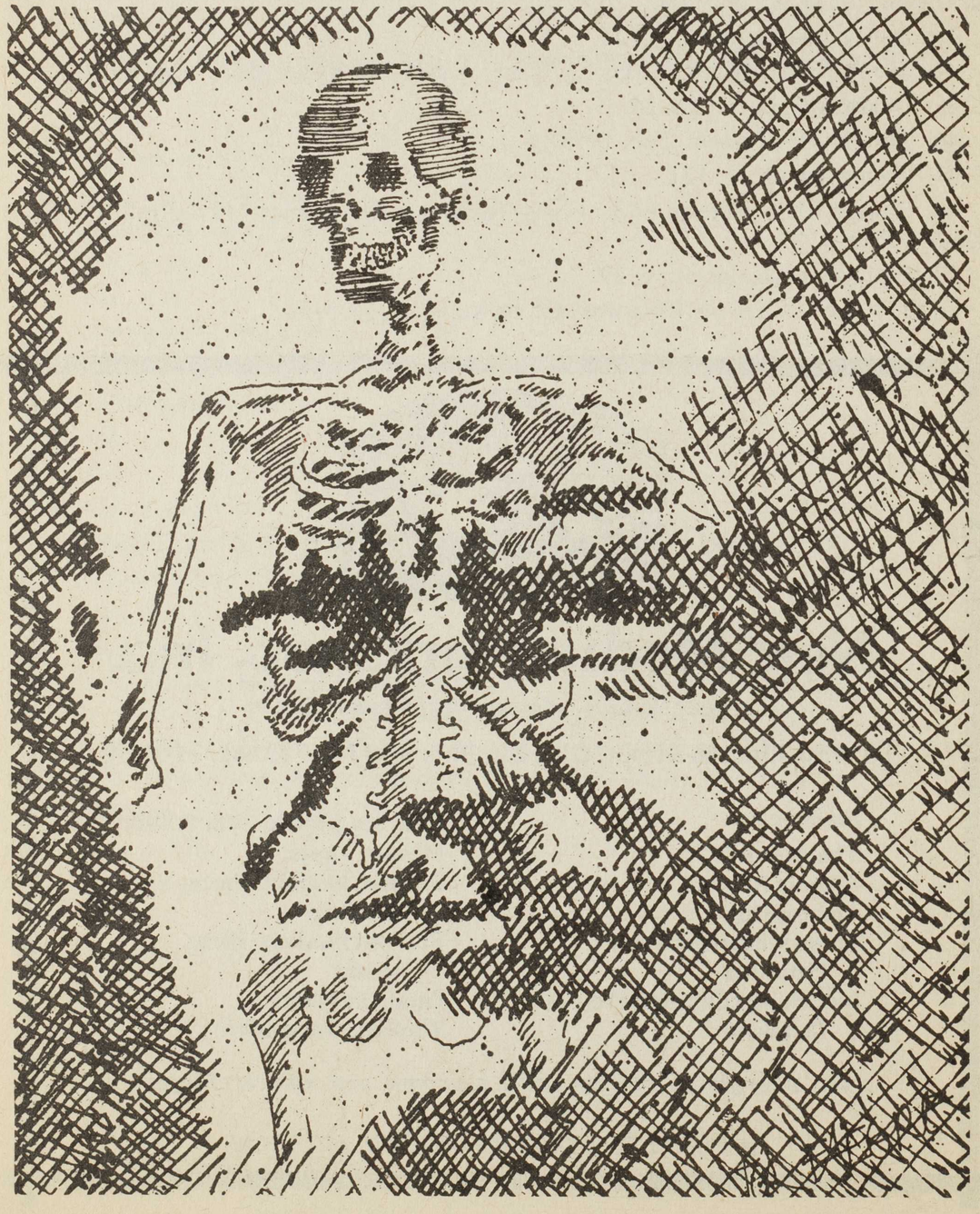

SHOTBLASTER

JIM BURNS

He was a shotblaster in the engineering factory where I was employed for a time. A shotblaster works in a small compound which is set apart from the rest of the shop-floor. In the compound there's a metal hut with a heavy door but no windows. The shotblaster wears overalls, of course, and also a canvas hood covering his head and shoulders. A perspex sheet set in the front of the hood allows him to see what he's doing. His job is to direct a steady and powerful stream of fine shot at various metal components which are rusty or require smoothing down. You don't have to think about it for long to realize what the atmosphere in the hut is like and even after a few minutes in the compound you can feel your scalp itching and the irritation in your nose and throat. Of the three men who'd done the job before the man I knew, two had died of chest ailments and the third had retired early.

The only way in which the firm could get anyone to take the job was by offering various minor perks – efficiency bonuses and the like – and also turning a blind eye to the piecework booked in by the shotblaster. Most factories limit your earnings on piecework, with the management and union having a tacit agreement as to what the maximum should be. Skilled workers are allowed a higher figure to work to. Whatever your rate, though, if you constantly book above the agreed maximum the ratefixer will come down and re-time the job and you'll find yourself speeding up in order to maintain the wage you've become accustomed to. Within reason the shotblaster was given a certain amount of leeway. Not many people were willing to work in that hut.

I always disliked having to go near the compound early in the morning. The shotblaster would be sitting on an upturned box, coughing and spitting. He was like that every morning for five or ten minutes. I once asked him why he stuck the job and he said it was for the money. If he went back to fettling or one of the other lower-grade, semi-skilled jobs he would lose two or three pounds a week and to a man with several children it was the difference between being able to afford a night out each week or watching TV all the time. He described it as the difference between living and existing.

He wasn't an unfriendly man but working in that hut, and his tendency to cough whenever he spoke for any length of time, had made him taciturn. In the canteen quite a few people disliked sitting next to him because the grains of shot rubbed off his clothes. He hadn't time to change before he ran across the road to the canteen. If you didn't get there early you had to queue and often wasted half the lunch hour before you got your meal. The shotblaster liked to sit outside for a few minutes before going back to his hut.

I didn't think it worth ruining your health for a couple of pounds a week but he just shrugged his shoulders when I put this to him. He was unskilled, badly educated, and the firm wouldn't guarantee him another job if he asked to be taken off this one. And if he went elsewhere it could mean a drop in wages or perhaps increased travelling expenses. He wasn't getting any younger either. So, what could he do, he asked me, and then turned his head to one side and coughed into a dirty, spit-stained handkerchief. ■