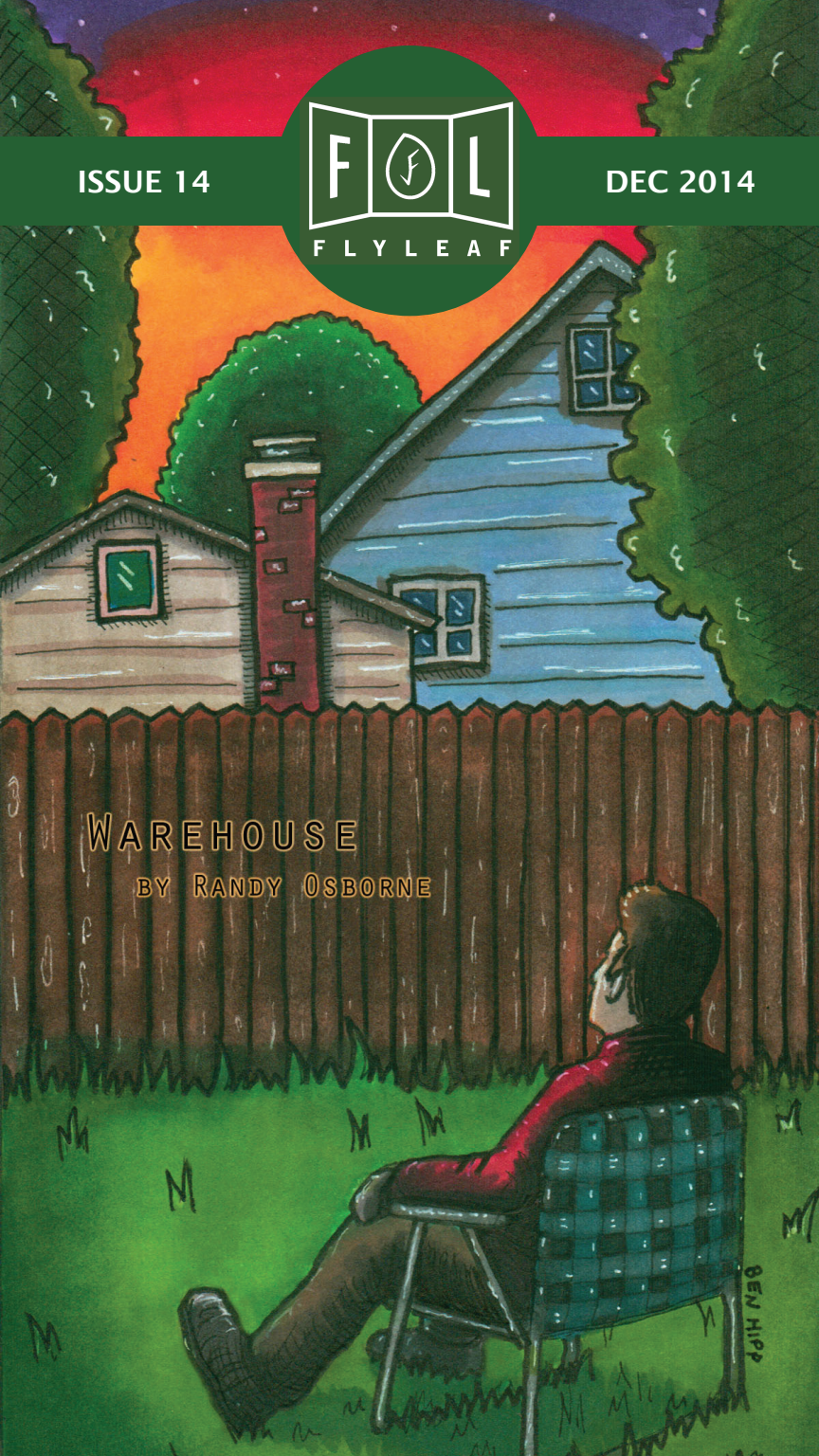
ISSUE 14

FLYLEAF

DEC 2014



Judge John S. Flanders fixed me with hooded eyes. His hairy sausage fingers fumbled with the paperwork. Wet lips peeled away from yellow teeth.

