

STYLE

## Poet Elizabeth Alexander's memoir of love, loss, art and glorious food



By [Karen Heller](#)

April 29, 2015 at 12:17 p.m. EDT



NEW YORK — In the hallway of her West Side apartment near Lincoln Center, the place where she remade her life after the sort of loss for which no spouse can prepare, poet and Yale professor Elizabeth Alexander stands before a vibrant black-and-white linocut titled "Inside Lizzy's Brain," a tribute to her protean intellect.

"How can you not love a man who paints that?" she says, looking at the jazzy, busy work.

Ficre Ghebreyesus, artist, chef (at New Haven's beloved [Caffe Adulis](#), now shuttered) and Eritrean activist, was Alexander's true love. They knew within a week of meeting in late spring 1996. He approached her in a New Haven, Conn., coffee shop that he owned with his brothers, where she was drinking a smoothie, set to meet a friend who never showed. Ficre mentioned that he had seen her at the opening of a play, "a verse drama" she had written.

"I literally looked up, and here was this lovely person. It wasn't that way of 'Oh, here's this cute guy.' It was more like, 'Oh, here you are.'" They spoke for an hour, about art, about everything. It was a coup de foudre, she says, her stomach experiencing "visceral torque."

On April 4, 2012, four days after his 50th birthday party, seemingly the picture of middle-aged health, Fiere died on a treadmill in the basement of their New Haven home. Their younger son, Simon, then all of 12, discovered him, the machine still running. Fiere's arteries, the autopsy revealed, were almost completely blocked.

Alexander, 52, starts her new memoir, "The Light of the World," this way: "The story seems to begin with catastrophe but in fact began earlier and is not a tragedy but rather a love story."

The book is a testament to ardor, and also to profound loss, with recipes (shrimp barka, spicy red lentil and tomato curry) from his establishment, which was not some fluorescent-lit takeout joint but an acclaimed destination. Alexander, a child of Washington who was raised on Capitol Hill and attended Georgetown Day and Sidwell Friends schools, will read and discuss her memoir at Politics and Prose Bookstore on Connecticut Avenue NW on Saturday and at Busboys and Poets on 14th Street NW on Sunday.

One chapter reads, in its entirety: " 'It's the shock, not the grief, baby,' my hairdresser says, as he runs his hands over and through my newly coarse, wildly gray hair."



Alexander is best known as the poet who composed and read "Praise Song for the Day" at President Obama's first inauguration. She and Obama have been friends since the days when both taught at the University of Chicago. Two weeks ago, she conducted a White House workshop for National Poetry Month for a group of teenage poets with her family and Yale freshmen in attendance. How often does Alexander visit the president's home? The soul of discretion, she offers, "Well, you know, I've been there."

Yet Alexander realizes that for all her acclaim as a poet, her memoir will receive far more attention than her verse. "A lot more people will read it," she says. "A *lot* more." Scores of readers flooded her inbox after an excerpt appeared in the New Yorker. The general response, she says, was: "Thank you for letting me get to know this extraordinary person. I felt I got to know him, and then I lost a friend."

Alexander sits in her apartment, filled with Ficre's paintings and photographs (his name is pronounced FEE-kray Geb-reh-YESS-oos), drenched in afternoon light, the Hudson River a jewel below. "Shock is a thing to get over, which is its own piece of grieving," she says, "grasping at what felt like vapor." She refers to the initial weeks after her husband's death as her "fugue state."

She wrote so as not to forget, to honor and hold on. "I felt like with my hand, I was grounding myself on the earth," she says, kneading her hand into the gray sofa. "I was writing and trying to fix something, that the earth had not been pulled out from under me, when it had. Trying to fix memories before they sifted away."

The book is for her sons, Solo and Simon, now 17 and 15, and, "if they have children, this is the person who would have been their grandfather." Says Alexander's friend, poet Terrance Hayes, "The book is an elegy, with the quality of a fable so the boys would be able to grasp the richness of that relationship."

Alexander helped digitize many of Ficre's paintings (though not all 882) and create a Web site for his work, chose his "Solitary Boat in Red and Blue" to grace the book cover (the very painting that hangs above the dining table where she wept and wrote the memoir each morning for four months), and organized an exhibit of his work that has sparked interest from other galleries.

