THE SLOW MUTANTS

Stephen King

I

The gunslinger spoke slowly to Jake in the rising and falling inflections of a dream:

“There were three of us: Cuthbert, Jamie, and I. We weren’t supposed to be there, because none of us had passed from the time of children. If we had been caught, Cort would have striped us. But we weren’t. I don’t think any of the ones that went before us were caught, either. Boys must put on their fathers’

pants in private, strut them in front of the mirror, and then sneak them back on their hangers; it was like that. The father pretends he doesn’t notice the new way they are hung up, or the traces of boot-polish mustaches still under their noses. Do you see?”

The boy said nothing. He had said nothing since they had relinquished the daylight. The gunslinger had talked hectically, feverishly, to fill his silence.

He had not looked back at the lights as they passed into the lightlessness beneath the mountains, but the boy had. The gunslinger had read the failing of day in the soft mirror of Jake’s cheek:

Now faint rose; now milk-glass; now pallid silver; now the last dusk-glow touch of evening; now nothing. The gunslinger had struck a false light and they had gone on.

Now they were camped. No echo from the man in black returned to them. Perhaps he had stopped to rest, too. Or perhaps he floated onward and without running-lights, through nighted chambers.

“It was held once a year in the Great Hall,” the gunslinger went on. “We called it The Hall of Grandfathers. But it was only the Great Hall.”

The sound of dripping water came to their ears.

“A courting rite.” The gunslinger laughed deprecatingly, and the insensate walls made the sound into a loon-like wheeze. “In the old days, the books say, it was the welcoming of spring. But civilization, you know….

He trailed off, unable to describe the change inherent in that mechanized noun, the death of the romantic and its sterile, carnal revenant, living only a forced respiration of glitter and ceremony; the geometric steps of courtship during the Easter-night dance at the Great Hall which had replaced the mad scribble of love which he could only intuit dimly — hollow grandeur in the place of mean and sweeping passions which might once have erased souls.

“They made something decadent out of it,” the gunslinger said. “A play. A game.”

In his voice was all the unconscious distaste of the ascetic. His face, had there been stronger light to illumine it, would have shown change —harshness and sorrow. But his essential force had not been cut or diluted. The lack of imagination that still remained in that face was remarkable.

“But the Ball,” the gunslinger said. “The Ball…”

The boy did not speak.

“There were five crystal chandeliers, heavy glass with electric lights. It was all light, it was an island of light.

“We had sneaked into one of the old balconies, the ones that were supposed to be unsafe. But we were still boys. We were above everything, and we could look down on it I don’t remember that any of us said anything. We only looked, and we looked for hours.

“There was a great stone table where the gunslingers and their women sat, watching the dancers. A few of the gunslingers danced,

but only a few. And they were the young ones. The other ones only sat, and it seemed to me they were half embarrassed in all that light, that civilized light. They were revered ones, the feared ones, the guardians, but they seemed like hostlers in that crowd of cavaliers with their soft women… .

“There were four circular tables loaded with food, and they turned all the time.

The cooks’ boys never stopped coming and going from seven until three the next morning. The tables rotated like clocks, and we could smell roast pork, beef, lobster, chickens, baked apples. There were ices and candies. There were great flaming skewers of meat.

“And Marten sat next to my mother and father — I knew them even from so high above — and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. The gunslingers did not clap, but my father stood slowly and held his hands out to her. And she went, smiling.

“It was a moment of passage, boy. A time such as must be at the Tower itself, when things come together and hold and make power in time. My father had taken control, had been acknowledged and singled out. Marten was the acknowledger; my father was the mover. And his wife my mother, went to him, the connection between them. Betrayer.

“My father was the last lord of light.”

The gunslinger looked down at his hands. The boy still said nothing. His face was only thoughtful.

“I remember how they danced,” the gunslinger said softly. “My mother and Marten the enchanter. I remember how they danced, revolving slowly together and apart, in the old steps of courtship.”

He looked at the boy, smiling. “But it meant nothing, you know. Because power had been passed in some way that none of them

knew but all understood, and my mother was locked root and rind to the holder and wielder of that power. Was it not so? She went to him when the dance was over, didn't she? And clasped his hand? Did they applaud? Did the hall ring with it as those pansy-boys and their soft ladies applauded and lauded him? Did it? Did it?"

Bitter water dripped distantly in the darkness. The boy said nothing.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. "I remember how they danced… . "He looked up at the unseeable stone roof and it seemed for a moment that he might scream at it, rail at it, challenge it blindly — those dumb tonnages of insensible granite that bore their tiny lives in its stone intestine.

"What hand could have held the knife that did my father to his death?"

"I'm tired," the boy said wistfully.

The gunslinger lapsed into silence, and the boy laid over and put one hand between his cheek and the stone. The little flame in front of them guttered. The gunslinger rolled a smoke. It seemed he could see the crystal light still, in the sardonic hall of his memory; hear the shout of accolade, empty in a husked land that stood even then hopeless against a gray ocean of time. The island of light hurt him bitterly, and he wished he had never held witness to it, or to his father's cuckoldry.

He passed smoke between his mouth and nostrils, looking down at the boy. How we make large circles in earth for ourselves, he thought. How long before the daylight again?

He slept.

After the sound of his breathing had become long and steady and regular, the boy opened his eyes and looked at the gunslinger with an expression that was very much like love. The last light of the fire

caught in one pupil for a moment and was drowned there. He went to sleep.

The gunslinger had lost most of his time sense in the desert, which was changeless; he lost the rest of it here in these chambers under the mountains, which were lightless. Neither of them had any means of telling time, and the concept of hours became meaningless. In a sense, they stood outside of time. A day might have been a week, or a week a day. They walked, they slept, they ate thinly. Their only companion was the steady thundering rush of the water, drilling its auger path through the stone. They followed it, drank from its flat, mineral-salted depth. At times the gunslinger thought he saw fugitive drifting lights like corpse-lamps beneath its surface, but supposed they were only projections of his brain, which had not forgotten the light. Still, he cautioned the boy not to put his feet in the water.

The range finder in his head took them on steadily.

The path beside the river (for it was a path; smooth, sunken to a slight concavity) led always upward, toward the river's head. At regular intervals they came to curved stone pylons with sunken ringbolts; perhaps once oxen or stage-horses had tethered there. At each was a steel flagon holding an electric torch, but these were all barren of life and light.

During the third period of rest-before-sleep, the boy wandered away a little.

The gunslinger could hear small conversation of rattled pebbles as he moved cautiously.

"Careful," he said. "You can't see where you are.

"I'm crawling. It's … say!"

"What is it?" The gunslinger half crouched, touching the haft of one gun.

There was a slight pause. The gunslinger strained his eyes uselessly.

“I think it’s a railroad,” the boy said dubiously.

The gunslinger got up and walked slowly toward the sound of Jake’s voice, leading with one foot lightly to test for pitfalls.

“Here.” A hand reached out and cat’s-pawed the gunslinger’s face. The boy was very good in the dark, better than the gunslinger himself. His eyes seemed to dilate until there was no color left in them: the gunslinger saw this as he struck a meager light. There was no fuel in this rock womb, and what they had brought with them was going rapidly to ash. At times the urge to strike a light was well-nigh insatiable.

The boy was standing beside a curved rock wall that was lined with parallel metal staves off into the darkness. Each carried black bulbs that might once have been conductors of electricity. And beside and below, set only inches off the stone floor, were tracks of bright metal. What might have run on those tracks at one time? The gunslinger could only imagine black electric bullets, flying through this forever night with affrighted searchlight eyes going before.

