When Lightning Strikes, in Love and Loss

Poet Alexander's memoir an odyssey of grief and wonder | BY SUSAN SELIGSON

Elizabeth Alexander, a prominent essayist and the author of five volumes of poetry, speaks at the White House during a celebration of National Poetry Month in April.

MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

By nature, most poets don't often seek out or find themselves in the limelight. But in 2009 the nation was riveted as Elizabeth Alexander stood at the US Capitol to recite her poem "Praise Song for the Day" at the inauguration of her friend President Barack Obama. Two years later, on a sunny, routine April morning, Alexander's private world was shattered by the sudden death of her husband, Ficre Ghebreyesus. Alexander has written a memoir, *The Light of the World,* about her husband, her marriage, her grief, and much more.

An Eritrean immigrant and artist with whom Alexander (GRS'87) had two sons, Ghebreyesus was a playful, generous soul who created East Africa–infused pastel canvases in his studio and traditional Eritrean food in the New Haven restaurant he owned with his two brothers. Alexander and Ghebreyesus were married for 16 years. Theirs was a relaxed, rewarding, and, as they saw it, fated partnership ignited by what the poet calls "a bolt of lightning."

"Lightning struck and did not curdle the cream but instead turned it to sweet, silken butter," she writes.

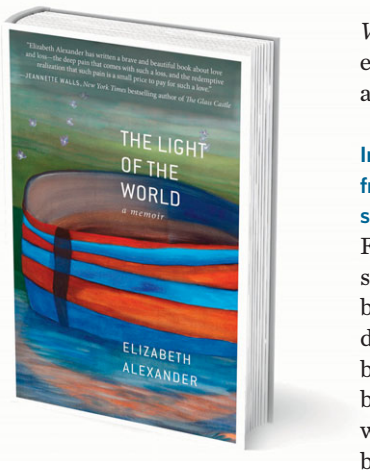
Born in Asmara into the chaos of a three-decade-long civil war, a man who'd endured exile and the scattering of family, he made the couple's Hamden, Conn., home a cozy refuge for friends, students, and colleagues. He cooked a mean Bolognese, and his recipes punctuate Alexander's prose. He worked at a home studio and tracked the dramas of surrounding wildlife with his adored sons. "We lived in emotional high cotton for a while," she writes.

Alexander's narrative lurches and swoops from present to past to the eternal: "I feel certain I can wait forever for him to come back." Every otherwise-mundane detail leading up to her husband's collapse, while on his treadmill the morning after a sleepover on his son's trundle bed—"the most comfortable bed" he ever slept in—remains burned in Alexander's mind. Just hours later he was gone. A poet to her bones, she puts words to her bewilderment and loss, often in pared-down, chilling declarative sentences: "I am getting older and he is not." The memoir strikes the reader not just as an act of catharsis, as readers of the genre are always bound to point out, but of generosity. For those who never knew Ghebreyesus, his abruptly silenced heart continues to beat through the pitch-perfect prose in Alexander's memoir, released in April by Grand Central Publishing.

Toward the book's conclusion, Alexander describes herself as looking "back from forward," with the fading not of memory, but of "the press of memory, the urgency of writing, the closeness of him." Of her husband, forever 50 as Alexander herself has advanced past 51, she concludes, "I never once doubted him, because that is how he made me feel. So I walk forward knowing I was loved, and therefore I am loved." Like Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* by Elizabeth McCracken (CAS'88, GRS'88), Alexander's book takes its place among the best of the genre, for its gentle, at times humorous attentiveness to both the sacred and mundane aspects of marriage, family, work, ancestry, and the tricky, here/not here nature of death itself.

A native of New York's Harlem who grew up in Washington, D.C., and the daughter of a former US Secretary of the Army and chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Alexander is the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University. She is a prominent essayist (she wrote a seminal piece about Rodney King) and critic and the author of five volumes of poetry, including *The Venus Hottentot* and *American Sublime.* Her work is often informed by African American history, and she has written about the lives of Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Bostonia asked Alexander to share her views on the process of memoir writing, on the nerve her book has touched among readers, and how the world is viewed through the poet's eye.



BOSTONIA: Many memoirists say they "had" to write their book. But yours, about so much more than loss, speaks to anyone who's loved or been loved. In writing, did you give much thought to the reader? Do you often hear from widows who found solace in the book?

ALEXANDER: I have heard from so many different kinds of people who have experienced loss—yes, some widows, but mostly people who have lived to tell the stories of many kinds of loss and want to share them. We need to tell our stories. I never imagine a reader because I think you can't; it interferes with the writing process. And then, you get the beautiful surprise of all the people out there who connect with your words and share themselves.

What responses to the book have surprised you?

How many there were before the book even came out. And the people who have said that through reading the excerpt and the book that they felt they knew Ficre, and then that they lost a friend.

It's clear that being a poet informs and shapes your narrative. How would you describe the way it does that?

I wrote this memoir as I write poems: word by word, sound by sound, image by image, attending to the music as I shape it.

Do you believe poets, even more than writers, experience the world differently from most people? What are the ways you register experience as a poet?

It's our job to keep our antennae up. It's our job to say what we see. It's our job to stay at the difficult places and work through them. To quote Adrienne Rich in *Diving into the Wreck,* to dive down and excavate "the wreck itself," and bring back treasures.

