

## The Mailbox

That rusty old mailbox means something. You see a sad piece of scrap, nailed to a post among the weeds, leaning into the wind. But thirty years ago it was special to me. And maybe I'm scrap myself. I'm standing in the same weeds, leaning into the same wind, out behind the hulking pale gray building we always called the shop. A middle-aged guy in work clothes, alone in the world and staring at cast-off tires and the useless lengths of pipe. But I want that old mailbox, where our uncle would leave gifts for us. I want to remember it as it was when the paint was fresh. Tomorrow I will come with my pickup and claim it. It needs painting. And that much, at least, will not be gone with this land.

There is nothing special about me, and you should know it from the start. I am not rich or talented. James Martin Geister is the brightest light of no one's life. I love, I have loved, I believe I am loved. And one summer in this orchard I saw something strange, terrible, haunting and perfectly normal. It changed my life. I went on, kept the land with my father and grandfather, and carried within me a faded knot of grief and joy and amazement, as I simply let the time go by.

Time just rolls on down the line, so time is the matter before us, or memory and what it makes of a man and leaves of him as it gathers up the chips of wood and broken glass that time will always make of life.

I turn and walk to the front of the shop, stand and look for a while at the back of my parents' farmhouse, a hundred feet away on a slight rise, shaded by thick trees. It's empty and I can imagine seeing their ghosts rising from it toward the first cloud on the road to Paradise. Except that my parents are alive, both fine and I hope to God they're happy. They drove out from from here an hour ago, following a moving van down the road to their retirement. My heart is just heavy, deep in memory and on the verge of weeping.

I have never been this much alone in my life. I wish that someone was with me, to hear the sound of my shoes scuffing on the packed dirt and gravel, and in my breathing the thin and urgent whisper of my prayer. It's something about Jesus and mercy but

nothing explain my loneliness in this still expanse of space. More will surely be revealed. It all depends on three months I lived through thirty years ago. I was eleven and my brother Bo was eight and the summer was just beginning. Time stretched out ahead of us as long and deep as the Friant-Kern Canal. We had so much summer that it almost seemed too much; too much world in every direction, and countless days stretched through dry haze into September.

I believe all of my life has been the ripples spreading out from that time and I think about that summer every day. I listen in solitude and it comes – vaguely, softly – like a trumpet on the radio, playing in another room. But in all my forty years, there was always family with me here, a dog or more than one to run from tree to tree elated, as though she had not sniffed each trunk a thousand times before. Ranging out, she would keep her people in sight. And if we whistled, she would quickly come along.

I remember that Grandpa's closet smelled of mothballs and shoe polish. I hid there, waiting for my brother to find me. I tried to keep my breathing shallow in the airless space with its heavy grandfather smells, and strained to hear if Bo might holler *Marty! Olly olly oxen free!* down in the back yard. Finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I tumbled out onto the bedroom floor, and lay panting on grandma's brown and gray hooked rug.

I was bored, but that's how summer always started. It took days to find something to do, and the cadence of our freedom. How could two kids in the country know what to do with so much sudden liberty? I just kept still a little while and listened to life beating down on the house and land. There had to be something we could do for fun.

Now I cross a plank bridge over the irrigation ditch and turn to face the lowering sun, toward another house where I expect to live a long, long time. The land has been divided, parts sold off, one part left to me on which to live. So I can still call part of this orchard my own, and this hard dirt trail still takes me home. All the land behind me — the shop, my parents' house, all all the orchard east of this ditch — on that, the escrow will close in two days. The sun is nearly down on everything and everyone I love have packed their things and gone.

And soon I come to the crossing, with rust-brown spikes and crossties running on the mounded ground, and stems of oat grass volunteering at the verge. Two white crosses stand by the right-of-way. Except for the railroad and the gap in the orchards it creates, there is nothing around me but those crosses and acre after acre of fruit trees.

Trees make a good life for people with simple dreams, and my family has made a living here. There is always work to do, and I get up every day and do my share and take care of the trees and the fruit. Once I stood with my little brother – we held hands – and watched men set these two large crosses here. I have walked past these crosses, ridden and driven and run past them, thousands of times in all the intervening years.



The Mailbox, a draft scene from a novel in process  
by [Kyle Kimberlin](#), is licensed under a [Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).

Draft 2012-06-10