He had never heard of such things. But there were skeletons in the world, just as there were demons. He had once come upon a hermit who had gained a quasi-religious power over a miserable flock of kine-keepers by possession of an ancient gasoline pump. The hermit crouched beside it, one arm wrapped possessively around it, and preached wild, guttering, sullen sermons. He occasionally placed the still-bright steel nozzle, which was attached to a rotted rubber hose, between his legs. On the pump, in perfectly legible (although rust-clotted) letters,

Hulks, the gunslinger thought. Only meaningless hulks in sands that once were seas.

And now a railroad.

“We’ll follow it,” he said.

The boy said nothing.

The gunslinger extinguished the light and they slept. When the gunslinger awoke the boy was up before him, sitting on one of the rails and watching him sightlessly in the dark.

They followed the rails like blindmen, the gunslinger leading, the boy following. They slipped their feet along one rail always, also like blindmen.

The steady rush of the river off to the right was their companion. They did not speak, and this went on for three periods of waking. The gunslinger felt no urge to think coherently, or to plan. His sleep was dreamless.

During the fourth period of waking and walking, they literally stumbled on a handcar.

The gunslinger ran into it chest-high, and the boy, walking on the other side, struck his forehead and went down with a cry.

The gunslinger made a light immediately. “Are you all right?” The words sounded sharp, almost waspish, and he winced at them.

“Yes.” The boy was holding his head gingerly. He shook it once to make sure he had told the truth. They turned to look at what they had run into.

It was a flat square of metal that sat mutely on the tracks. There was a see-saw handle in the center of the square. The gunslinger had no immediate sense of it, but the boy knew immediately.

“It’s a handcar.”

“What?”

“Handcar,” the boy said impatiently, “like in the old movies. Look.”

He pulled himself up and went to the handle. He managed to push it down, but it was necessary to hang all his weight on the handle. He grunted briefly. The handcar moved a foot, with silent timelessness, on the rails.

“It works a little hard,” the boy said, as if apologizing for it.

The gunslinger pulled himself up and pushed the handle down. The handcar moved forward obediently, then stopped. he could feel a drive-shaft turn beneath his feet. The operation pleased him — it was the first old machine other than the pump at the way station that he had seen in years which still worked well, but it disquieted him, too. It would take them to their destination that much quicker. The curse-kiss again, he thought, and knew the man in black had meant them to find this, too.

“Neat, huh?” The boy said, and his voice was full of loathing.

“What are movies?” The gunslinger asked again.

Jake still did not answer and they stood in a black silence, like in a tomb where life had fled. The gunslinger could hear his organs at work inside his body and the boy’s respiration. That was all.

“You stand on one side. I stand on the other side,” Jake said. “You’ll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good. Then I can help. First you push, then I push. We’ll go right along. Get it?”

“I get it,” the gunslinger said. His hands were in helpless, despairing fists.

“But you’ll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good,” the boy repeated, looking at him.

The gunslinger had a sudden vivid picture of the Great Hall a year after the spring Ball, in the shattered, hulked shards of revolt, civil strife, and invasion. It was followed with the memory of Allie, the woman from Tull with the scar, pushed and pulled by the bullets that

were killing her in reflex. It was followed by Jamie's face, blue in death, by Susan's, twisted and weeping. All my old friends, the gunslinger thought, and smiled hideously.

"I'll push," the gunslinger said.

He began to push.

They rolled on through the dark, faster now, no longer having to feel their way.

Once the awkwardness of a buried age had been run off the handcar, it went smoothly. The boy tried to do his share, and the gunslinger allowed him small shifts — but mostly he pumped by himself, in large and chest-stretching rises and failings. The river was their companion, sometimes closer on their right, sometimes further away. Once it took on huge and thunderous hollowness, as if passing through a prehistoric cathedral narthex. Once the sound of it disappeared almost altogether.

The speed and the made wind against their faces seemed to take the place of sight and to put them once again in a frame of time and reference. The gunslinger estimated they were making anywhere from ten to fifteen miles an hour, always on a shallow, almost imperceptible uphill grade that wore him out deceptively. When they stopped he slept like the stone itself. Their food was almost gone again. Neither of them worried about it.

For the gunslinger, the tenseness of a coming climax was as unperceivable but as real and as accretive as the fatigue of propelling the handcar. They were close to the end of the beginning. He felt like a performer placed on center stage minutes before the rise of the curtain; settled in position with his first line held in his mind, he heard the unseen audience rattling programs and settling in seats. He lived with a tight, tidy ball of unholy anticipation in his belly and welcomed the exercise that let him sleep.

The boy spoke less and less; but at their stopping place one sleep-period before they were attacked by the Slow

Mutants, he asked the gunslinger almost shyly about his coming of age.

The gunslinger had been leaning against the handle, a cigarette from his dwindling supply of tobacco clamped in his mouth. He had been on the verge of his usual unthinking sleep when the boy asked his question.

“Why would you want to know that?” He asked.

The boy’s voice was curiously stubborn, as if hiding embarrassment. “I just do.”

And after a pause, he added:

“I always wondered about growing up. It’s mostly lies.”

“It wasn’t growing up,” the gunslinger said. “I never grew up all at once. I did it one place and another along the way. I saw a man hung once. That was part of it, though I didn’t know it then. I left a girl in a place called King’s Town twelve years ago. That was another part. I never knew any of the parts when they happened. Only later I knew that.”

He realized with some unease that he was avoiding.

“I suppose the coming of age was part, too,” he said, almost grudgingly. “It was formal. Almost stylized; like a dance.” He laughed unpleasantly. “Like love.

“Love and dying have been my life.”

The boy said nothing.

“It was necessary to prove one’s self in battle,” the gunslinger began.

Summer and hot.

August had come to the land like a vampire lover, killing the land and the crops of the tenant farmers, turning the fields of the castle-city white and sterile.

In the west, some miles distant and near the borders that were the end of the civilized world, fighting had already begun. All reports were bad, and all of them palled before the heat that rested over this place of the center. Cattle lolled empty-eyed in the pens of the stockyards. Pigs grunted listlessly, unmindful of knives whetted for the coming fall. People whined about taxes and conscription, as they always have; but there was an emptiness beneath the apathetic passion play of politics. The center had frayed like a rag rug that had been washed and walked on and shaken and hung and dried. The lines and nets of mesh which held the last jewel at the breast of the world were unraveling.

Things were not holding together. The earth drew in its breath in the summer of the coming eclipse.

The boy idled along the upper corridor of this stone place which was home, sensing these things, not understanding. He was also empty and dangerous.

It had been three years since the hanging of the cook who had always been able to find snacks for hungry boys, and he had filled out. Now, dressed only in faded denim pants, fourteen years old, he had already come to the widened chest-span and lengthening legs that would characterize his manhood. He was still unbedded, but two of the younger slatterns of a West-Town merchant had cast eyes on him. He had felt a response and felt it more strongly now. Even in the coolness of the passage, he felt sweat on his body.

Ahead were his mother’s apartments and he approached them incuriously, meaning only to pass them and go upward to the roof, where a thin breeze and the pleasure of his hand awaited.

He had passed the door when a voice called him: “You. Boy.”

It was Marten, the enchanter. He was dressed with a suspicious, upsetting casualness — black whipcord trousers almost as tight as leotards, and a white shirt open halfway down his chest His hair was tousled.

The boy looked at him silently.

“Come in, come in! Don’t stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you.”

He was smiling with his mouth, but the lines of his face held a deeper, more sardonic humor. Beneath that there was only coldness.

But his mother did not seem to want to see him. She sat in the low-backed chair by the large window in the central parlor of her apartments, the one which overlooked the hot blank stone of the central courtyard. She was dressed in a loose, informal gown and looked at the boy only once — a quick, glinting rueful smile, like autumn sun on stream water. During the rest of the interview she studied her hands.

