THE SQUEEZE

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The following prose is reset from original notes made some thirty odd years ago. Some of this material may have been used previously in another article called A *Dark Line of Fir Trees,* but I have no idea where that has gone. This version is written belatedly in response to a request made to me by Morris Blythman in 1953. Today's date is 18th October 1987.

To rise early in a miserable morning and go to a dirty job is always a dreary business, but to go to a dirty job in the pit is an action of especially dreary quality. The morning is slow-moving, the motion of the bus so barely discernible in that early-morning stultification of mind that the journey might very well be one mile or a hundred miles, a kind of huddled moving of huddled figures of men awake too early, with the bus itself seeming to huddle, hugging the hedges in the gray morning. No coloured movement of the golds and reds and greens of a morning, but gray, gray in the sky, in the distance, in the talk, stomach, eyes, gestures, memories. No clarity of white and black, no fervency, elation, light, life, light-ness; only the eternal gray pall of the pale morning. Make no mistake, in this late darkness, there can be only consciousness of the gray lightening behind the dark, and a knowledge that the gray will pervade the coming light. Talk, stomach, movement, memories, gestures all foretell it, as certain of the obfuscation of the light by the presence of Satan. And the faces of the men among the pale pall of tobacco smoke are themselves pale with the old, old pallor of the pits.

When the bus stops, there is a short walk to the baths, and maybe because you are conscious that this is the last shift of the week, or because of the caller air after the fug of the bus, the spirit is lifted a little. And then there is another lift because of the light and chatter in the baths between groups of the wapinschaw of moth-

er-naked men. Here are the blacks and whites and no mistake, the blacks of the lowsed night-shift men under the showers, and the whites of the yoking day-shift men as they change into pit clothes. And you know that of all clarity, there is no clearness quite like the pulse of colours among the morning light at the end of a night-shift. The envy for the night-shift men lowsing is always the thought of as summer morning and the bus home. From the black and fasting of the long, small-death-dealing of the early morning to the hot shower and its cleansing, when weariness, it seems, is sloughed off. "Pit durt is tirin itsel", they say, and that is true, for the pores cannot breathe normally. The hot tea along with the first smoke after the dirt has been removed have their own clarity, physically and mentally. Your pit is Lumphinnins No.11, unofficially called *The Peeweep*.

The mood is fine then, walking to the bus has its own contentment, and the brae of a field rising big-bellied to the sun has a green almost unbelievable, the sky is a wonder of space unlimited and outwith the notion of restriction, and the air is really felt in the lungs, almost intoxicant, of almost intolerable texture, its potency transforming.

For those who are about to be yokit at it, however, the morning has no splendours, the light is short, and the morning is a long time away in their going to the deep black where they will dour time away. So the staun their ben for the cage, and into it when the turn comes, and the safety gate clangs shut as the cage drops down the shank: a dark line of fir trees, undershot with the gray light of the morning, crests a neighbouring hill and is the last of the bonny world the men will see before slipping down past the laich shuts at ground level, into the black, with the wecht o the wurld abuin them till lowsin-tyme.

To go to, never mind remain at, there is no job that requires so much effort. Other kinds of work may be worse to do, though they would be bad at that, but no work is like coalmining at its worst for infusing in men's bones such a reluctance to begin, even when sitting beside it, ninety per cent of the way there, so to speak.

And when on night-shift, how easy it is to decide not to go out at all, but to settle down at the fireside again, thinking, "Well, that's that for a while yet." And again, on day-shift, when the alarm clock blatters out at 4.30 in the morning, how luxurious it is to turn round in bed and guddle into the blankets, thinking, "Nothing doing" to the day's darg. I have known men who just would not go to work for days at a time when conditions at the face became intolerable, preferring that others should set things to rights. Who can blame them? In some conditions, nothing but the direst need for money or sheer greed of siller would persuade any man in his normal senses to go into some of those putrid plowtery dens that can suddenly evolve in the best-regulated of pits. The most miserable specimens of manhood that I have ever seen (apart from photographs of famished creatures) were those who just had to carry on while chilled to the bone with roof-water, their bodies streaming wet despite oilskins which indeed plagued them to wear and work in. At such times, such men had revulsion in their innermost souls at the horrible work they had to do.

