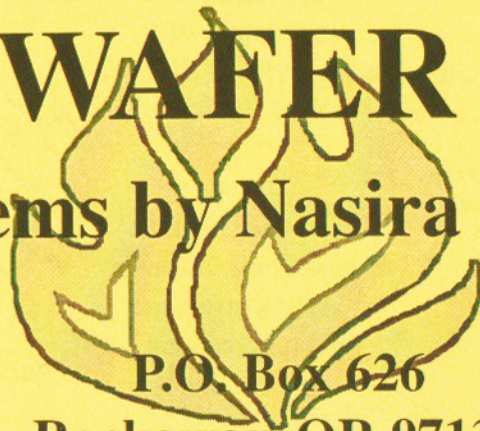


THE WATER CAGE

Poems by Nasira Alma



P.O. Box 626

Rockaway, OR 97136

This book is
in memory of
Walworth Rood Slenger
1914 - 1995:

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Nasira Alma
P.O. Box 626
Rockaway, OR 97136

*Find your center
in pure consciousness
he always urged me,
bald head radiant
as a crystal.*

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Jana + Werner
Thank you for your love,
encouragement, kindness, counsel,
appreciation + friendship.
Hugs to you both.
Nasira
Rockaway Beach, Oregon
10/14/95

WHEN CAVES WERE WOMBS

Our magic impregnated the earth
in those days, drew rain

to oak roots and aurochs to
the men's spears. Our backs hurt

by evening. When the Sun turned
sick, to keep him company,

we hunkered round the fire, snoring
like a single beast.

The Moon grew fat, then thin,
then vanished.

Now they say we had no magic.
Yet we lived, we died.

drumming the heartbeat
on deer skin stretched tight —
a spirit buck springs
over the candle
into my breast

blest with less

orb web
God spider-still
this silk cross suits me fine
(my “more” wasn’t more anymore)
— rapt rest

snake skin
at the road side
I shed the day

wind at dusk
each branch
its own dance

LET THE DEER LEAD ME

dusk at the villa
walking down the mountain
with the deer

soft forms among the trees
— their essence unveiled
in their hiding

a doe and I stop
her gaze transforms from fear
to self-lostness

mine
from watching her
to seeing us

below, dinner guests
in neckties and high heels
munch shrimp on the terrace

grazing the lawn
the deer entertain
the cocktail crowd

later the moon sinks
under Arcturus
making deer silhouettes

their true selves
have slipped up the mountain
into the forest's arms

COMING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN

Isaac said, "You would have killed me!"

Abraham said, "Yes, Son." He gripped the knife in one hand and a staff in the other. He was one hundred eleven years old. The boy was eleven.

"Without even trying to change His mind!" Isaac said.

"Yes," Abraham said.

Isaac led the way slowly down the path.

rocks holding themselves
apart from each other
dust motes separating

After a time, Isaac walked a little faster. And faster still. He looked over his shoulder. His father was nowhere in sight. Isaac was glad. Then he felt the eye of the God Who had ordered his death. Hunching his shoulders, he tried to make himself small. He turned and started back up the mountain.

his reluctant feet
knowing their difference
from the holy path

THE ELEVATION

four-lane trail out of the port city,
womb of a daily grind

speeding up the gorge to the blacktop
as heat bellydances off the hood

braking for the gravel, then
the rough road, the pine-needled path

rolling the feet outside down in
soundless climb; a tremble up the spine

lichen beards shiver and yellow violets
encompass the ice slabs

at the top, petals of cold flame blossom
from stones; the sun at its zenith

backpack lowered, a hand kneads a cramp,
arms stretch, fingers walk the light air

this is my body, given over to the heaving
of its lungs and the heart's pounding

this is my blood, surrendered to the
febrile beat

below, the expansive quiver of trees
on the valley's back

the view west to east:
Mts. St. Helens, Rainier, Adams, Hood

snow-cowled, their voices yearning
toward a higher peak

FIND US

Waiting for the bus
I hear a murmur,
the sort of sound
that in the wilderness

would cause me to stop
and strain to hear whether
it was brook or bird.
I turn around

and look straight into
a man's face. His eyes
are open wounds. He asks,
"Can you help me out?"

A Mercedes goes by
and a limo.
Their tires sing
on the wet pavement.

Here at the bus stop
we pass dollar bills
back and forth
among ourselves

and beg passersby, safe
beneath their umbrellas,
to stop and find us
behind our wounds.

SHARK WOMAN

She moves ceaselessly through the crowd
caging cigarettes. "How do you like
August Twelfth?" she asks. "How do you
like August Twelfth?" A big woman
at the piano delivers the blues.