He saw her seldom now, and the phantom of cradle songs had almost faded from his brain. But she was a beloved stranger. He felt an amorphous fear, and an uncoalesced hatred for Marten, his father’s right-hand man (or was it the other way around?), was born.

And, of course, there had already been some backstreet talk — talk which he honestly thought he hadn’t heard.

“Are you well?” She asked him softly, studying her hands. Marten stood beside her, a heavy, disturbing hand near the juncture of her white shoulder and white neck, smiling on them both. His brown eyes were dark to the point of blackness with smiling.

“Yes,” he said.

“Your studies go well?”

“I’m trying,” he said. They both knew he was not flashingly intelligent like Cuthbert, or even quick, like Jamie. He was a plodder and a bludgeoner.

“And David?” She knew his affection for the hawk.

The boy looked up at Marten, still smiling paternally down on all this. “Past his prime.”

His mother seemed to wince; for a moment Marten’s face seemed to darken, his grip on her shoulder tighten.

Then she looked out into the hot whiteness of the day, and all was as it had been.

It’s a charade, he thought. A game. Who is playing with whom?

“You have a scar on your forehead,” Marten said, still smiling. “Are you going to be a fighter like your father or are you just slow?”

This time she did wince.

“Both,” the boy said. He looked steadily at Marten and smiled painfully. Even in here, it was very hot.

Marten stopped smiling abruptly. “You can go to the roof now, boy. I believe you have business there.”

But Marten had misunderstood, underestimated. They had been speaking in the low tongue, a parody of informality. But now the boy flashed into High Speech: “My mother has not yet dismissed me, bondsman!”

Marten’s face twisted as if quirt-lashed. The boy heard his mother’s dreadful, woeful gasp. She spoke his name.

But the painful smile remained intact on the boy's face and he stepped forward.

"Will you give me a sign of fealty, bondsman? In the name of my father whom you serve?"

Marten stared at him, rankly unbelieving.

"Go," Marten said gently. "Go and find your hand."

Smiling, the boy went.

As he closed the door and went back the way he came, he heard his mother wail.

It was a banshee sound.

Then he heard Marten's laugh.

The boy continued to smile as he went to his test.

Jamie had come from the shop-wives, and when he saw the boy crossing the exercise yard, he ran to tell Roland the latest gossips of bloodshed and revolt to the west. But he fell aside, the words all unspoken. They had known each other since the time of infancy, and as boys they had dared each other, cuffed each other, and made a thousand explorations of the walls within which they had both been birthed.

The boy strode past him, staring without seeing, grinning his painful grin. He was walking toward Cort's cottage, where the shades were drawn to ward off the savage afternoon heat. Cort napped in the afternoon so that he could enjoy his evening tomcat forays into the mazed and filthy brothels of the lower town to the fullest extent

Jamie knew in a flash of intuition, knew what was to come, and in his fear and ecstasy he was torn between following Roland and going after the others.

Then his hypnotism was broken and he ran toward the main buildings, screaming.

“Cuthbert! Allen! Thomas!” His screams sounded puny and thin in the heat. They had known, all of them, in that invisible way boys have, that the boy would be the first of them to try the line. But this was too soon.

The hideous grin on Roland’s face galvanized him as no news of wars, revolts, and witchcrafts could have done. This was more than words from a toothless mouth given over fly-specked heads of lettuce.

Roland walked to the cottage of his teacher and kicked the door open. It slammed backward, hit the plain rough plaster of the wall and rebounded.

He had never been here before. The entrance opened on an austere kitchen that was cool and brown. A table. Two straight chairs. Two cabinets. A faded linoleum floor, tracked in black paths from the cooler set in the floor to the counter where knives hung, to the table.

A public man’s privacy here. The last faded sobriety of a violent midnight carouser who had loved the boys of three generations roughly, and made some of them into gunslingers.

“Cort!”

He kicked the table, sending it across the room and into the counter. Knives from the wall rack fell in twinkling jackstraws.

There was thick stirring in the other room, a half-sleep clearing of the throat.

The boy did not enter, knowing it was sham, knowing that Cort had awakened immediately in the cottage’s other room and stood with one glittering eye beside the door, waiting to break the intruder’s unwary neck.

“Cort, I want you, bondsman!”

Now he spoke the High Speech, and Cort swung the door open. He was dressed only in thin underwear shorts, a squat man with bow legs, runneled with scars from top to toe, thick with twists of muscle. There was a round, bulging belly. The boy knew from experience that it was spring steel. The one good eye glared at him from the bashed and dented hairless head.

The boy saluted formally. “Teach me no more, bondsman. Today I teach you.”

“You are early, puler,” he said casually, but he also spoke the High Speech.

“Five years early, I should judge. I will ask only once. Will you renege?”

The boy only smiled his hideous, painful smile. For Cort, who had seen the smile on a score of bloodied, scarlet-skied fields of honor and dishonor, it was answer enough — perhaps the only answer he would have believed.

“It’s too bad,” the teacher said absently. “You have been a most promising pupil — the best in two dozen years, I should say. It will be sad to see you broken and set upon a blind path. But the world has moved on. Bad times are on horseback.”

The boy still did not speak (and would have been incapable of any coherent explanation, had it been required), but for the first time the awful smile softened a little.

“Still, there is the line of blood,” Cort said somberly, “revolt and witchcraft to the west or no. I am your bondsman, boy. I recognize your command and bow to it now —if never again — with my heart.”

And Cort, who had cuffed him, kicked him, bled him, cursed him, made mock of him and called him the very eye of syphilis, bent to

one knee and bowed his head.

The boy touched the leathery, vulnerable flesh of his neck with wonder, “Rise, bondsman. In love.”

Cort stood slowly, and there might have been pain behind the impassive mask of his reamed features. “This is waste. Renege, boy. I break my own oath. Renege, and wait!”

The boy said nothing.

“Very well.” Cort’s voice became dry and businesslike. “One hour. And the weapon of your choice. “

“You will bring your stick?”

“I always have.”

“How many sticks have been taken from you, Cort?” Which was tantamount to asking: How many boys have entered the square yard beyond the Great Hall and returned as gunslinger apprentices?

“No stick will be taken from me today,” Cort said slowly. “I regret it. There is only the once, boy. The penalty for overeagerness is the same as the penalty for unworthiness. Can you not wait?”

The boy recalled Marten standing over him, tall as mountains. “No.”

“Very well. What weapon do you choose?”

The boy said nothing.

Cort’s smile showed a jagged ring of teeth. “Wise enough to begin. In an hour.

You realize you will in all probability never see the others, or your father, or this place again?”

“I know what exile means,” he said softly.

“Go now.”

The boy went, without looking back.

The cellar of the barn was spuriously cool, dank, smelling of cobwebs and earthwater. It was lit from the ubiquitous sun, but felt none of the day’s heat; the boy kept the hawk here and the bird seemed comfortable enough.

David was old, now, and no longer hunted the sky. His feathers had lost the radiant animal brightness of three years ago, but the eyes were still as piercing and motionless as ever. You cannot friend a hawk, they said, unless you are a hawk yourself, alone and only a sojourner in the land, without friends or the need of them. The hawk pays no coinage to morals.

David was an old hawk now. The boy hoped (or was he too unimaginative to hope?

Did he only know?) that he himself was a young one.

“Hai,” he said softly and extended his arm to the tethered perch.

The hawk stepped onto the boy’s arm and stood motionless, unhooded. With his other hand the boy reached into his pocket and fished out a bit of dried jerky.

The hawk snapped it deftly from between his fingers and made it disappear.

The boy began to stroke David very carefully. Cort most probably would not have believed it if he had seen it, but Cort did not believe the boy’s time had come, either.