Even at the worst of times, though, the humour will out, for I have heard one such miserable specimen say pawkily enough to another one more miserable: "They say there's a better wy o makkin a leevin nor this, but naething can baet this for deein for a leevin."

Now you will be passed into your place by the fireman, who will tell you what you have to do if it differs from the normal, and you will walk ben with your neebors. And you will reach the face in ten minutes or nearer thirty and you will sit down and hae yer blaw and a chitterin-byte o piece. Then you will say, "Ay, we'll hae tae move, then," as you unroll your oilskins and put them on, and you will draw a long, heavy electric cable in to the face-track and drag it along the face to a coal-cutting machine. You will check the machine, plug in the cable and switch on to test it, then switch off.

The machine lies like a big, fat slug under the brushing of the top road where the brushers are preparing their own darg, and are in a hurry to get you and your damned machine out of the way, so you run out the haulage roap to your neebor Geordie who sets a chain loop at the end of the rope under a haulage stell so you can tighten the rope, which is made of fine strong steel wires. Then you switch off, engage the gears, switch on and turn the machine round, cutting as you go; stop, set a new roof support, draw one which is fouling the machine, start up, carry on cutting and turning on your stell, stop; you have turned ninety degrees and are a little way short of your entry into the coal-face track. You put the machine out of gear, draw the pin which holds the jib in place, reset the rope to the face, stop; swing the jib in, start again, move further to the face while keeping the jib clear of obstructions; your neebor hops around the machine like a puddock, water streaming down his oilskins, setting the stells as required while you wait to operate the machine.

You draw full into the face, jib clear, snug and out of the dripping water. "That's fine, Tam," says one of the brushers, but you still have to draw the machine a few yards down the face-run and out of the water on the pavement before your main darg is done.: brushers will always say everything is fine as long as they can get on with their work, but you are feeling great just the same, for it is nearing piece-time and you are practically lowsed as far as the machine is concerned.

Set one more haulage stell down the face-run, draw the machine down, switch off, remove the plug, draw the cable off the wall and you are lowsed. So you run out the haulage rope, Geordie sings out from behind you, "Richt, Tam" and you switch on and off on the fast draw, slacken the rope and tell Geordie to reset it to a better lie of the face.

"Richt, Tam" repeats Geordie, and you switch on, switch off, to allow the dying motor to tighten the rope; everything fine again. As usual, you take stock of the things around you, noting the height and breadth of the face-track, the condition

of the roof and coal-face. This coal is about two feet six inches high. You look behind you, checking the rope again; fine.

Now you will switch on, and switch off again, still on the fast draw so that the pull will take you about a foot at a time before the motor dies: some will say that you should use the slow, because the machine is coming towards you, but you will do as you consider fit and as the next man would do; everything is fine.

You switch on, and the handle spins out of the engaging dogs: the machine leaps towards you while you back away quickly on your knees, scrabbling at the handle to re-engage the dogs. They do not engage. So you knock the friction clutch down, out of engagement, in order to stop the machine at once. The machine still comes on, the clutch seemingly inoperative. You scrabble at the switch handle again, barking your knuckles on the coal-face. The dogs of the switch refuse to engage, and time suddenly has an unacceptable speed.

The only way out is to the right-hand side on to the conveyor belt track where you intend to throw yourself well out of the way of the oncoming machine.

You turn, throw yourself between two props. You feel yourself held back and realise you are gripped between the side of the cutter and the prop which happens to be of heavy steel. The squeeze is across the upper thighs, the right hip being against the machine and the left thigh against the prop.

At such a time it is almost as if you are another person observing yourself, but since this account is a recollection, there is no need to pursue the fantasy further.

Therefore, I may make a comment here that has some relevance to the situation already described. When I was child, "Count your blessings, name them one by one" was a line of a hymn popular enough at Church and Sunday School to imprint itself upon the memory. But what a time to count your blessings is this, anyone might imagine, for there I was, the squeeze really on me now, first of all with a smoothness of irresistible quickly-mounting pressure, then the sheer pain

of it not quite enough to knock me out, but vicious at that. I was like a trapped animal caught by the hind legs, the upper body thrashing up and down, up and down in an extremity of agony. But there was little room to thrash, no easement of position, my feet clear of the pavement, my shoulders against the roof, head bent, only one hand able to reach down for support, and all the time the balance of my body thrown out by the awful pressure mounting and driving in the loins, solid and heavy, lead-heavy. The pressure never seemed to steady, but kept mounting until I felt sure my skin would burst.

