as best he can.

"I hope he's around. I hope he's out there doing something that makes him happy. Maybe that's making art in some other capacity, maybe it's just making biscuits. Maybe he wouldn't see a distinction. I didn't much like my time at Biscorp, but I still make it a point to stop into Biscuits n Biscuits whenever I see one. And it's silly, but I always kind of look really closely at the employees. Just hoping."



Sometimes, I'll set up a small obstacle course.

Just things you can find around the house. Jars of change. Sofa cushions. Butter cookie tins.

Here and there, scattered arbitrarily. Things for me to jump over or crawl under, swinging things tethered to the ceiling fan that have to be swatted away. Hazards.

I'll light a small fire and set off the alarms and put on a strobe light. Lock the doors, make puddles. A series of puzzles.

Blindfold myself and spin around until I'm all dizzy. Knock myself out with a pan. Take a drug to bring about disorientation. Drop myself off in an unfamiliar city with no way home.