“I think you die today,” he said, continuing to stroke. “I think you will be made sacrifice, like all those little birds we trained you on. Do you remember?

No? It doesn’t matter. After today, I am the hawk.”

David stood on his arm, silent and unblinking, indifferent to his life or death.

“You are old,” the boy said reflectively. “And perhaps not my friend. Even a year ago you would have had my eyes instead of that little string of meat, isn’t it so? Cortwould laugh. But if we get close enough … which is it, bird? Age . or friendship?”

David did not say.

The boy hooded him and found the jesses, which were looped at the end of David’s perch. They left the barn.

The yard behind the Great Hall was not really a yard at all, but only a green corridor whose walls were formed by tangled, thick-grown hedges. It had been used for the rite of coming of age since time out of mind, long before Cort and his predecessor, who had died of a stab-wound from an overzealous hand in this place. Many boys had left the corridor from the east end, where the teacher always entered, as men. The east end faced the Great Hall and all the civilization and intrigue of the lighted world. Many more had slunk away, beaten and bloody, from the west end, where the boys always entered, as boys forever.

The west end faced the mountains and the hut-dwellers; beyond that, the tangled barbarian forests; and beyond that the desert. The boy who became a man progressed from darkness and unlearning to light and responsibility. The boy who was beaten could only retreat, forever and forever. The hallway was as smooth and green as a gaming field. It was exactly fifty yards long.

Each end was usually clogged with tense spectators and relatives, for the ritual was usually forecast with great accuracy — eighteen was the most common age (those who had not made their test by the age of twenty-five usually slipped into obscurity as freeholders, unable to face the brutal all-or-nothing fact of the field and the test). But on

this day there were none but Jamie, Cuthbert, Allen, and Thomas. They clustered at the boy's end, gape-mouthed and frankly terrified.

"Your weapon, stupid!" Cuthbert hissed, in agony. "You forgot your weapon!"

"I have it," the boy said distantly. Dimly he wondered if the news of this had reached yet to the central buildings, to his mother — and Marten. His father was on a hunt, not due back for weeks. In this he felt a sense of shame, for he felt that in his father he would have found understanding, if not approval. "Has Cort come?"

"Cort is here." The voice came from the far end of the corridor, and Cort stepped into view, dressed in a short singlet. A heavy leather band encircled his forehead to keep sweat from his eyes. He held an ironwood stick in one hand, sharp on one end, heavily blunted and spatulate on the other. He began the litany which all of them, chosen by the blind blood of their fathers, had known since early childhood, learned against the day when they would, perchance, become men.

"Have you come here for a serious purpose, boy?"

"I have come for a serious purpose, teacher."

"Have you come as an outcast from your father's house?"

"I have so come, teacher." And would remain outcast until he had bested Cort. If Cort bested him, he would remain outcast forever.

"Have you come with your chosen weapon?"

"I have so come, teacher."

"What is your weapon?" This was the teacher's advantage, his chance to adjust his plan of battle to the sling or the spear or the net.

"My weapon is David, teacher."

Cort halted only briefly.

“So then have you at me, boy?”

“I do.”

“Be swift, then.”

And Cort advanced into the corridor, switching his pike from one hand to the other. The boys sighed flutteringly, like birds, as their compatriot stepped to meet him.

My weapon is David, teacher.

Did Cort remember? Had he fully understood? If so, perhaps it was all lost. It turned on surprise — and on whatever stuff the hawk had left in him. Would he only sit, disinterested, on the boy’s arm, while Cort struck him brainless with the ironwood? Or seek the high, hot sky?

They drew close together, and the boy loosened the hawk’s hood with nerveless fingers. It dropped to the green grass, and the boy halted in his tracks. He saw Cort’s eyes drop to the bird and widen with surprise and slow-dawning comprehension.

Now, then.

“At him!” The boy cried and raised his arm.

And David flew like a silent brown bullet, stubby wings pumping once, twice, three times, before crashing into Cort’s face, talons and beak searching.

“Hai! Roland!” Cuthbert screamed deliriously.

Cort staggered backwards, off balance. The ironwood staff rose and beat futilely at the air about his head. The hawk was an undulating, blurred bundle of feathers.

The boy arrowed forward, his hand held out in a straight wedge, his elbow locked.

Still, Cort was almost too quick for him. The bird had covered ninety percent of his vision, but the ironwood came up again, spatulate end forward, and Cort coldbloodly performed the only action that could turn events at that point. He beat his own face three times, biceps flexing mercilessly.

David fell away, broken and twisted. One wing flapped at the ground frantically.

His cold, predator's eyes stared fiercely into the teacher's bloody, streaming face. Cort's bad eye now bulged blindly from its socket.

The boy delivered a kick to Cort's temple, connecting solidly. It should have ended it; his leg had been numbed by Cort's only blow, but it still should have ended it. It did not. For a moment Cort's face went slack, and then he lunged, grabbing for the boy's foot.

The boy skipped back and tripped over his own feet. He went down asprawl. He heard, from far away the sound of Jamie's scream.

Cort was up, ready to fall on him and finish it. He had lost his advantage. For a moment they looked at each other, the teacher standing over the pupil, with gouts of blood pouring from the left side of his face, the bad eye now closed except for a thin slit of white. There would be no brothels for Cort this night.

Something ripped jaggedly at the boy's hand. It was the hawk, David, tearing blindly. Both wings were broken. It was incredible that he still lived.

The boy grabbed him like a stone, unmindful of the jabbing, diving beak that was taking the flesh from his wrist in ribbons. As Cort flew at him, all spread-eagled, the boy threw the hawk upward.

"Hai! David! Kill!"

Then Cort blotted out the sun and came down atop of him.

The bird was smashed between them, and the boy felt a calloused thumb probe for the socket of his eye. He turned it, at the same time bringing up the slab of his thigh to block Cort's crotch-seeking knee. His own hand flailed against the tree of Cort's neck in three hard chops. It was like hitting ribbed stone.

Then Cort made a thick grunting. His body shuddered. Faintly, the boy saw one hand flailing for the dropped stick, and with a jackknifing lunge, he kicked it out of reach. David had hooked one talon into Cort's right ear. The other battered mercilessly at the teacher's cheek, making it a ruin. Warm blood splattered the boy's face, smelling of sheared copper.

Cort's fist struck the bird once, breaking it's back. Again, and the neck snapped away at a crooked angle. And still the talon clutched. There was no ear now; only a red hole tunneled into the side of Cort's skull. The third blow sent the bird flying, clearing Cort's face.

The boy brought the edge of his hand across the bridge of Cort's nose, breaking the thin bone. Blood sprayed.

Cort's grasping, unseeing hand ripped at the boy's buttocks and Roland rolled away blindly, finding Cort's stick, rising to his knees.

Cort came to his own knees, grinning. His face was curtained with gore. The one seeing eye rolled madly in its socket. The nose was smashed over to a haunted, leaning angle. Both cheeks hung in flaps.

The boy held his stick like a baseball player waiting for the pitch.

Cort double-feinted, then came directly at him.

The boy was ready. The ironwood swung in a flat arc, striking Cort's skull with a dull thudding noise. Cort fell on his side, looking at the boy with a lazy unseeing expression. A tiny trickle of spit came from his mouth.

“Yield or die,” the boy said. His mouth was filled with wet cotton.

And Cort smiled. Nearly all consciousness was gone, and he would remain tended in his cottage for a week afterward, wrapped in the blackness of coma, but now he held on with all the strength of his pitiless, shadowless life.

“I yield, gunslinger. I yield smiling.”

Cort’s clear eye closed.

The gunslinger shook him gently, but with persistence. The others were around him now, their hands trembling to thump his back and hoist him to their shoulders; but they held back, afraid, sensing a new gulf. Yet it was not as strange as it could have been, because there had always been a gulf between this one and the rest.

