Time to Think
I looked down from my precarious perch among the branches of the old ash I loved so dearly and thought to myself, ‘this probably wasn’t such a good idea’. The dog, a black spotted pit-bull was snapping at my toes with such anger I actually felt guilty. Had I not thrown a rock at the poor mutt, it wouldn’t have had to go through this. But hey, you never know when a rock will come out of nowhere and hit you upside the head. Trust me, I’d know, and I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s best to have a head not worth caring about. You bite the tail, it bites back.

Awhile later, the damn dog wondered off. I stayed there, staring at the clouds rolling by at the speed of life- a car, a dog, a cross. I sat there, staring up, thinking, waiting for the call that would soon come. I had time, time to think, time to waste.

When I was younger, I used to spend my summer playing baseball, playing with friends, playing with chalk. I used to draw forests on the ground around me, transform a canvas of faded cement into a whole new world. The world was my painting, and I could do whatever I wanted with it. But times change, and people change. I am not the toddler I used to be. I will never again play baseball and the world is not my artwork. I am just a small, insignificant part of a painting that in itself is irrelevant.

Growing up is never easy, and once you’ve grown up, you want to do it all again. This was my conclusion after a late summer afternoon spent thinking perched in my favorite, old ash tree. I’ve done a lot of growing up in my life. I didn’t like one second of it, yet I would do it all again for a morsel of the past. I spent most of my time like this, hiding in one of my various hideouts, alone, thinking. I hated being around others, even those who wanted to be around me. The sad looks, pitying glances, guilty smiles. I was done with it, and never wanted to see any of them again. The more I learned about the world and its inhabitants, the more I realized that, more
often than not, when no one else is watching, people do the wrong thing. No one understands the world, or their purpose in it. It’s kind of sad… and pathetic.

“SETH!!” my mom shouted. Dinner time. I scrambled down the Ash (literally scrambling, the dead tree’s bark cracked under my weight), and walked home slowly, just to anger her. I left my baseball cap in the tree; I knew I would be back. Just like every other night. Dinners with the three of us were hell. I don’t say this because they were miserable, or was the worst part of my entire existence, but because whenever I look at them, I feel a rage boil down to my core that was hotter than the deepest pits of hell. I went inside, leaving my shoes on, and sat in my chair, which was next to my mom’s and across from his. I hated him, despised him with absolutely every part of my body. He tried to be a replacement, but it wasn’t enough. Nothing would ever be enough. He didn’t stand a chance from the start. I lie in bed at night, close my eyes, and actively hate his existence.

Keeping my eyes directly fixed upon my burger, I ate. I chewed slowly, to give myself an excuse to not talk. Eventually, and somewhat hesitantly, my mom murmured, “..Seth?”. I looked up, looked into her eyes. There it was. The always present, never ending look of guilt. The thing was, she deserved to feel guilty. But it wasn’t enough. “Won’t you ever understand Mom, that I don’t want to talk to you? That I never will? I know you feel obliged to try, but stop”. I was able to remain quiet and controlled, but I knew I could not continue to do so. He was there, and the moment this flicked through my thoughts, I exploded. “What do you even want me to do? Forgive you? If it weren’t for you, Dad would still be alive. My life is your fault. Everything is your fault.” If I could ever run, never look back and just go, I would. And I wouldn’t look back. I would grab my hat, and go someplace where no one knew anything about me.
I looked up, saw the disappointed look on his face, then the tears on hers, and said “you deserve to cry”. I turned, and without hesitation, walked out the door and into the wild, into the world where I was allowed to be me. I climbed back up my thinking tree, back to my spot, my home, and put on my hat.

For a while, I just sat, and listened to the world around me. The gentle crickets, the creaking of the old, dead branches in the wind, and the piercing, ugly protests of a car’s horn. I could imagine what it was like, how scary it must have been for my dad. That day, the day before my birthday, we were playing baseball under the same tree I was in now. We used to toss the ball back and forth for hours, sometimes in silence, sometimes discussing the meaning of life. My mom called from the house to my dad, telling him she forgot birthday candles, asking him to pick some up. My dad winked at me, then turned to the house, and in a quiet, pitiful voice asked, “five more minutes, pleaseee?” She consented. He always got what he wanted from her, in the exact way that I didn’t. My dad had a way with people, so much so that I didn’t know a person who didn’t like him. I thought back to how he looked that night. He had on what he would call his “cool dad jeans”, with simple navy-blue t-shirt on top, a Seattle Mariners hat on his head and a pencil that was always tucked behind his ear. As it began to darken to point where we couldn’t see anymore, my father walked up to me and put his hat on my head. “Take care of that, birthday boy, and I’ll be right back to make sure you haven’t lost it yet”. I gave him a hug, and sat below my tree. My dad gave me a baseball cap and an understanding of life. My mom gave me a dead dad.