I felt sick and dizzy.

"Who comes before us now?" Flanders boomed at me, drowning out my heart's thunder.

It was 1965. Lyndon Johnson sent the first troops to Vietnam that year. Malcolm X was shot to death. Race riots tore up the South. In my hometown of Rockford, Illinois, I walked with my cousin Patrick and his brother Mike into an open building from which I took nothing. Then we all got arrested.

In those days, the phrase "juvenile delinquent" carried weight. It meant leather jackets and smoking. Fast cars, vandalism, and getting girls in trouble. At age 10, still without pubic hair, I became a juvenile delinquent.

True, I was not a well-behaved boy. I loved the tick made by a stone as it passed through glass, leaving a jagged hole, followed by the festive tinkle of glass and the stone's muted clatter, ricocheting inside the garage. One night I broke more than 100 windows.

But "burglarized"—the word used by police for our (non-)caper—was inaccurate. At most, Patrick (my age), Mike (a few years older), and I *trespassed upon* Seipel & Sons Electrical Supply Warehouse. Most boys in the neighborhood did likewise. The ramshackle four-story building stood unguarded, its half-open door creaking loose. Some kids swiped switches, screws, bundles of multicolored wire, but I saw zilch that interested me. Nor did Patrick.

Mike started out small, taking flex cord, caddy clips, locks, and tape. He moved up to soldering irons, crimpers, glue guns and drills. Near the end, he walked out of Seipel with a suitcase-like object, later opened in his bedroom

to reveal an array of plugs and dials. Tube tester, he said.

Boys from a rival bunch spotted us. More to the point, they spotted Mike, lugging the tube tester behind him like a kid on his way to the train station. They dropped the dime on Mike because they hated him. Mike: always ready to fight, always ready to squeal on *them*.

I heard about the cops' visit to his house from Patrick. "Like hell," Ted told the juvie badges when they showed up at his door. Father to Patrick, Mike and two more kids, Korean War veteran Ted wouldn't let officers inside without a warrant. Patrick hovered behind his dad, guessing the nature of the trouble and preparing to act confused. Mike already had fled.

"Who comes before us now?"

Today I understand Flanders' roaring routine as theatrics, as judicial Wizard of Ozzery thrown in to terrify his victims, because he could and enjoyed it.

In court, the sneering blowhard Flanders targeted Mike first, likely wanting to break the spirit of our ringleader, make an example of him so that his henchboys then would cave in and confess.

Mike shivered like a dog in the rain. His lanky frame twitched uncontrollably, as if zapped by some hidden device, maybe taken from a shelf at Seipel & Sons. "He's going to crap his pants," Patrick muttered beside me.

Patrick believed our court appearance amounted to nothing more than a formality to satisfy the grown-ups. We had, after all, done nothing wrong. I felt almost the same, about 75 percent certain that I would be shown mercy, if not exonerated altogether. *Exonerated* was my mother's word. I had disgraced the family, she said, as if we had been royalty or aristocrats to begin with. She wanted me "fully exonerated," our good name wiped clean.

Looking around, I noticed that my mother was one of the few adults not smiling along with the gruesome Flanders. Most of the parents seemed weirdly pleased by this theater of disgrace, and almost worshipful of Flanders, as if he would deliver at last an effective penalty, one that made their children fall into line, finally behave.

Ted, arms crossed, scowled at the judge.

I'd like to reel off the insults Flanders pelted Mike with, the shape of the humiliation Flanders wrapped around this boy like a shawl of spikes, but I don't recall most of what he said, since I was not in the crosshairs. Not yet.