Cort’s eye fluttered open again, weakly.

“The key,” the gunslinger said. “My birthright, teacher. I need it.”

His birthright was the guns — not the heavy ones of his father, weighted with sandalwood — but guns, all the same. Forbidden to all but a few. The ultimate, the final weapon. In the heavy vault under the barracks where he by ancient law was now required to abide, away from his mother’s breast, hung his apprentice weapons, heavy cumbersome things of steel and nickel. Yet they had seen his father through his apprenticeship, and his father now ruled at least in name.

“Is it so fearsome, then?” Cort muttered, as if in his sleep. “So pressing? I feared so. And yet you won.”

“The key.”

“The hawk … a fine ploy. A fine weapon. How long did it take you to train the bastard?”

“I never trained David. I friended him. The key.”

“Under my belt, gunslinger.” The eye closed again.

The gunslinger reached under Cort’s belt, feeling the heavy press of his belly, the huge muscles there now slack and asleep. The key was on a brass ring. He clutched it in his hand, restraining the mad urge to thrust it up to the sky in a salutation of victory.

He got to his feet and was finally turning to the others when Cort’s hand fumbled for his foot. For a moment the gunslinger feared some last attack and tensed, but Cort only looked up at him and beckoned with one crusted finger.

“I’m going to sleep now,” Cort whispered calmly. “Perhaps forever, I don’t know.

I teach you no more, gunslinger. You have surpassed me, and two years younger than your father, who was the youngest. But let me counsel.”

“What?” Impatiently.

“Wait.”

“Huh?” The word was startled out of him.

“Let the word and the legend go before you. There are those who will carry both.” His eyes flicked over the gunslinger’s shoulder. “Fools, perchance. Let the word go before you. Let your shadow grow. Let it grow hair on its face. Let it become dark.” He smiled grotesquely. “Given time, words may even enchant an enchanter. Do you take my meaning, gunslinger?”

“Yes.”

“Will you take my last counsel?”

The gunslinger rocked back on his heels, a hunkered, thinking posture that foreshadowed the man. He looked at the sky. It was deepening, purpling. The heat of the day was failing and

thunderheads in the west foretold rain. Lightning tines jabbed the placid flank of the rising foothills miles distant. Beyond that, the mountains. Beyond that, the rising fountains of blood and unreason. He was tired, tired into his bones and beyond.

He looked back at Cort. “I will bury my hawk tonight, teacher. And later go into lower town to inform those in the brothels that will wonder about you.”

Cort’s lips parted in a pained smile. And then he slept.

The gunslinger got to his feet and turned to the others. “Make a litter and take him to his house. Then bring a nurse. No, two nurses. Okay?”

They still watched him, caught in a bated moment that was not yet able to be broken. They still looked for a corona of fire, or a werewolf change of features.

“Two nurses,” the gunslinger repeated, and then smiled. They smiled.

“You god-damned horse drover!” Cuthbert suddenly yelled, grinning. “You haven’t left enough meat for the rest of us to pick off the bone!”

“The world won’t move on tomorrow,” the gunslinger said, quoting the old adage with a smile. “Allen, you butter-ass. Move your freight”

Allen set about making the litter; Thomas and Jamie went together to the main hall and the infirmary.

The gunslinger and Cuthbert looked at each other. They had always been the closest — or as close as they could be under the particular shades of their characters. There was a speculative, open light in Cuthbert’s eyes, and the gunslinger controlled only with great difficulty the need to tell him not to call for the test for a year or even eighteen months, lest he go west. But they had been through a great deal together, and the gunslinger did not feel he could risk it without

an expression that might be taken for patronization. I've begun to scheme, he thought, and was a little dismayed. Then he thought of Marten, of his mother, and he smiled a deceiver's smile at his friend.

I am to be the first, he thought, knowing it for the first time, although he had thought of it(in a bemused way) many times before. I am to be first "Let's go," he said.

"With pleasure, gunslinger."

They left by the east end of the hedge-bordered corridor; Thomas and Jamie were returning with the nurses already. They looked like ghosts in their heavy white robes, crossed at the breast with red.

"Shall I help you with the hawk?" Cuthbert asked.

"Yes," the gunslinger said.

And later, when darkness had come and the rushing thundershowers with it; while huge, phantom caissons rolled across the sky and lightning washed the crooked streets of the lower town in blue fire; while horses stood at hitching rails with their heads down and their tails drooping, the gunslinger took a woman and lay with her.

It was quick and good. When it was over and they lay side by side without speaking, it began to hail with a brief, rattling ferocity. Downstairs and far away, someone was playing Hey Jude ragtime. The gunslinger's mind turned reflectively inward. It was in that hail-splattered silence, just before sleep overtook him, that he first thought that he might also be the last.

The gunslinger did not, of course, tell the boy all of this, but perhaps most of it had come through anyway. He had already realized that this was an extremely perceptive boy, not so different from Cuthbert, or even Jamie.

"You asleep?" the gunslinger asked.

“No.”

“Did you understand what I told you?”

“Understand it?” The boy asked, with cautious scorn. “Understand it? Are you kidding?”

“No.” But the gunslinger felt defensive. He had never told anyone about his coming of age before, because he felt ambivalent about it. Of course, the hawk had been a perfectly acceptable weapon, yet it had been a trick, too. And a betrayal. The first of many: Am I readying to throw this boy at the man in black?

“I understood it,” the boy said. “It was a game, wasn’t it? Do grown men always have to play games? Does everything have to be an excuse for another kind of game? Do any men grow up or do they only come of age?”

“You don’t know everything,” the gunslinger said, trying to hold his slow anger.

“No. But I know what I am to you.”

“And what is that?” The gunslinger asked tightly.

“A poker chip.”

The gunslinger felt an urge to find a rock and brain the boy. Instead, he held his tongue.

“Go to sleep,” he said. “Boys need their sleep.”

And in his mind he heard Marten’s echo: Go and find your hand.

He sat stiffly in the darkness, stunned with horror and terrified (for the first time in his existence; of anything) of the self-loathing that might come.

During the next period of waking, the railway angled closer to the underground river, and they came upon the Slow Mutants.

Jake saw the first one and screamed aloud.

The gunslinger's head, which had been fixed straight forward as he pumped the handcar, jerked to the right. There was a rotten jack-o-lantern greenness below and away from them, circular and pulsating faintly. For the first time he became aware of odor — faint, unpleasant, wet.

The greenness was a face, and the face was abnormal. Above the flattened nose was an insectile node of eyes, looking at them expressionlessly. The gunslinger felt an atavistic crawl in his intestines and privates. He stepped up the rhythm of arms and handcar handle slightly.

The glowing face faded.

"What was it?" the boy asked, crawling. "What — "The words stopped dumb in his throat as they came up upon and passed a group of three faintly glowing forms, standing between the rails and the invisible river, watching them, motionless.

"They're Slow Mutants," the gunslinger said. "I don't think they'll bother us.

They're probably just as frightened of us as we are of — "

One of the forms broke free and shambled toward them, glowing and changing. The face was that of a starving idiot. The faint naked body had been transformed into a knotted mess of tentacular limbs with suckers.

The boy screamed again and crowded against the gunslinger's leg like an affrighted dog.

One of the tentacles pawed across the flat platform of the handcar. It reeked of the wet and the dark and of strangeness. The gunslinger let loose of the handle and drew. He put a bullet through the forehead of the starving idiot face. It fell away, its faint swamp-fire glow fading, an eclipsed moon. The gunflash lay bright and branded on their dark retinas, fading only reluctantly. The smell of expended powder was hot and savage and alien in this buried place.

There were others, more of them. None moved against them overtly, but they were closing in on the tracks, a silent, hideous party of rubberneckers.

