

Faculty Commencement Speech 2026

Elizabeth Alexander



Thank you, class of 2026! This is a big honor to be speaking here today. I don't know if you realize that we had the same first semester at Montserrat. I will be using this time to highlight the meandering path that brought me here.

It's 1999. Caller I.D. is still a new phenomenon. I look at the phone and breathe deep with dread as I answer my Nana's call. "Honey. Go to Harvard and find yourself a good Italian lawyer!" she replies when I explain for the millionth time that I am... gasp... seriously applying to art school. She would fill my ear with her thoughts on ways to supplement this unrealistic art habit I was pursuing. The thought of me as a 'starving artist' looming in her view. She wasn't wrong: at that point in my life, a career in visual art was not only invisible, but seemingly impossible.

Although incredibly rewarding, it's no secret that a life in the arts is not always easy. But I promise that if you are in this room, you have the skills to navigate these winding paths, even if it's on a map you have to draw yourself. Those paths look different for everybody. Mine looks like a series of loop de loops, forks, and whiplash. I worked as the world's worst bartender, a baker, afterschool program project leader, summer camp instructor, assistant to at least 4 artists, farmer, freelance mural painter, museum gallery guard, commercial welder, montessori teacher, and puppet theater box office attendant. All while trying to maintain a studio practice. And, of course, regularly answering worried calls from Nana.

"Honey. Why don't you start painting mailboxes? You'd make a fortune!"

"What? No thanks. I'll paint your mailbox if you want, but that isn't really what I see myself doing, you know, long term"

"I know honey, I just worry.... What about bird houses? You should see what some of these places charge for this stuff. And most of them are ugly. You would paint a beautiful birdhouse! People would eat them up. You'd make a fortune!"

Nana was envisioning me on Good Morning America talking about how my birdhouses were so popular I couldn't keep them in stock. The hosts gushing over my talent as I did a painting demo on live TV. Barely able to afford rent, I certainly lacked the start up costs for this birdhouse empire of Nana's dreams. There was a year that I tried my hand at selling jewelry at craft fairs. I made about 50\$ while I watched my studiomate charm shoppers into buying drawings he made in elementary school. His pile of goods shrank throughout the day, while my inventory barely budged. It became painfully clear that sales are NOT my gift.

As the first born in both families, hopes of fame and fortune were pinned on me early, especially by Nana. "Honey, you should model! You'd make a lot of money." Nana would say, at least once a month for my entire adolescence. At 5'2", it was never much of a possibility, let alone an interest of mine. However, weirdly, throughout my life I find myself in close proximity to some kind of model or another: in life drawing and sculpture classes, or critiquing drawings and paintings of Dan by the hundreds during end of semester evaluations.

Even though my face doesn't grace magazine's glossy pages, my work sometimes does. So, somehow Nana was oddly close to seeing my future with this one.

It is a heavy weight to struggle in the spotlight of others' expectations. I keep thinking about how dad referred to my MFA as the 'golden ticket' and the 'master key.' He left high school in 11th grade to work for his family. It was a great triumph to have a child get any degree, especially a masters. When I walked across that stage in 2009, I was filled with the anxiety of letting my family down. And oh gawd. What would Nana's calls be like now?!

I went to grad school in order to teach in higher education, but due to the recession, schools were downsizing or closing art departments across the country. The debt from that golden ticket would soon kick in and I didn't understand that the academic search process spans many months, usually beginning in the autumn. How does one find a teaching job anyway? Craigslist?

That summer I desperately applied for a job at Hi Rise Bakery in Cambridge, MA. I got the position because I showed a natural ability for shaping baguette dough during my interview. It turns out shaping a baguette and rolling a coil for pottery are nearly identical techniques. Some days I worked at 6 am, some days I worked at 2 am, often within the same week. I never slept. I shaped, scored, and baked hundreds of loaves of bread a day. Often panic stricken as I tried to recall how to braid challah bread at 4 am or dozing at the bench as I shaped burger buns. Needless to say, I was too sleep deprived to make art.

Burned out after about a year of baking, I applied for any teaching job I could find: public schools, private schools, afterschool programs, and adjunct college positions. I applied ...on Craigslist ... to an ad looking for a 3D Design instructor at Montserrat College of Art. I was not interviewed for that position. But, in August (maybe late July) I got a random email asking if I might be interested in picking up an installation art course at Montserrat. During my interview I learned that they remembered my portfolio when they needed an instructor. My failed 3D Design application months earlier actually got me a job!

That one class became 5 years of a piecemeal schedule of odd jobs fit around adjunct teaching at Montserrat and area schools. All while I exhibited my work across the region. Every opening reception had my proud but concerned Nana in the corner bewildered by what I was doing. "Honey. You work too hard."

Eventually, my golden ticket paid off, and I finally got that full time teaching job that I was after! When the University of North Carolina School of the Arts called with their offer, I cried. A deep ugly cry. All those years exhausting myself with applications and interviews were finally over. But, I just agreed to move over 700 miles away from a life and community I loved dearly.

Still. The calls kept coming.

"Honey, your father misses you! When are you moving home?"

"Nana, we just bought a house. It's not that easy to get another teaching job, especially since you live in a region that breeds academics!"

"I know, honey, but you're too far away."

Nana's calls became less frequent over those years. Ironically, she was rushed to the hospital the day I interviewed for this position. I didn't want to get her hopes up if I didn't get the job, so, even though I was only 30 minutes away, I couldn't visit her in the hospital. She lived long enough to see me settle back into my life here. Some of our last conversations were about how delighted she was that I moved back. Mostly she was delighted that, for once, I listened to her.

As I stated earlier, my first semester at Montserrat was your first semester. All of us panicking at the same time about starting a life in a new place. Yes, I was here before, but a lot changed between 2015 and 2022 while I was away. Would it still be the place I remember? Tinged with anxiety and excitement, we were all saying "I can't believe I'm doing this" at the same time. I have to say, I am amazed by how much you have all accomplished in 4 short years.

You will be getting so much advice during this time in your life. Most of you probably have some Nana-like figure that, out of love, tries to steer you towards their dreams for you.

Now that you are approaching another pivotal moment in your life you're probably thinking "I can't believe I am doing this" once again. Remember that you have already spent these past 4 years drawing your own map. Remember you're part of a Community. There will be times that you will seek the same opportunities as your peers. You will often know who gets the prize or the job that you were also going for, and maybe they are in this room. But it is just as likely that you will find yourself with opportunities because someone in here passed your name along.

I can trace many accomplishments to someone from my circle recommending me. In fact, I learned I didn't

actually get a random email because of my killer installation art portfolio. One of my classmates from Mass Art taught painting at Montserrat and told his colleagues that I would be a good fit here. It just so happened that they already had my application on file.

There will be recessions and wars and hiring booms. You won't always know what to do or how you will get a foothold. You will wander and settle and wander again. Those are the times when you need your community most, and there will be times when they need you. We are all here for each other, no matter if you stay in Beverly or move thousands of miles away, if you are a full time studio artist or channel your creative energy into dog grooming. We are here for you, and honey, we are so proud of you!