To paraphrase part of a short poem I was to write later about the accident, suddenly in the quick grip and squeeze, the complete entity that was myself seemed to be formed of the intangible characteristics of a dream in which all space contracted into a yard or so around me, and time itself seemed to be only of the duration of a couple of heartbeats; my body and everything tangible and solid about me seemed to be purely static, terribly inert and utterly impotent; the mere consideration of energy in movement seemed impossible, while underlying and accentuating this dream-quality of the mind become nightmare, the understanding was bound up with the idea that my whole life had been patterned to that culmination of agony, almost as if I had always known it, foreknowledge like a child walking through mind hand-in-hand with an adult Now. It was an awful feeling of seeming to stand apart from the body while watching it going through a series of actions awesome in their inevitableness, concentration being strangely at one with the pulsing of pain that stabbed and pounded in my body, with the veering of vision from the general all-embracing intake of the eyes to single squinting shafts of seeing that took in nothing within the radius of my lamplight, and with the heaving of hearing in throbbing waves that beat at the temples and cascaded behind the eyes. Again and again and again those three conditions beat in me until I was compounded of that sorry triumvirate within the single entity of own self.

But the mind is a queer instrument, for in a corner of the understanding still left unaccountably with a little common sense, I realised the machine had stopped as I saw the haulage rope trailing back into the drum of the machine. I knew then that the haulage stell had failed to hold because of its having been set badly, enough to do me good service personally. "Count your blessings..." And in the middle of all the fuss the mind was making because of the body's troubles, it managed to tell my neebors to switch off the machine and get a mash to free the prop against which I was being squeezed.

By now, all the men working at other jobs within ready reach of me were milling around, some of them just about as frantic as I myself was, their distress for me almost matching my own, for mental communion is natural in pit work, and every pitman seems to be involved with every other pitman. The man who brought the heavy mash to drive out the prop kept saying over and over again: "I cannae hit it, Tam, I cannae hit it!" Owing to the lie of the prop, my body was in the way of the line of the blow needed to knock the prop aside. I tried to bend down and hold my position while he made one or two ineffectual taps at the prop, but everything was against him, and I had to lift my shoulders up again.

I really was in trouble now, and could not (literally, for the life of me) get free of the notion that something was going to burst from the pressure. "For Christ's sake, get a sylvester," I said, but this was already being done. A sylvester is a pawl and ratchet tool used along with a length of chain for moving heavy plant and for jobs such as the extraction of awkward props in the waste. So it was soon rigged up, and the men worked quickly to free the prop. Like a lout, I kept re-peating, "It's the bluid, boys, it's the bluid," as if I were streaming with the stuff. What I was talking about was the awful pounding pressure of the blood in my lower abdomen.

Suddenly, I was free of it, the prop drawing away and I flopping down upon the conveyor run, my mouth opening and shutting in relief or like the distress of a muckle salmon grassed.

Helped by my neebors, I dragged myself to a dry part of the face and lay flat to recover, making myself as comfortable as possible. In a little while, someone gave me a drink of tea and I had a couple of drags at a cigarette. An oversman, who had a bit of good sense, bound me about the pelvis with a long, wide bandage while I awaited the stretcher.

During the long carry off the face and along the various roads to the shaft, the men spelled each other and gave me the most gentle consideration imaginable: their work must have been exasperating in the extreme, especially in the tight places. Then at last there was an examination by the pit doctor in the baths, and an ambulance was sent for, to take me home to Dunfermline, the doctor advising a hot bath and "...you'll be all right in a day or two."

When I reached home, I felt a little foolish being carried into the house in front of Peggy, my wife, with the baby in her arms, as I saw the concern on her face, a kind of strange amaze; and by now I was annoyed with myself for my stupidity in creating such an accident through trustfulness in machinery and over-confidence in self.

I was laid down in front of the living-room fire, and as I was beginning to shiver and was feeling very sore about the loins, Peg decided to send for our own doctor rather than have me dumped into a bath. When the doctor came, he enquired what had happened, examined me carefully and decided I should go to the local hospital for an X-ray. He said he would call another ambulance, and was sure the hospital would keep me in.