“You may have to pump for me,” the gunslinger said. “Can you?”

“Yes.”

“Then be ready.”

The boy stood close to him, his body poised. His eyes took in the Slow Mutants only as they passed, not traversing, not seeing more than they had to. The boy assumed a psychic bulge of terror, as if his very id had somehow sprung out through his pores to form a telepathic shield.

The gunslinger pumped steadily but did not increase his speed. The Slow Mutants could smell their terror, he knew that, but he doubted if terror would be enough for them. He and the boy were, after all, creatures of the light, and whole. How they must hate us, he thought, and wondered if they had hated the man in black in the same way.

He thought not, or perhaps he had passed among them and through their pitiful hive colony unknown, only the shadow of a dark wing.

The boy made a noise in his throat and the gunslinger turned his head almost casually. Four of them were charging the handcar in a stumbling way — one of them in the process of finding a handgrip.

The gunslinger let go of the handle and drew again, with the same sleepy casual motion. He shot the lead mutant in the head. The mutant made a sighing, sobbing noise and began to grin. Its hands were limp and fishlike, dead; the fingers clove to one another like the fingers of a glove long immersed in drying mud.

One of these corpse-hands found the boy's foot and began to pull.

The boy shrieked aloud in the granite womb.

The gunslinger shot the mutant in the chest. It began to slobber through the grin. Jake was going off the side. The gunslinger caught one of his arms and was almost pulled off balance himself. The thing was amazingly strong. The gunslinger put another bullet in the mutant's head. One eye went out like a candle. Still it pulled. They engaged in a silent tug of war for Jake's jerking, wriggling body. They yanked on him like a wishbone.

The handcar was slowing down. The others began to close in — the lame, the halt, the blind. Perhaps they only looked for a Jesus to heal them, to raise them Lazarus-like from the darkness.

It's the end for the boy, the gunslinger thought with perfect coldness. This is the end he meant. Let go and pump or hold on and be buried. The end for the boy.

He gave a tremendous yank on the boy's arm and shot the mutant in the belly. For one frozen moment its grip grew even tighter and Jake began to slide off the edge again. Then the dead mud-hands loosened, and the Slow Mutie fell on its face between the tracks behind the slowing handcar, still grinning.

"I thought you'd leave me," the boy was sobbing. "I thought … I thought.

…"

“Hold onto my belt,” the gunslinger said. “Hold on just as tight as you can.”

The hand worked into his belt and clutched there; the boy was breathing in great convulsive, silent gasps.

The gunslinger began to pump steadily again, and the handcar picked up speed.

The Slow Mutants fell back a step and watched them go with faces hardly human (or pathetically so), faces that generated the weak phosphorescence common to those weird deep-sea fishes that live under incredible black pressure, faces that held no anger or hate on their senseless orbs, but only what seemed to be a semiconscious, idiot regret.

“They’re thinning,” the gunslinger said. The drawn-up muscles of his lower belly and privates relaxed the smallest bit. “They’re —”

The Slow Mutants had put rocks across the track. The way was blocked. It had been a quick, poor job, perhaps the work of only a minute to clear, but they were stopped. And someone would have to get down and move them. The boy moaned and shuddered closer to the gunslinger. The gunslinger let go of the handle and the handcar coasted noiselessly to the rocks, where it thumped to rest.

The Slow Mutants began to close in again, almost casually, almost as if they had been passing by, lost in a dream of darkness, and had found someone of whom to ask directions. A street-corner congregation of the damned beneath the ancient rock.

“Are they going to get us?” The boy asked calmly.

“No. Be quiet a second.”

He looked at the rocks. The mutants were weak, of course, and had not been able to drag any of the boulders to block their way. Only small rocks. Only enough to stop them, to make someone get down.

“Get down,” the gunslinger said. “You’ll have to move them. I’ll cover you.

“No,” the boy whispered. “Please.”

“I can’t give you a gun and I can’t move the rocks and shoot too. You have to get down.”

Jake’s eyes rolled terribly; for a moment his body shuddered in tune with the turnings of his mind, and then he wriggled over the side and began to throw rocks to the right and the left madly, not looking.

The gunslinger drew and waited.

Two of them, lurching rather than walking, went for the boy with arms like dough. The guns did their work, stitching the darkness with red-white lances of light that pushed needles of pain into the gunslinger’s eyes. The boy screamed and continued to throw away rocks. Witch-glow leaped and danced. Hard to see, now, that was the worst. Everything had gone to shadows.

One of them, glowing hardly at all, suddenly reached for the boy with rubber boogeyman arms. Eyes that ate up half the mutie’s head rolled wetly.

Jake screamed again and turned to struggle.

The gunslinger fired without allowing himself to think, before his spotty vision could betray his hands into a terrible quiver; the two heads were only inches apart. It was the mutie who fell, slitheringly.

Jake threw rocks wildly. The mutants milled just outside the invisible line of trespass, closing a little at a time, now very close. Others had caught up, swelling their number.

“All right,” the gunslinger said. “Get on. Quick.”

When the boy moved, the mutants came at them. Jake was over the side and scrambling to his feet; the gunslinger was already pumping

again, all out. Both guns were holstered now. They must run.

Strange hands slapped the metal plane of the car's surface. The boy was holding his belt with both hands now, his face pressed tightly into the small of the gunslinger's back.

A group of them ran onto the tracks, their faces full of that mindless, casual anticipation. The gunslinger was pumped full of adrenalin; the car was flying along the tracks into the darkness. They struck the four or five pitiful hulks full force. They flew like rotten bananas struck from the stem.

On and on, into the soundless, flying, banshee darkness.

After an age, the boy raised his face into the made wind, dreading and yet needing to know. The ghost of gunflashes still lingered on his retinas. There was nothing to see but the darkness and nothing to hear but the rumble of the river.

"They're gone," the boy said, suddenly fearing an end to the tracks in the darkness, and the wounding crash as they jumped the rails and plunged to twisted ruin. He had ridden in cars; once his humorless father had driven at ninety on the New Jersey Turnpike and had been stopped. But he had never ridden like this, with the wind and the blindness and the terrors behind and ahead, with the sound of the river like a chuckling voice — the voice of the man in black. The gunslinger's arms were pistons in a lunatic human factory.

"They're gone," the boy said timidly, the words ripped from his mouth by the wind. "You can slow down now. We left them behind."

But the gunslinger did not hear. They careened onward into the strange dark.

They went on three periods of waking and sleeping without incident.

During the fourth period of waking (halfway through? three-quarters? they didn't know — only that they weren't tired enough yet to stop)

there was a sharp thump beneath them, the handcar swayed, and their bodies immediately leaned to the right with gravity as the rails took a gradual turn to the left.

There was a light ahead — a glow so faint and alien that it seemed at first to be a totally new element, neither earth, air, fire, or water. It had no color and could only be discerned by the fact that they had regained their hands and faces in a dimension beyond that of touch. Their eyes had become so light-sensitive that they noticed the glow over five miles before they approached it.

“The end,” the boy said tightly. “It’s the end.”

“No.” The gunslinger spoke with odd assurance. “It isn’t.”

And it was not. They reached light but not day.

As they approached the source of the glow, they saw for the first time that the rock wall to the left had fallen away and their tracks had been joined by others which crossed in a complex spider web. The light laid them in burnished vectors.

On some of them there were dark boxcars, passenger coaches, a stage that had been adapted to rails. They made the gunslinger nervous, like ghost galleons trapped in an underground Sargasso.

The light grew stronger, hurting their eyes a little, but growing slowly enough to allow them to adapt. They came from dark to light like divers coming up from deep fathoms in slow stages.

