whispering sound changed to loud contention. It was as if we were being rebuked for our
discovery, and it was frightening. Nobody tells you about the pathetic fallacy until you're
in college ... and even then I noticed that nobody but the total dorks completely believed
it was a fallacy.

Chris jumped over the side of the washout, his hair already soaked and clinging to his
head. I followed. Vern and Teddy came close behind, but Chris and I were first to reach
the body of Ray Brower. He was face down. Chris looked into my eyes, his face set and
stern - an adult's face. I nodded slightly, as if he had spoken aloud.

I think he was down here and relatively intact instead of up there between the rails and
completely mangled because he was trying to get out of the way when the train hit him,
knocking him head over heels. He had landed with his head pointed towards the tracks,
arms over his head like a diver about to execute. He had landed in this boggy cup of land
that was becoming a small swamp. His hair was a dark reddish colour. The moisture in
the air had made it curt slightly at the ends. There was blood in it, but not a great deal, not
a gross-out amount. The ants were grosser. He was wearing a solid colour dark green tee-
shirt and bluejeans. His feet were bare, and a few feet behind him, caught in that
blackberry brambles, I saw a pair of filthy low-topped Keds. For a moment I was puzzled
- why was he here and his tennies there... Then I realized, and the realization was like a
dirty punch below the belt. My wife, my kids, my friends - they all think that having an
imagination like mine must be quite nice; aside from making all this dough, I can have a
little mind-movie whenever things get dull. Mostly they're right But every now and then it
turns around and bites the shit out of you with these long teeth, teeth that have been filed
to points like the teeth of a cannibal. You see things you'd just as soon not see, things that
keep you awake until first light. I saw one of those things now, saw it with absolute
clarity and certainty. He had been knocked spang out of his Keds. The train had knocked
him out of his Keds just as it had knocked the life out of his body.

That finally rammed it all the way home for me. The kid was dead. The kid wasn't
sick, the kid wasn't sleeping. The kid wasn't going to get up in the morning anymore or
get the runs from eating too many apples or catch poison ivy or wear out the eraser on the
end of his Ticonderoga No 2 during a hard math test The kid was dead; stone dead. The
kid was never going to go out bottling with his friends in the spring, gunnysack over his
shoulder to pick up the returnables the retreating snow uncovered The kid wasn't going to
wake up at two o'clock a.m. on the morning of 1 November this year, run to the
bathroom, and vomit up a big glurt of cheap Halloween candy. The kid wasn't going to
pull a single girl's braid in home room. The kid wasn't going to give a bloody nose, or get
one. The kid was can't, don't, won't, never, shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't. He was the side
of the battery where the terminal says NEG. The fuse you have to put a penny in. The
wastebasket by the teacher's desk, which always smells of wood-shavings from the
sharpener and dead orange-peels from lunch. The haunted house outside of town where
the windows are crashed out, the NO TRESPASSING signs whipped away across the
fields, the attic full of bats, the cellar full of worms. The kid was dead, mister, ma'am,
young sir, little miss. I could go on all day and never get it right about the distance
between his bare feet on the ground and his dirty Keds hanging in the bushes. It was
thirty-plus inches, it was a googol of light-years. The kid was disconnected from his Keds
beyond all hope of reconciliation. He was dead.

We turned him face up into the pouring rain, the lightning, the steady crack of thunder.

There were ants and bugs all over his face and neck. They ran briskly in and out of the
round collar of his tee-shirt. His eyes were open, but terrifyingly out of sync - one was
rolled back so far that we could see only a tiny arc of pupil; the other stared straight up
into the storm. There was a dried froth of blood above his mouth and on his chin - from a
bloody nose, I thought - and the right side of his face was lacerated and darkly bruised.
Still, I thought, he didn't really look bad. I had once walked into a door my brother Dennis
was shoving open, came off with bruises even worse than this kid's, plus the bloody nose,
and still had two helpings of everything for supper after it happened.

Teddy and Vern stood behind us and if there had been any sight at all left in that one
upward-staring eye, I suppose we would have looked to Ray Brower like pallbearers in a
horror movie.

A beetle came out of his mouth, trekked across his fuzzless cheek, stepped onto a nettle, and was gone.

'D'joo see that?' Teddy asked in a high, strange, fainting voice. 'I bet he's fuckin' fulla bugs! I bet his brains're-

'Shit up, Teddy,' Chris said, and Teddy did, looking relieved.

Lightning forked blue across the sky, making the boy's single eye light up. You could almost believe he was glad to be found, and found by boys his own age. His torso had swelled up and there was a faint gassy odour about him, like the smell of old farts.

I turned away, sure I was going to be sick, but my stomach was dry, hard, steady. I suddenly rammed two fingers down my throat, trying to make myself heave, needing to do it, as if I could sick it up and get rid of it. But my stomach only hitched a little and then was steady again.

The roaring downpour and the accompanying thunder had completely covered the sound of cars approaching along the Back Harlow Road, which lay bare yards beyond this boggy tangle. It likewise covered the crackle-crunch of the underbrush as they blundered through it from the dead end where they had parked.

And the first we knew of them was Ace Merrill's voice raised above the tumult of the storm, saying: 'Well what the fuck do you know about this?'

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We all jumped like we had been goosed and Vern cried out -he admitted later that he thought, for just a second, that the voice had come from the dead boy.

On the far side of the boggy patch, where the woods took up again, masking the butt end of the road, Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers stood together, half-obscured by a pouring grey curtain of rain. They were both wearing red nylon high school jackets, the kind you can buy in the office if you're a regular student, the same kind they give away free to varsity sports players. Their da haircuts had been plastered back against their skulls and a mixture of rainwater and Vitalis ran down their cheeks like ersatz tears.

'Sumbitch!' Eyeball said. That's my little brother!

Chris was staring at Eyeball with his mouth open. His shirt, wet, limp and dark, was still tied around his skinny middle. His pack, stained a darker green by the rain, was hanging against his naked shoulderblades.

'You get away, Rich,' he said in a trembling voice. 'We found him. We got dibs.'

'Fuck your dibs. We're gonna report 'im,'

'No you're not,' I said. I was suddenly furious with them, turning up this way at the last minute. If we'd thought about it, we'd have known something just like this was going to happen ... but this was one time, somehow, that the older, bigger kids weren't going to steal it - to take something they wanted as if by divine right, as if their easy way was the right way, the only way. They had come in cars -I think that was what made me angriest They had come in cars. 'There's four of us, Eyeball. You just try.'

'Oh, we'll try, don't worry,' Eyeball said, and the trees shook behind him and Ace, Charlie Hogan and Vern's brother Billy stepped through them, cursing and wiping water out of their eyes. I felt a lead ball drop into my belly. It grew bigger as Jack Mudgett and Fuzzy Brackowicz stepped out behind Charlie and Billy.

'Here we all are,' Ace said, grinning. 'So you just -'