The X-ray revealed a fractured pelvis, and it was decided to send me to Bridge of Earn hospital for treatment, so I was trundled off to the lift. Electricity seemed

to be no friend to me at all, for the power failed before the lift started, and I had to wait in the corridor until power was restored. The accident had happened about 9.30 that morning, and as the afternoon was now well-through, I wanted badly to get into bed and warmth so that my shivering would cease.

But my luck was out: the ambulance had to pick up another patient in a neighbouring town somewhere. I lay and shivered, longing for warmth, and plagued not so much by the pain though I was bumping up and down on the bruised hip, but by ever-recurring reconstructions in my mind of the complete sequences of the accident, reliving the initial grip and the long, hard squeeze. I would linger over all the details, slowly building them into a complete pattern, until the infernal picture of that squeeze flashed across my mind so vividly that I would close my eyes tightly and draw in my breath, while my muscles strained me up from the bed as the bouncing started again, the physical pain taking over as a kind of relief from the purely mental. I was sorry enough for myself by the time the ambulance stopped and the doors opened to admit my fellow-patient.

He was carried in by a friend and the ambulance driver between them, and was placed in the other bed in a sitting posture. His friend sat down facing him. The doors of the vehicle closed and it swung round and away to the hospital. By now it was about six o'clock in the evening, and off and on I was shivering violently, as I say, a wee bit sorry for myself.

I looked at the other patient. He was barely aware of himself and was bent like a half-shut knife, an old, old man grayed and baldish, with a blanket hung around shoulders inbent towards a meagre chest. He swayed slightly, backwards and forwards, and in a low, distressed voice kept repeating, "If only I could sleep," and wheezing oddly all the time, looked fair done in.

His friend spoke to me, asking what had happened, for he knew by my black face that I was a miner and that I must have had 'an accident in the pit' as the saying goes. I told him about the bit squeeze I had had, and he told me about the

old man, who was also a miner. The poor old chap was just over fifty years of age, but he looked far older because of the ravaging of pneumonokoniosis. I looked at him. He swayed to and fro, moaning and wheezing, his inner self lost in a psyche of indiscernibility. His friend said quietly to me, "Ay, yince he's in hospital, he'll come oot naither weel nor no weel."

I stopped shivering, easing myself down on the least sore part of my hip, and thought: "Count your blessings."

It is a bitter thought what a fuss folk can make about themselves, but bitterest is the thought that they are the sorrier folk for counting their blessings only by comparing themselves with those who are even more unfortunate. And who are those folk but ourselves? And who are "ourselves" but us? And who is "us" but myself? Like our blessings, name us one by one.

Anyone is at liberty to guess the spiritual blessing I gained from those matters: the physical blessing was finally fleshed out financially at £72.18.2d in settlement of my claim between the Scottish Area of the National Union of Mine Workers and the National Coal Board on 11 November 1953.

CRIB TO *THE SQUEEZE*

Beginning to write this particular Crib in order to amplify the story of the accident described, I am suddenly aware of the difference between the pursuit of the particular so common to prose and the existence with the essential which is the being of poetry. In other words, should I now become historically diffuse in discussing mining and mining people, so that the reader will become as *au fait* with those matters as I am, or should I hint at depth of understanding by shadowing thought in poetic form? There is much I could include here, so much in fact that is the very reason for the story, that it would be very difficult to avoid overburdening.

Therefore, it is sufficient to say that I have written extensively in verse about mining, miners and mining areas, in both general and personal terms. Inevitably, such preoccupation has led to my sympathetic affiliation with left politics and to corresponding dislike of the right-wing variety. It has always been astonishing to me how a certain kind of character can betray a natural negative obtuseness about miners and mining that can suddenly erupt in positive hatred. As you must know, when we use the word "character", we tend to accentuate what kind of creature is meant by emphasis on the preceding words. "Oh," we say, "he is *some* character, that yin!" Or if we like him, we say, "Ay, he's a character!" You will be well aware, then, that when I wrote above, "a certain kind of character..." I should really have written "a *certain kind* of character," because of his reprehensible nature.

Those sort of people have always been with us. I remember them in my boyhood from tales about them in the Lanarkshire coalfield, and they were not strangers to me the other day when the Tory Party began its systematic slaughter of the coal industry. But "no names, no pack-drill", though I have been slightly dismayed at certain Tories, if not really surprised at them. Such people, strangely

enough, are even found among miners themselves, when they show their true colour under banners as Tory-blue as industrial breathlessness by insisting they are "democratic". They are persistent people, for there was a "Spencer" union away back in Nottinghamshire in 1926, so as they betrayed their comrade miners elsewhere, there is no pity for them today when we see them being betrayed themselves by further closures of their Nottinghamshire collieries because of the politics of their Tory masters.