After he left, I ran inside, where I was soon scooted off to bed. It was late, and my mom wanted me asleep. I protested, telling her I had to wait up to give Dad his hat back. She offered
to return it for me, but I wouldn’t let her. I went to sleep, cuddled against the wall, hat in hand and a smile on my face.

I was awoken by knocking downstairs, but thought nothing of it. Turns out, that knock mattered a lot more than I thought. The newspapers would say, that “on August 3rd at 10:30, John Polski was killed when he was hit by a drunk driver while driving to the grocery store”. Every night for the last 4 years, since that happened, I would dream the same dream. It would start black, and then, with the blaring of a honk, I was in the middle of the road, cars zooming around me. The world would shatter, and I would see crimson, red and blue flashing lights, and my dad’s face, smashed and deformed, bleeding out into an old baseball cap.

Since it happened, I have never been the same. I see life the way it is, in all of its glory. Life is a monster, and all you can do is try not to get obliterated. Nothing matters. It has become apparent to me that my only purpose in life is to remember my dad, and have others remember me so that he can continue to exist.

As I sit and reminisce, I can hear the quiet murmurings of my mother and him inside the house. I hate her, nearly as much as I hate him. My father is dead. There is no one like him on earth, and it is disgusting to even try to replace him. I look at my house, perched on the hill, deck protruding like a broken leg. I can see my mother and him, outlines of shadow on the floor to ceiling windows. I can hear them faintly through the screen door that’s always open in the summer. Eventually, their voices stop and the lights turn off. They know I will let myself in when I am ready. The same way I have done countless times before. And eventually, I do, submissive, tail between my legs, ready to wake up in the morning and repeat the process all over again. It all seems so miserable, and so endless.
I walk up to my room, close the door behind me, and sit, quietly on my floor. For just a moment I allow myself to wallow in self-pity, to wish someone else had my life. I took off my shoes, and put on my pajamas. I curled up in my bed, against the wall, and tried to clear my thoughts. I felt the familiar surge of anger begin to race through my veins, faster than blood, before it reached my brain I sat up. Not tonight. Tonight I would not be angry. Not four years after my dad’s death. Not the day before my birthday.

I woke up, and immediately could tell it was not yet daybreak. I have always been a light sleeper, and the frantic footsteps below were not subtle. I lay there, eyes open, staring at the ceiling, listening. I could hear the occasional car on the street passing by and taste a warm summer breeze though my open window. Rapid talking downstairs, he was telling someone our address. I got up, and looked out my window, staring down at my familiar tree and its swing that I don’t use anymore. I miss my dad. I miss the time we used to spend together, under that giant ash tree. I looked at the tree now, and saw its yellowing leaves. I, now, felt guilty. The tree was sick and dying, and I couldn’t help but feel it was my fault, because it happened under my care. When I asked, my mom said something about invasive species, and that it had to be taken down. I cried for hours after.

I was soon distracted from my brooding, as flashing lights appeared out of the corner of my eyes. I turned to look. Red and blue, turning down my drive. I tilted my head, puzzled. Why would an ambulance be at my house? I saw paramedics jump out, and run into my house. I dropped to my knees. Something was wrong and I didn’t know what. I wanted to find out but I couldn’t move. All I could think about was my dad, lying on the cement, dying. The image flashed before my eye, the one I had seen too many times before. I shuddered. Death. Slowly I got back to my feet, and looked out the window. I saw her, my mom, strapped down, being
pushed into the van. He got in with her. They all did. I turned, threw open the door, pounded down the stairs and ran out into our front yard. I was too late. All I could see was an ambulance, speeding towards a distant hospital…

I couldn’t tell you how long I stood there, an hour, five hours, 4 years. It was my mother, and I knew it without a doubt. Eventually, I walked to my tree, and sat below it. A leaf drifted passed my face, yellowed and oblong, in it struck me just how frail we all are. Our bodies, our sanity. I cried.

As dawn turned to morning, I saw him walk down the hill, towards me. He was crying. What I knew earlier was confirmed. He sat next to me, and put his arm around me. For once I didn’t hate him. I didn’t have the strength, nor the heart. We sat there for a while. He was silent; he knew I knew. I waited for him to talk, waited for that final confirmation, waiting for the truth. Soon, it came. “Seth… I’m so sorry. Last night, your mother collapsed. The doctors couldn’t…”.

I stood, turned around, and walked away from him. I didn’t need to hear anymore. I didn’t want to hear the same speech… the one about “being in a better place”. I walked up the hill and passed my house. Away. Where? I didn’t know. The house my mother loved so dearly didn’t seem like home. The tree I loved so dearly was dead. I didn’t have a place to go.

I walked down the street. I kept going. I had wished to firmly to be able to just go. I realized now, it didn’t matter where you are. Who you are stays with you no matter where your location, or who you are with. Who I am… I am a dead mom, a dead dad and a dead tree. I took my baseball cap out of my back pocket and put it on. I kept walking.

It was my birthday that day. I had just turned twelve.