The shark woman wears a rag turban.
Her face is scarred from burns.
A yellow teddy swings from a hook
on her belt. The big woman bends with
splayed fingers over the ivories.

A man gives the Shark Woman a cigarette.
She lights it off the butt she's smoking.
The teddy swings with a smile. "How do you
like August Twelfth?" she asks. The big
woman at the piano delivers the blues.

AT THE BUS STOP

Green acorns burden the limbs over
the bus stop. I am weighed down with
notebooks, the heat and my thoughts.

The stranger's shirt is buttoned with
safety pins. White whiskers stubble
his cheeks.

Putting a hand on my sleeve,
he rasps, "You from Portland?"

"Yes."

"My brothers want me come home,"
he says. "Too cold there."

"I've lived in Minnesota. I know
about cold."

"Family — they're like that, always
thinking up some job for you."

"My family wants me to go back to earning
big money. Never mind that I cried every
night. You can't hug a paycheck in the dark."

I'd like to drop pennies into the wells of
his eyes and make big wishes.

He returns my gaze. We've known each
other a million years.

He runs a hand under his nose. "Nebraska's
flat out too cold," he says and walks away.

surf swallowing ankles
salt in my mouth

the elements taking me in

last light
on the gold cross
a cormorant flies under the moon

MUSIC IS FOR DANCING

the crazy man asks
each tanned and polished girl:
“dance? want to dance?”
the jazzmen play sax, vibes, bass
blue disks glint over their eyes

the crazy man dances alone
he swings his arms
steps right
steps left
a jazzman raises a trombone

a child joins the crazy man
they swing their arms
stepping right
stepping left
the people clap for the trombone

Jesus said:
bring me the children
they know
that music
is for dancing

THE MAN IN THE "LOVE AMERICA" JACKET

Every evening he makes the rounds of trash receptacles in Pioneer Square, one plastic bag for bottles, one for cans. He is tall in cowboy boots and too lean. His hair has thinned to a sickly fringe. A carcinoma blooms on one nostril. The back of his leather jacket urges: "Love America."

Men with attaches stride through the square. Frowning corporate frowns, they notice the solitary man with his stately gait just in time to avoid him.

They tell each other
that their work is eating them alive.

The man in the Love America jacket
speaks to no one.

He sorts through the trash
with a look of austere peace.

THE ONLY WAY TO GO

mussel shells sprung wide open
crab carapaces grilled red

sheared driftwood roots
cracked and blackened kelp

a cod skeleton, eye untouched
a jellyfish fried in sunlight

the murre's wishbone, a frail stance
the speargunned sealion corpse

yes, I honor death in all its forms:
it is the only way we know to go

a fawn, skinned and brined
head lifted in a pose of laughter
front hooves stilled in dance

THE DOCS KEPT CHARTS ON HIM

in memory of Markus Marty
who died of AIDS, 1994

they ordered
weekly tests

to chart the curve
of his dying

they didn't chart
his death smile, though

weren't there
to see

bliss
on the lips

of a man
embraced by God

at the mike
a man with AIDS
his eyes reciting
the same poem
he speaks

pearl glow east
another dawn
he didn't see

I WON'T PRAY UNLESS I HAVE TO

Devotion drags me off like a sneaker wave
and deposits me by Your wafer cage.

Yes, damn it, I believe. I've been decked
by the cold flood from a chalice.

Your Body, You say, Your Blood. You fang
my throat and gulp my sap as Your purge.

My God, my God, why don't You forsake me?
Your relentless Presence wears me down.

You ate my breast. Which morsel is next
for the remission of Your sins?

Suiciding Your sublime Oneness, You let
evil in through the numberless cracks:

all these individuals who can be lied to, cheated,
and thus made even more separate.

Hell: the otherness of others
and You did it

You did it

You did it!

You designed us too small to to understand Your ways,
our nerves strong enough for a lifetime of pain.

Then You made us Your redeemers.
I won't pray unless I have to.

BABY EBONY

Her dark skin
glistens.
“Banana,” she says.

Out on the street
Lydia
her mother
missing teeth
fucked up on white shit
raves at Lenny
her father.
He’s slumped on the sidewalk
his back to the building.
He shared the same bag.

“Motherfucker,”
Ebony’s mother bawls,
“don be comin roun here
with no cheapass dope.
You don know me.
I real woman —
bring me real shit!”

Ebony eats the banana.
She glistens
like something the sun
hasn’t dried
— something that
still might change.

