

Axis mundi, tree at the center of the universe

by [Muriel Nelson](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue

My writing lamp blinks off whenever it pleases.
Stay with me, little light.
Outside in winter coats, firs stand around.

They lean close to whisper windy chants
and show with apparent parental patience
why Native Americans call them grandfathers.

If such a tree falls in a forest
while other trees bend in the icy wind
and no one is there to hear—

or if only one hand claps (that other
Zen riddle, like a one-penny tip
from a hostile patron)—

if we live a long time with these koans
as trees rustle old limbs, drop things, make cracks, push back,
nurture each other, and generally get on with it—

if we don't hear when a person or tree hurts and falls—
if whole forests clap with biblical zeal, and we don't take a stance

even now when earth's central tree's wobbling as never before—

how will we keep our balance?