She writes, "He was a bottomless boat and the boat that would always hold me." Now, she is helping launch his art into the greater world. Ficre was well-known as a chef in New Haven, but art was his true passion, although he fostered no real drive to promote the work.

The memoir's title comes from her mentor, Nobel laureate Derek Walcott — "O beauty, you are the light of the world!" — who taught Alexander at Boston University. "I showed him my diary and he wrote out some of my squiggles, with slashes where the line breaks should be," she recalls. "He told me: 'The only thing you're not doing are breaking the lines because, in fact, you are writing poetry. Go away, and come back when you have some poems.'" She went on to earn a doctorate in English at the University of Pennsylvania.

Before that, after graduating from Yale, Alexander worked as a reporter for The Washington Post. She lasted one year. "I like making things up," she says. "I could see the line, and I wanted to step over it so badly."

Alexander and her husband were born two months, but more than 6,000 miles, apart, on separate continents. "What are the odds that two people would grow up on other sides of the world and find each other? But you know what?" she says, leaning in as if to share a secret. "It happens every day."

She cherishes their differences, referring to herself as "the cheerful, pushy American wife." Fiere's immigrant experience informed his choices.

"When you come to this country, it takes far more tenacity than I ever had," she says. "He walked out of Eritrea, through Sudan, through Germany, through Italy, to America, to make a life, make a successful life. What does *that* take? When you come as an immigrant, there's not always this sense of pushiness. My parents are New Yorkers. You just keep pushing."

Alexander's parents are more than just New Yorkers. "If you want to talk about the Talented Tenth, these are the people," says poet E. Ethelbert Miller, who will introduce Alexander at *Busboys and Poets* on Sunday. "These are the Race Men, in a very positive way."

Her father, Clifford Alexander, went to Harvard and Yale Law, served as chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and was the first African American secretary of the Army. Her mother, Adele Logan Alexander, graduated from Radcliffe, earned a doctorate from Howard and was an adjunct history professor at George Washington University. Adele's father was Duke Ellington's doctor, her grandfather the first treasurer at Tuskegee Institute at the time of Booker T. Washington. Artist Charles Alston was her mother's uncle — and his wife, Myra Adele Logan, a surgeon, was the first woman to perform open heart surgery, in 1943. Alston's cousin by marriage was the acclaimed painter Romare Bearden.



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For all the family's accomplishments, in the spring of 2005, Alexander became only the third African American woman to serve as tenured faculty in Arts and Sciences in Yale's history. The number of African American women granted tenure on that faculty is now 11.

"It's not good," Alexander says. "It's really not changed in the way you would think it would have. The student body is so much more diverse."

She loves university life: "I am employed by a place that believes fundamentally in the thing that I make." She teaches poetry, literature and African American studies, and for four years chaired Yale's African American Studies department, a job she held at Ficare's death. "I loved the administration, in that I loved building a community about what I think is a noble and fascinating mission," she says. "I loved that we were shining light on what is often a neglected or distorted area of study. And I liked being a leader."

Says Miller, a friend for decades: "I think she's become a model for other African American women writers. She is moving into the position of what Maya Angelou and Lucille Clifton were for one generation, Elizabeth is for the next."

A year after Ficare's death, Alexander moved to Manhattan, to the city of her birth (she was born in Harlem), drawn to "the life force that is here" and where "my deepest, deepest sister friends live." Her parents also moved back to New York to help their only daughter. They reside in an apartment a few floors below. In some ways, Alexander leads a far more traditional, Old World existence than she ever imagined. Instead of a row house, the extended family occupies a high-rise. She became a widow at 50 in an age when couples expect to live into their 80s or beyond.

"The Light of the World" is a tribute to the 16 years she and Ficare shared. "You're not guaranteed love. You're not guaranteed children," she says. "You're not guaranteed joy in this world, though I think you can make some."

At the time of Ficare's death, the family of four was all one height, "5-foot-9 and a smidge."

Solo and Simon emerge from their rooms to play basketball before dinner, giants now, towering over their mother. Life marches. Her friends wonder whether it is painful, on book tour, to keep returning to loss, to Ficare's death?

"It is a pleasure," his wife says, "an emotional pleasure, to remember."