AN OPEN WINDOW LETS IN ANYTHING

the day poached us in our sweat
after sundown people come out
like cockroaches —
we scavenge the city
for something to appease
the mouth of the mind

and make us forget how the sun's eye
withered our worth before noon;
we crawl out like cockroaches after dark
to sit in the unlit corners of jazz clubs
where the sound that goes round and round

the brain is the sun's disdain
for our day's cache of self-loathing;
where the bartenders are cranky —
we don't order fancy drinks: just beer
just beer and tequila

around 4 we hide in our beds,
jaded beyond hope of sleep or love,
and listen to glass breaking,
an invasion of noise from the invisible
men who pillage the dumpsters

an open window lets in anything
soon it will let in the sun

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE YOUR ADDRESS

black light in a stone dragon's eyes
the hour before dawn surrenders hard

another new year shoulders its way
from the womb; the cord cuts like a noose

two pragmatic slaps on the butt: a heart
in pain is more heart and more pain

the beat drills through categories
power resides in the drummer's open hand

clenched words mutate to fat-lady tattoos
on your chest; your thoughts are your address

the falls' roar has eased to winter whispers
your fears fill the gaps for miles around

you invest for a posh retirement
but you'll never move from this address

PEELING A GRAPE

The skin tears away
in strips. When
the circumcision
of the whole
is accomplished

squeeze juice
from the heart.
Go ahead
dig your nails
into the lush flesh

the way God
bears in on a saint,
and ask yourself
are you ready
for Divine love?

winter solstice:
a bouquet of chamomile
hung in shadow

a rosebud
left on her pillow
to show
it was no accident
her death in the river

August Sixth —
inscribed on glowing lanterns
the names of Hiroshima's dead
ride her seven rivers
to the sea

THE FORMING

what
ever
is
forming
in space/time/
body/mind
did it
have to be
a serpent first
or did it
want to be?

THE SKULL A BONE FORT

the skull a bone fort
for the cortex that grasps
the me/what's-not-me of things

the hands
a clattering of bones
that grip diplomas coins & scones

the skull
a scaffold where skin is hanged
till dead

the hands
agents distant from the heart
— the watch-me-do of things

in the skull house
the brain —
untouched by lips

or moonlight —
remote-controls the mirage
of a self-fulfilled life

Kali, I want to be
a holy carp with no hands
undulating in love

a sacred jellyfish
without skull, cycling praise
through my entrails

Fierce and Formidable Mistress,
take these hands and skull
for Your belt and necklace

Mother of Mercy and Moksha,
let me rest in the silence
of Your Divine Uterus

Mothers do not panic
Death is
perfectly
organic.

breaking up kindling —
the woods' stillness
mends itself

AT LAST THE SKULL CRACKS

I slam my head
against the Black Stone.
The skull splits

uncorking a viscid mix of
schemes
lies
alibis
fears
and murky nightmares
that glug past the jagged bone.

Photons rush in to pack the head
with clean fill.
Radiance oozes around the eyeballs
and out the nostrils.

Now a match is struck
and the heart erupts in flame.

aaaah Kaaba
aaaah Allah

THE WARLOCK SUMMONED ME

The warlock summoned me: "Do not be afraid. I will heal you."

His unblinking eyes in a garnet face
put me under. I am stoned on his gaze.

He chants secret phonemes. I follow
the crumbs through the magic forest.

He presents a thumb to my forehead.
In my soul, the labyrinth collapses.

Disease transmutes to undifferentiated
love. Lost in simplicity, I am healed.

My one-piece heart: apostate, renegade,
sociopath,

albino bullwoman staring at the sun
— she pastures on mystery: I am She,

the one who drips blood from her own hide
as she dances to the altar, Shiva's bride

the outlaw Empress with a face of opal secreted
by earth and the void's unblinking eye.

I WILL FLY TO YOU

My Love, I wrote a song for You,
You took away my health.
I sang the little song to You,
You took away my job.
I wrote another song for You,
You took away my self.
Now I have no song for You
except the swan's*, my Love.

*A swan sings to tell other swans
it is about to fly. Swans that have
been shot sing and then try to fly.
Hunters call this the swan song.

WINTER REACH

Snowflakes
soak up
the city's noise.

They will change it
to finch song.

At the corner
while the light is red
my branches rise

~~to receive stillness now~~
~~and, later,~~ the little bird.