PIECE-TIMM

It was piece-timm, sae I was telt,
lang years afore the Spencer folk
in Nottingham played blooter
wi aa thur neebors for an extrie scone
athin the piece-box.

The yae young collier chiel
chippit the hauf o his bit piece
fornent him ben the cundie,
aither at odds wi whit was in the breid
or in his ainsel.

An aulder neebor said,
"Ye ken, ye're onlie feedin rats!
Listen! Juist hear them squeechlin!
Wi you aboot, the ilka day for thaem
is lyker Christmas!"

Anither bodie said,
"Ye're richt thare, Sannie. Gin he haed
as monie wee bit rattons
as I hae, he'd kep thon piece for thaem,
for they're aye chowein!"

I could go on fine about those Nottingham fellows, but truth to tell, I did know one or two others of that same type, either in fact or by cairried story. There was one pair I knew: they always worked on the night-shift; they were brothers who, as pit talk has it, "Aye follaet the brushin." They were good brushers, good at their graft, though, but few socialised with them, for their ill reputation dated from 1926. It was amazing how management always protected them over the years. No one ever said to them, "Whoere dae ye drink?", by way of suggesting a collogue around a dram at the week-end, for their quisling qualities were well-known. If such people were always as alone as at one with nobody else but themselves, they did know what it was in their natures that made for dislike in others at them, but what is to be said of that dislike for miners that is sometimes found outwith their community, a condition of mind that is as political as pitious.

SOUND

"You and your miners!"
he said, as resonant with hate
as once I heard such resonance
of malice in the utter quiet
before the mile-high metals craised
and then obliterated waste and face-run.

Ay, ay! His voice
was vile as treacherous in tone
as its intention Torylike
as made a mockery of miners:
the personalness of attack
resounded bowff around the silent table.

Now I remember
the urgency of quiet tones
directing skill of miners' hands
to save me from the utter anguish
I suffered under fathom-weight
of metals, all those voices kindlinesses.

That takes us back, like mind the first time there, or weel I mynd the tyme, to that paraphrased poem within *The Squeeze.* What prose does best, and that is like saying it is a roundabout road for a shortcut, a poem does better, and that is like saying the latter sees where it is and where it is going, in the way the crow is said to fly, direct as here to there, though indeed, as we so often observe, crows seldom seem to fly as straight as that.

Since looking through my papers for the poem about the accident, I now see that I have written about one hundred and twenty-five A4 pages of peoms that are directly, or occasionally indirectly, concerned with mining and miners. Also, where I did say, in transcribing *The Squeeze*, that some of the material had been used previously in "another article called *A Dark Line of Fir Trees,* and that "I have no idea where that has gone", I see now that I did use some of the old material in a poem in Scots with the same title. It is of four hundred and twenty-one lines. Over and above that, there is that English prose piece dealt with here, as

well as about six A4 pages in prose Scots called *The Blooter*, which saw print in the magazine *Lallans*. That story was fiction but based on two kinds of fact, one a family story about an old incident in Ireland involving the Black-and-Tans, and one which encapsulates the characters of a couple of miners once known to me but now long gone.

All of those pieces make too large a quantity of words for this Crib, though every one of their pages could afford comment and explication running to many more. Therefore, I amplify *The Squeeze* only by the poem that made for the paraphrase. The story itself was published originally in the magazine *Epoch*, while the poem appeared in *The New Edinburgh Review*.

MINER'S ACCIDENT

This is a dream
and Space a yard or so.
This is a dream
and Tine is to count but two.
Mass without energy seems
and Foreknowledge a child walking through
mind hand-in-hand with an adult Now.

Experience is strangely at one
with the pulsing of Pain,
the veering of vision,
the heaving of hearing, again
and again and again a triumvirate on
one single Self, the blood mainly
of agony's flowering reign.

And pity is a torn flower,
but agony an orgastic flush
of a life in an hour
when the outrage of flesh
is the blossoming of blood, a thrush
fever song; the infinite one Self in the crush
and the break of the bough in its florish.