Patrick went next, and Flanders dispatched him quickly. When it was over, Patrick turned from the bench, putting on his best somber face. He jammed his hands in his pockets. During the long walk back to his seat, Patrick tried a sequence of expressions, as if hoping to hit on the most abject one for spectators. The people had come for this, we knew.

Then it was my turn. I wasn't able to push out a reply regarding Flanders' "who-comes" question—he already knew the answer anyway, since it was typed on the complaint—before the judge spoke his own response. As if he had just tasted something vile, he spat all three of my names, first, middle and last.

How would I like, he asked, to be thrown in jail that afternoon? He had seen boys like me, plenty of boys, turn into society's waste. Human garbage, unfit for the company of decent, hardworking people. A disease that festered, a pox that ruined what good citizens wanted to make for themselves.

On and on he went. My eyes burned.

Of course, none of us went to jail. With a royal slam of his gavel, Flanders declared us juvenile delinquents and placed us on probation for 18 months. If we had no

further scrapes with the law, charges would be dropped at the end of the period and erased from the official records. And that's what happened.

Widely revered by Rockford's citizenry in the mindless way of crowds—in the way of our audience that day—Flanders was just a silly gasbag in a black gown: a big person who, I suppose for unsavory reasons if they could ever be known, took pleasure in bullying the little. He confirmed what I sensed about life at the mercy of power, and what Ted already knew.

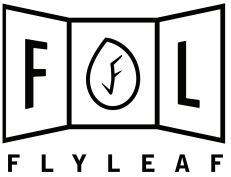
My mother and Ted shared a secret link. He gave her small gifts, such as the sapphire brooch he claimed to have designed himself. His lapidary hobby gave me the idea that Ted was trying to replace my gem-cutter dad in a small way, although Ted must have known he would scarcely gain by it. After the divorce, my father became a pariah, seldom seen. Maybe Ted hoped to live by proxy a different life, not the reality of a factory foreman with a houseful of kids but the hero and comforter of a single mother, his sister-in-law.

Cleaning out my mother's attic after her death, I found a loose-leaf binder from Ted's soldier days. In front are charts he composed and formulas on the velocity of bombs aimed rightly. There's a treatise called the "Generalization of the Theory of Relativity for Explanatory Purposes." In the back of the book are notes that deal not with military tactics but criminology. They are dense, lengthy, scrupulously detailed, and a little goofball-ish. Combat must not have kept him busy enough. "So-called tangible evidence is often useless," Ted wrote, on the matter of investigations. He thumbed his nose at what he called "the conventional superstition of implacable avenging nemesis," which I guessed to mean he disagreed with the

idea that bad guys always get caught. Or even that the "bad" guys are correctly identified. I gave the book to Patrick.

My mother circulated petitions to shut down the Seipel warehouse, an eyesore and health hazard neglected by its owners. But somebody found a quicker way. On the night the place burned down, Patrick said, he found his father on a lawn chair in the backyard, staring at the sky's orange blush, listening to the sirens. Dreamily, as if they were music.

In his criminology notes Ted equated any well-plotted caper to a fine painting that bears "the artist's personality and genius, his alone." The cops could read no signature on the unsolved Seipel fire, our town's biggest in years, an inferno. Like hell, as Ted might say, if you believed in Hades or, for that matter, justice—of which there was none but the imperfect kind you made yourself. We didn't belong with Flanders, Ted knew. He understood it the way he understood Einstein, and how fast bombs fall, and where to pour the kerosene.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RANDY OSBORNE's work has appeared in small literary magazines. He teaches fiction and creative nonfiction for the continuing-education program at Emory University in Atlanta. He is finishing a book of personal essays, and is represented by Brandt & Hochman in New York. You can find more about his current work at www.randyosborne.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

BEN HIPP is an aspiring children's book illustrator and spends most of his time drawing, painting, and watching horror movies. He lives with his cat, Vandal, who enjoys helping him paint by walking over his palette and sleeping on his art supplies. He lives in New York. You can find him online at www.benhipp.com.

www.flyleafjournal.com