Ahead, drawing nearer, was a huge hangar stretching up into the dark. Cut into it, showing yellow squares of light, were a series of perhaps twenty-four entranceways, growing from the size of toy windows to a height of twenty feet as they drew closer. They passed inside through one of the middle ways. Written above were a series of characters, in various languages, the gunslinger presumed. He was astounded to find that he could read the last one; it was an

ancient root of the High Speech itself and said: TRACK 10 TO SURFACE AND POINTS WEST

The light inside was brighter; the tracks met and merged through a series of switchings. Here some of the traffic lanterns still worked, flashing eternal reds and greens and ambers.

They rolled between rising stone piers caked black with the passage of thousands of vehicles, and then they were in some kind of central terminal. The gunslinger let the handcar coast slowly to a stop, and they peered around.

“It’s like the subway,” the boy said.

“Subway?”

“Never mind.”

The boy climbed up and onto the hard cement. They looked at silent, deserted booths where newspapers and books had once been vended; an ancient bootery; a weapon shop (the gunslinger, with a sudden burst of excitement, saw revolvers and rifles; closer inspection showed that their barrels had been filled with lead; he did, however, pick out a bow, which he slung over his back, and a quiver of almost useless, badly weighted arrows); a women’s apparel shop.

Somewhere a converter was turning the air over and over, as it had for thousands of years — but perhaps not for much longer. It had a grating noise somewhere in the middle of its cycle which served to remind that perpetual motion, even under strictly controlled conditions, is still a fool’s dream. The air had a mechanized taste. Their shoes made flat echoes.

The boy cried out: “Hey! Hey….”

The gunslinger turned around and went to him. The boy was standing, transfixed, at the book stall. Inside, sprawled in the far

corner, was a mummy. The mummy was wearing a blue uniform with gold piping — a trainman's uniform by the look.

There was an ancient, perfectly preserved newspaper on the mummy's lap, which crumbled to dust when the gunslinger attempted to look at it. The mummy's face was like an old, shriveled apple. Cautiously, the gunslinger touched the cheek.

There was a small puff of dust, and they looked through the cheek and into the mummy's mouth. A gold tooth twinkled.

"Gas," the gunslinger murmured. "They used to be able to make a gas that would do this."

"They fought wars with it," the boy said darkly.

"Yes."

There were other mummies, not a great many, but a few. They were all wearing blue and gold ornamental uniforms. The gunslinger supposed that the gas had been used when the place was empty of all incoming and outgoing traffic. Perhaps, in some dim day, the station had been a military objective of some long-gone army and cause.

The thought depressed him.

"We had better go on," he said, and started toward Track 10 and the handcar again. But the boy stood rebelliously behind him.

"Not going."

The gunslinger turned back, surprised.

The boy's face was twisted and trembling. "You won't get what you want until I'm dead. I'll take my chances by myself."

The gunslinger nodded noncommittally, hating himself. "Okay." He turned around and walked across to the stone piers and leaped

easily down onto the handcar.

“You made a deal!” The boy screamed after him. “I know you did!”

The gunslinger, not replying, carefully put the bow in front of the T-post rising out of the handcar’s floor, out of harm’s way.

The boy’s fists were clenched, his features drawn in agony.

How easily you bluff this young boy, the gunslinger told himself dryly. Again and again his intuition has led him to this point, and again and again you have led him on by the nose — after all, he has no friends but you.

In a sudden, simple thought (almost a vision) it came to him that all he had to do was give it over, turn around, take the boy with him, make him the center of a new force. The Tower did not have to be obtained in this humiliating, nose-rubbing way. Let it come after the boy had a growth of years, when the two of them could cast the man in black aside like a cheap wind-up toy.

Surely, he thought cynically. Surely.

He knew with sudden coldness that going backward would mean death for both of them — death or worse: entombment with the living dead behind them. Decay of all the faculties. With, perhaps, the guns of his father living long after both of them, kept in rotten splendor as totems not unlike the unforgotten gas pump.

Show some guts, he told himself falsely.

He reached for the handle and began to pump it. The handcar moved away from the stone piers.

The boy screamed: “Wait!” And began running on the diagonal, toward where the handcar would emerge toward the darkness ahead. The gunslinger had an impulse to speed up, to leave the boy alone yet at least with an uncertainty.

Instead, he caught him as he leaped. The heart beneath the thin shirt thrummed and fluttered as Jake clung to him. It was like the beat of a chicken's heart.

It was very close now.

The sound of the river had become very loud, filling even their dreams with its steady thunder. The gunslinger, more as a whim than anything else, let the boy pump them ahead while he shot a number of arrows into the dark, tethered by fine white lengths of thread.

The bow was very bad, incredibly preserved but with a terrible pull and aim despite that, and the gunslinger knew that very little would improve it. Even re-stringing would not help the tired wood. The arrows would not fly far into the dark, but the last one he sent out came back wet and slick. The gunslinger only shrugged when the boy asked him how far, but privately he didn't think the arrow could have traveled more than a hundred yards from the rotted bow — and lucky to get that.

And still the sound grew louder.

During the third waking period after the station, a spectral radiance began to grow again. They had entered a long tunnel of some weird phosphorescent rock, and the wet walls glittered and twinkled with thousands of minute starbursts.

They saw things in a kind of eerie, horror-house surreality.

The brute sound of the river was channeled to them by the confining rock, magnified in its own natural amplifier. Yet the sound remained oddly constant, even as they approached the crossing point the gunslinger was sure lay ahead, because the walls were widening, drawing back. The angle of their ascent became more pronounced.

The tracks arrowed straight ahead in the new light. To the gunslinger they looked like the captive tubes of swamp gas sometimes sold for a pretty at the Feast of Joseph fair-time; to the boy they looked like

endless streamers of neon tubing. But in its glow they could both see that the rock that had enclosed them so long ended up ahead in ragged twin peninsulas that pointed toward a gulf of darkness ahead —the chasm over the river.

The tracks continued out and over the unknowable drop, supported by a trestle aeons old. And beyond, what seemed an incredible distance, was a tiny pinprick of light; not phosphorescence or fluorescence, but the hard, true light of day.

It was as tiny as a needle-prick in a dark cloth, yet weighted with frightful meaning.

“Stop,” the boy said. “Stop for a minute. Please.”

Unquestioning, the gunslinger let the handcar coast to a rest. The sound of the river was a steady, booming roar, coming from beneath and ahead. The artificial glow from the wet rock was suddenly hateful. For the first time he felt a claustrophobic hand touch him, and the urge to get out, to get free of this living burial, was strong and nearly undeniable.

“We’ll go through,” the boy said. “Is that what he wants? For us to drive the handcar out over … that … and fall down?”

The gunslinger knew it was not but said: “I don’t know what he wants.”

“We’re close now. Can’t we walk?”

They got down and approached the lip of the drop carefully. The stone beneath their feet continued to rise until, with a sudden, angling drop, the floor fell away from the tracks and the tracks continued alone, across blackness.

The gunslinger dropped to his knees and peered down. He could dimly make out a complex, nearly incredible webwork of steel girders

and struts, disappearing down toward the roar of the river, all in support of the graceful arch of the tracks across the void.

In his mind's eye he could imagine the work of time and water on the steel, in deadly tandem. How much support was left? Little? Hardly any? None? He suddenly saw the face of the mummy again, and the way the flesh, seemingly solid, had crumbled effortlessly to powder at the bare touch of his finger.

"We'll walk," the gunslinger said.

He half expected the boy to balk again, but he preceded the gunslinger calmly out onto the rails, crossing on the welded steel slats calmly, with sure feet.

The gunslinger followed him, ready to catch him if Jake should put foot wrong.

They left the handcar behind them and walked precariously out over darkness.

