



Photo credit: Alpha Smoot

**The Light of the World**  
**September 11, 2016**  
**2:00**  
**East Building Auditorium**  
**National Gallery of Art**

Elizabeth Alexander, poet, essayist, playwright, and scholar; chancellor, Academy of American Poets; director of creativity and free expression, Ford Foundation; and Wun Tsun Tam Mellon Professor in the Humanities, Columbia University.

A book signing of *The Light of the World* follows.

This lecture is free and open to the public. Seating is available on a first-come, first-seated basis. The East Building of the National Gallery of Art is located at Fourth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW.

This program is generously supported by  
Darryl Atwell.



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD





**Elizabeth Alexander** is the author of six books of poetry, including *American Sublime*, a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize; two collections of essays; and *The Light of the World*, her critically acclaimed memoir on love and loss. Her writing explores such subjects as race, gender, politics, art, and history. Among her acclaimed essays, “‘Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)” and “Meditations on ‘Mecca’: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Responsibilities of the Black Poet” have enlivened debate on the role of art and social justice and addressed issues of race, representation, violence, and the vulnerable black body. In 2009, she wrote and delivered the poem “Praise Song for the Day” for President Barack Obama’s first inauguration.

Alexander earned her BA in English from Yale University in 1984, her MA in English (Creative Writing) from Boston University in 1987, and her PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992. She has received many awards, fellowships, and honorary degrees, among them grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She received the Anisfield-Wolf Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry and is the inaugural recipient of the Jackson Poetry Prize. She is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

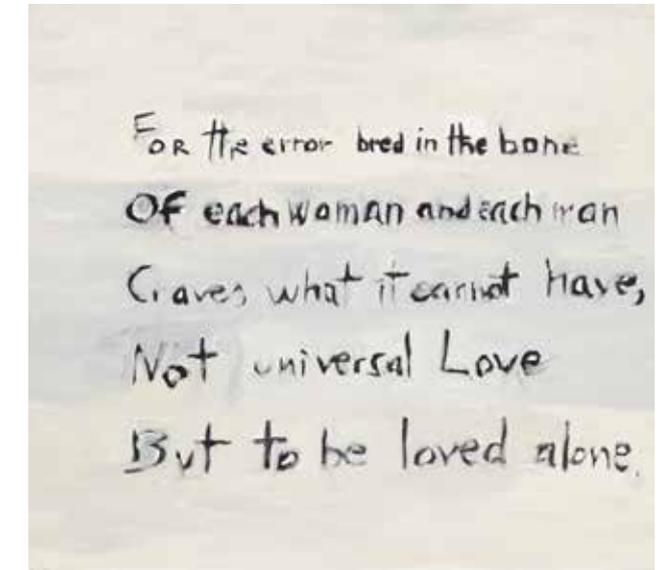
Alexander has taught with distinction at the University of Chicago, where she won the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching; New York University, in the graduate creative writing program; and Smith College, where she was Grace Hazard Conkling Poet in Residence and director of the Poetry Center. She was on the faculty of

Yale University for 15 years and served as chair of Yale’s African American studies department. Alexander was recently named the Wun Tsun Tam Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University.

In 2015, Alexander joined the Ford Foundation as director of creativity and free expression. She shapes and directs Ford’s grant making in arts, media, and culture. She guides the foundation’s efforts to examine how cultural narratives affect and shape social movements and how media and the arts, including film and visual storytelling, can contribute to a fairer and more just society.

In *The Light of the World*, Alexander finds herself at an existential crossroads after the sudden death of her husband, Ficre Ghebreyesus. Channeling her poetic sensibilities into rich, lucid prose, Alexander tells a love story that is, itself, a story of loss. As she reflects on the beauty of her married life, the trauma resulting from her husband’s death, and the solace found in caring for her two sons, Alexander universalizes a very personal quest for meaning in the wake of loss. *The Light of the World* is at once an endlessly compelling memoir and a deeply felt meditation on the blessings of love, family, art, and community. It is also a lyrical celebration of a life well-lived and a paean to the enduring gift of human companionship.

**Ficre Ghebreyesus** was born in Asmara, Eritrea. He left the country as a political refugee and lived in Sudan, Italy, and Germany before coming to the United States, where he earned his undergraduate degree and worked as a humanitarian activist on behalf of Eritrean independence and ongoing relief issues. He also studied painting at the Art Students’



League and printmaking at the Bob Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, both in New York City. He earned his MFA in 2002 from Yale University, where he was awarded the Carol Schlossberg Prize for Excellence in Painting at graduation.

For almost thirty years, Ghebreyesus made his life in New Haven, Connecticut, where he lived with his family. From 1992 to 2008, he was executive chef and co-owner with his brothers of the immensely popular Caffé Adulis, which brought creative Eritrean cuisine to New Haven and New York City. In the last years of his life, he dedicated his work time solely to his art. He died unexpectedly in April 2012.