

# When Great Trees Fall

*Maya Angelou*

When great trees fall,  
rocks on distant hills shudder,  
lions hunker down  
in tall grasses,  
and even elephants  
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall  
in forests,  
small things recoil into silence,  
their senses  
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,  
the air around us becomes  
light, rare, sterile.  
We breathe, briefly.  
Our eyes, briefly,  
see with  
a hurtful clarity.  
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,  
examines,  
gnaws on kind words  
unsaid,  
promised walks  
never taken.

Great souls die and  
our reality, bound to  
them, takes leave of us.  
Our souls,

dependent upon their  
nurture,  
now shrink, wizened.  
Our minds, formed  
and informed by their  
radiance, fall away.  
We are not so much maddened  
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of  
dark, cold  
caves.

And when great souls die,  
after a period peace blooms,  
slowly and always  
irregularly. Spaces fill  
with a kind of  
soothing electric vibration.  
Our senses, restored, never  
to be the same, whisper to us.  
They existed. They existed.  
We can be. Be and be  
better. For they existed.

> **What Sparks Poetry: Read how this poem inspired Sally Keith to begin writing poetry**

*Copyright © 2015 by The Estate of Maya Angelou  
All rights reserved.*

*Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.*