The gunslinger felt a fine slick of sweat cover his skin. The trestle was rotten, very rotten. It thrummed beneath his feet with the heady motion of the river far beneath, swaying a little on unseen guy wires. We're acrobats, he thought. Look, mother, no net. I'm flying. He knelt once and examined the crossties they were walking on. They were caked and pitted with rust (he could feel the reason on his face; fresh air, the friend of corruption: very close to the surface now), and a strong blow of the fist made the metal quiver sickly.

Once he heard a warning groan beneath his feet and felt the steel settle preparatory to giving way, but he had already moved on.

The boy, of course, was over a hundred pounds lighter and safe enough, unless the going became progressively worse.

Behind them, the handcar had melted into the general gloom. The stone pier on the left extended out perhaps twenty feet. Further than

the one on the right, but this was also left behind and they were alone over the gulf.

At first it seemed that the tiny prick of daylight remained mockingly constant (perhaps drawing away from them at the exact pace they approached it — that would be wonderful magic indeed), but gradually the gunslinger realized that it was widening, becoming more defined. They were still below it, but the tracks were still rising.

The boy gave a surprised grunt and suddenly lurched to the side, arms pinwheeling in slow, wide revolutions. It seemed that he tottered on the brink for a very long time indeed before stepping forward again.

“It almost went on me,” he said softly, without emotion. “Step over.”

The gunslinger did so. The crosstie the boy had stepped on had given way almost entirely and flopped downward lazily, swinging easily on a disintegrating rivet, like a shutter on a haunted window.

Upward, still upward. It was a nightmare walk and so seemed to go on much longer than it did; the air itself seemed to thicken and become like taffy, and the gunslinger felt as if he might be swimming rather than walking. Again and again his mind tried to turn itself to thoughtful, lunatic consideration of the awful space between this trestle and the river below. His brain viewed it in spectacular detail, and how it would be: The scream of twisting metal, the lurch as his body slid off to the side, the grabbing for nonexistent handholds with the fingers, the swift rattle of bootheels on treacherous, rotted steel — and then down, turning over and over, the warm spray in his crotch as his bladder let go, the rush of wind against his face, rippling his hair up in cartoon fright, pulling his eyelids back, the dark water rushing to meet him, faster, outstripping even his own scream —

Metal screamed beneath him and he stepped past it unhurriedly, shifting his weight, not thinking of the drop, or of how far they had come, or of how far was left. Not thinking that the boy was

expendable and that the sale of his honor was now, at last, nearly negotiated.

“Three ties out here,” the boy said coolly. “I’m going to jump. Here! Here!”

The gunslinger saw him silhouetted for a moment against the daylight, an awkward, hunched spread-eagle. He landed and the whole edifice swayed drunkenly.

Metal beneath them protested and something far below fell, first with a crash, then with the sound of deep water.

“Are you over?” The gunslinger asked.

“Yes,” the boy said remotely, “but it’s very rotten. I don’t think it will hold you. Me, but not you. Go back now. Go back now and leave me alone.”

His voice was hysterical, cold but hysterical.

The gunslinger stepped over the break. One large step did it. The boy was shuddering helplessly. “Go back. I don’t want you to kill me.”

“For Christ’s sake, walk,” the gunslinger said roughly. ”It’s going to fall down.”

The boy walked drunkenly now, his hands held out shudderingly before him, fingers splayed.

They went up.

Yes, it was much more rotten now. There were frequent breaks of one, two, even three ties, and the gunslinger expected again and again that they would find the long empty space between rails that would either force them back or make them walk on the rails themselves, balanced giddily over the chasm.

He kept his eyes fixed on the daylight.

The glow had taken on a color — blue — and as it came closer it became softer, paling the radiance of the phosphor as it mixed with it. Fifty yards or a hundred? He could not say.

They walked, and now he looked at his feet, crossing from tie to tie. When he looked again, the glow had grown to a hole, and it was not a light but a way out. They were almost there.

Thirty yards, yes. Ninety short feet. It could be done. Perhaps they would have the man in black yet. Perhaps, in the bright sunlight the evil flowers in his mind would shrivel and anything would be possible.

The sunlight was blocked out.

He looked up, startled, staring, and saw a silhouette filling the light, eating it up, allowing only chinks of mocking blue around the outline of shoulders, the fork of crotch.

“Hello, boys!”

The man in black’s voice echoed to them, amplified in this natural throat of stone, the sarcasm taking on mighty overtones. Blindly, the gunslinger sought the jawbone, but it was gone, lost somewhere, used up.

He laughed above them and the sound crashed around them, reverberating like surf in a filling cave. The boy screamed and tottered, a windmill again, arms gyrating through the scant air.

Metal ripped and sloughed beneath them; the rails canted through a slow and dreamy twisting. The boy plunged, and one hand flew up like a gull in the darkness, up, up, and then he hung over the pit; he dangled there, his dark eyes staring up at the gunslinger in final blind lost knowledge.

“Help me.”

Booming, racketing: “Come now, gunslinger. Or catch me never!”

All chips on the table. Every card up but one. The boy dangled, a living Tarot card, the hanged man, the Phoenician sailor, innocent lost and barely above the wave of a stygian sea.

Wait then, wait awhile.

“Do I go?” The voice so loud, he makes it hard to think, the power to cloud men’s minds… .

Don’t make it bad, take a sad song and make it better… . “Help me.”

The trestle had begun to twist further, screaming, pulling loose from itself, giving —“Then I shall leave you.”

“No!”

His legs carried him in a sudden leap through the entropy that held him, above the dangling boy, into a skidding, plunging rush toward the light that offered, the Tower frozen on the retina of his mind’s eye in a black frieze, suddenly silence, the silhouette gone, even the beat of his heart gone as the trestle settled further, beginning its final slow dance to the depths, tearing loose, his hand finding the rocky, lighted lip of damnation; and behind him, in the dreadful silence, the boy spoke from too far beneath him.

“Go then. There are other worlds than these.”

It tore away from him, the whole weight of it; and as he pulled himself up and through to the light and the breeze and the reality of a new karma (we all shine on), he twisted his head back, for a moment in his agony striving to be Janus—

but there was nothing, only plummeting silence, for the boy made no sound.

Then he was up, pulling his legs through onto the rocky escarpment that looked toward a grassy plain at the descending foot, toward

where the man in black stood spread-legged, with arms crossed.

The gunslinger stood drunkenly, pallid as a ghost, eyes huge and swimming beneath his forehead, shirt smeared with the white dust of his final, lunging crawl. It came to him that he would always flee murder. It came to him that there would be further degradations of the spirit ahead that might make this one seem infinitesimal, and yet he would still flee it, down corridors and through cities, from bed to bed; he would flee the boy's face and try to bury it in cunts or even in further destruction, only to enter one final room and find it looking at him over a candle flame. He had become the boy; the boy had become him. He was a wurderlak, lycanthropus of his own making, and in deep dreams he would become the boy and speak strange tongues.

This is death. Is it? Is it?

He walked slowly, drunkenly down the rocky hill toward where the man in black waited. Here the tracks had been worn away, under the sun of reason, and it was as if they had never been.

The man in black pushed his hood away with the backs of both hands, laughing.

"So!" he cried. "Not an end, but the end of the beginning, eh? You progress, gunslinger! You progress! Oh, how I admire you!"

The gunslinger drew with blinding speed and fired twelve times. The gunflashes dimmed the sun itself, and the pounding of the explosions slammed back from the rock-faced escarpments behind them.

"Now," the man in black said, laughing. "Oh, now. We make great magic together, you and I. You kill me no more than you kill yourself."

He withdrew, walking backwards, facing the gunslinger, grinning. "Come. Come.

Come.”

The gunslinger followed him in broken boots to the place of counseling.