

Up the Country and Back Again
A Note on the Writing of “Hans Clinker”
by James P. Blaylock

My first published short story (or whatever sort of thing it was) came out in 1975 in a literary magazine titled *Scree 3*, an imprint of Duck Down Press. Those were heady days, the long war recently over, lots of leftover hippies and yippies still “going up the country” at least for another year or two, many of them soon to become punk rockers or capitalists. The cover of *Scree 3* depicts a quintessential hippie girl (‘hippie young woman’ sounds off to my ear) not apparently clothed, staring at a half-peeled banana. I’ll say that it’s quite possibly emblematic and leave it at that.

“Hans Clinker,” in which a boy smears bacon grease on his shoe soles and skates around his kitchen floor, was written during my last semester in college, in 1974, when Tim Powers and I and several other friends hung out together on Friday nights and read whatever we were writing at the time, although actually it was (as ever) an excuse to eat pizza and drink beer, or sometimes red wine, Papa Cribari being the hands-down favorite. My method of writing those Friday night pieces was to wait until the last

possible moment and then let the Muses have their way with me – one take and with no stopping to think. (Interestingly, two of the pieces had to do with a character named Selznak the Dwarf, who became the inspiration for my first novel, *The Elfin Ship*, three or four years later.)

After I graduated in June, Viki and I pulled up stakes and moved up the coast, to Eureka, California, in Humboldt County, infamous today as the dope-growing capital of the Western World. We had no money and no jobs and no prospects: a grocery budget of \$20.00 a week – three dinners from one chicken, the third being chicken and barley soup, heavy on the barley and the leftover soup frozen for another day. We picked blackberries and apples, which we froze for pies and cobblers. I remember sitting around at a friend's cottage happily listening to “Cook with Honey” on the stereo, which, goofy and sentimental as it sounds, nicely reflected the atmosphere of that out-of-time year.

We spent a lot of time scrounging old fence lumber to build spice cabinets and planter boxes for Christmas gifts, and more hours yet walking along rainy, north coast beaches or hauling buckets of Himalaya berries across meadows, our hands stained purple. We had a couple of big aquariums, one containing a vast Surinam toad (*Pipa pipa*) that would later make an appearance in *The Last Coin*. One time we had some mad money,

so we walked downtown to buy a candy bar (fifteen cents at the time) with our friend Mary, who dropped hers in the gutter on the way back up the street. There was no mad money left to buy another, so the three of us split the two. That was over 35 years ago, and Mary still gets angry when I bring up that candy bar in the gutter.

It was when we were living in Eureka that “Hans Clinker” was published, my payment (three copies of the magazine) arriving in the mail – a red-letter day for sure. Up until then, rejection slips were the only evidence that I was playing the game by the rules, but that changed on the instant. We splurged: invited friends over, opened a bottle of Cribari wine, and bought ice cream for the cobbler.

I’m reminded a little bit of Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which is a very fine book concerning a poverty stricken year (as you’re probably already aware) that Orwell spent living on the streets and in bad apartments and boarding houses. After I read it I was a little disappointed to discover that Orwell actually had money in a bank account. He didn’t use the money, but it was there. That was our deal – no real virtue or worry in the poverty: we had set aside a few bucks in case we had to bolt, which is what we did. After about a year in Eureka we loaded our worldly possessions into a U-Haul and returned to southern California where we

would settle down into a marriage, which, next year, will have been going along happily for forty years.

On that Friday back in 1974 when I wrote “Hans Clinker,” Viki and I had cooked up bacon and eggs for breakfast. When I sat down to write later that afternoon it was bacon grease or nothing, according to the cheapskate Muses. I went for the bacon grease and never looked back, until now.