In what ways did you and Ficre, from opposite ends of the world, speak the same language?

Ficre and I were remarkably similar in key ways. We both came from very strong, devoted families. We were both committed artists who believed in each other's work unsurpassingly. We both were ready to start a family. We were both internationalists who loved language and culture and learning. We had the exact same idea of what a happy home would be: food, music, talk, a garden, love. So all of that makes the cultural differences what's interesting.

Your sons are so well drawn—were they aware you were writing the book? Has its existence been helpful to them, and have they embraced it?

I would not have published this book without their involvement and comfort and assent. I would have written it, because as an artist I needed to, but not opened the world to it. They've been amazingly honest, interested, and excited.

What did you learn about yourself and how did you grow from becoming, through marriage, an African African American? In what ways is a cross-cultural marriage a gift to couples and their children?

It's a big, beautiful, connected world, and I want my children to experience it that way. You belong to more than just where

you are standing at any given moment.

How did Ficre's struggle for survival in Eritrea inspire the lessons he taught your sons?
He was grateful for life's small gifts. He taught them to know and understand the world. He taught them the cost of violence.

You were a critically acclaimed poet when "Praise Song for the Day" thrust you into the international spotlight. Did you anticipate the harsh criticism from some corners?
There will always be unfair criticism—you just have to keep going and make the work, even when the noise is loud. I think of Kay Ryan's great poem "Lime Light" and the need to focus on what's in front of you: the work.

You teach, write essays, plays—do you have a writing schedule?
I wrote *The Light of the World* while on sabbatical. I'm so grateful for that aspect of academic life.

Who are the writers and poets, living or dead, you admire most?
Always, always Gwendolyn Brooks. Lucille Clifton. Robert Hayden. Toni Morrison (I consider her a poet of sorts). Walt Whitman. Rainer Maria Rilke.

How much can the craft of poetry be taught, and how much is a gift?
Poetry can indeed be taught, like most skills. But the gift of voice is its own thing, as well as the determination to work through and despite discouragement.

What are you working on now?
My teaching, my children, and following the new directions the memoir is leading me in.

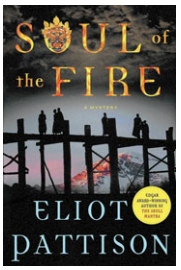
Fiction

Soul of the Fire

By Eliot Pattison (LAW'77)
Minotaur Books, 2014

IN HIS LATEST NOVEL, PATTISON delves into Tibet's war-torn history. He draws on his extensive personal knowledge of the landscape, people, and political climate of Tibet, transporting readers to the land of Shangri-La, in all its beauty and turmoil.

In *Soul of the Fire*, the eighth installment in the Inspector Shan series, the wary and observant protagonist, veteran detective, and Tibetan rights advocate Shan Tao Yun is faced with an ultimatum and the risk of losing those he loves most. He reluctantly accepts the title of "reformed criminal" and a seat on an international commission investigating a series of apparent suicides by self-immolation. However, he soon discovers the commission is a front for the Chinese government to cover up acts of protest by Tibetan monks, and he sets out to expose the government deception behind the suicides. Throughout the novel Shan is our translator between Chinese and Tibetans, East and West, past and present, illuminating the motivation behind this real-world conflict.



From the opening paragraph, Pattison immerses us in a world of sadness and persecution, but not without a subtle thread of hope. His use of metaphor and elegantly crafted "death poems" captures the emotional depth and humanity of his characters. "I never knew what it was to live," reads one immolation poem, "until I started to die."

The novel makes for dark reading at times, but its message is ultimately the power of loyalty, patriotism, spirituality, and righteousness. Shan is involved in a passionate and desperate political chess game, yet one where corrupt alliances disintegrate, and as Pattison writes, "hidden crimes find hidden justice." Shan is not a catalyst, but a witness to the events as they unfold, asking the readers questions and offering subtle hints to the mystery's resolution.

No religion on earth uses more signs than Tibetan Buddhism, the author writes, and with expert use of these symbols as well as Tibetan slang, he also offers a rich travelogue and cultural history. From the use of the color red (which represents both fire and joy in China) to references to Agni, the fire god, he combines traditional Buddhist legend with modern-day beliefs to tell Tibet's, as well as Shan's, story.

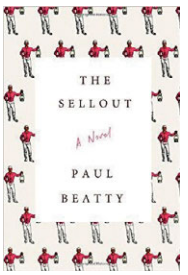
Like any detective novel, this one is laced with clues. But unlike the typical whodunit, the real story is not the resolution of the crime itself, but the strength and resilience of the Tibetan people, Pattison says in an author's note. As for Tibet's humanitarian struggle, he tells us there is no solution that does not require exceptional sacrifice.—ASHLEY M. JONES (CAS'15, COM'15)

The Sellout

Paul Beatty (CAS'84, GRS'87)
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

READING THIS INSANE NOVEL while the media wore out the video of a black South Carolina man being shot in the back by a cop was almost too much.

The narrator's father dies a nearly identical death on a Los Angeles street corner (four shots, not eight), but instead of memorials and marches and federal investigations, what ensues is demented satire.



As the book opens, the narrator is sparking up some weed right in the Supreme Court chamber while waiting for the justices to take their seats, ruminating stoned on his race-case predecessors, among them the Scottsboro Boys and rapper Luke