A SMALL STONE KNOWS

I have tried
this and that
here and there

still haven't hit
a niche that fits
nor learned my worth

but a small stone
that I let go
from my grip

knows where
to find its
place on Earth

the white stone
that wouldn't let me
go home without it

stone at rest
a sand nest
hollowed round

sparrow hawk
in the rainbow arch
flightstill

BIRD FLOATING ON THE COSMIC CYCLE

in honor of James W. Washington, Jr.,
and his sculpture

a chisel unlocks
flight in stone bones —
the eagle exits
through the crack
of dawn

near noon
lightning parses the sky —
charred and broken,
the eagle lands with its cargo
of Spirit

a sculptor finds
the injured bird
in a fissured rock,
its beak ajar —
the primal wound

he nests the bird for healing
on waves of the cosmic cycle —
head to breast and motionless
the eagle shrouds itself
in prayer

grace throbs
from the cleft heart
of Christ —
where nails impale him
soon lasers of love

enraptured
by his commission
the sculptor hammers
to resurrect God
from the granite tomb

*Beads spin
through his fingers
stars*

I AM MUHAMMAD'S CAMEL

Beads spin through his fingers
as stars cross the night.
Mecca at his back,
he sways in the saddle,
and I am Muhammad's camel.

Forced from Mecca
by his dead wife's clan,
we flee to Medina
a place of date palms
Jews and few Arabs.

I smell his pain and sweat.
He whispers her name
— Khadijah — and keens.
“You enemies have ears,”
his companions warn.

Defiant in faith, he throws
back his head and sings,
“Allah, Allah, Allah!”
I sing with him,
for I am Muhammad's camel.

We stop at a cave.
Two doves greet us.
Their luminous forms
climb the desert dark.
The Prophet glows too.

At his side, I lower
my chin when he touches
his forehead to the ground.
My heart sighs, “God is Great!”
for I am Muhammad's camel.

night ebbing
from the match flame
and flowing back

SO YOU WANT TO KNOW GOD?

Crack your heart
like a coconut.
Drink the milk.

WILD BIRTH

Along the mountain path
a thin flame stirs

furled taut as a bud.
Spirit hovers close.

The flame unfolds
fire rose, full bloom.

ONLY THE WILD CAN DIE

A priest baptized me with holy water.
A bishop confirmed me with chrism.
In high school, I wore the three-knotted
cord of St. Francis.

A nun, I dressed in St. Dominic's
white, a sheikh gave me a Sufi veil,
a prelate handed me the Cleric's rose:
men all of them conferring men's sanctity.

The initiation I need, Mother,
is the stroke of Your sickle.
Only what is wild can die.

Tonight let me dissolve in a cocoon
deep in a crystal wilderness under the eye
of an owl — the cocoon is your womb.

Eight caribou pull Your sled. The Little
Dipper anoints Your brow with star-oil
as we race across the tundra. The fat
of the white bear lights the lamp
after moonset. Fetuses becoming we-don't-
know-what dream medicine dreams inside You.

At dawn, You cut us loose.
A clear pond, it's ice cracked, proves

that now we look like You

and we are wild ...
yes, we're wild, Mother,
wild through and through!

OUT OF MY MIND

today I cannot find
the purse I saw stolen
in last night's dream

the Trappist novice —
his plans for
an autobiography

a child grasps
at water
from a hose —
our teacher turns
our thoughts to God

No longer an abject daughter, I have burst
out of Dad's Be-A-Man mold,
lunged into the maw of Mother's untolds
and ascended live.

Voyager, I weighed anchor in the shallow
nitpicks of false prophets.
Ex-philosopher, I am cured of Kantian
headcolds and Kierkegaardian shakes.

Ex-gullible, I wearied of that god
who is not mensch enough for
down-and-dirty love. Ex-wife, I have
verified ambition's stench.

Smallness is our substance. The mind's
a glass ball: turn it upside down,
little dogmas like snowflakes fall.
Heart is the closet where obsolete gadgets
get stored. Roles we embrace uniform us
in this prison, chain the wrists
and bind the liver. Pregnant, we deliver
an undersized god as a refuse dump for
the worst of ourselves, and, quivering,
prostrate before him.

I want out.
I want to be in a space too big for me,
the place of God Who Cannot Be Contained.

Tonight I am four marble walls, unroofed
for the helix where an angel descends,
ten cubits tall. From the furnace
in his breast, he snatches a blazing coal.
When he presses it to my forehead, I go out
of my mind and cry:

*Let nothing survive in me
that impedes Your Presence!
Let me be the House of God
within the Gate of Heaven!*

THE LAST PENTECOST

don't bother with
quick bread — we will walk
only forty years

in the desert
the fat of the soul
begins to smoke

steam from your blood
hisses through your skin —
you shed your name

you walk on coals
goals drop
from your bones

you strike a rock
expecting water — out leaps
a baptism of fire

the people's song of praise
boils over
in complaint

they think
God promised honey
with every prayer

a trumpet shrieks —
darkness grips the mountain
you must climb alone

FROM GOD'S SIDE

as good as dead
you haul your thumping heart
to the summit

lightning cracks your brain —
you hear The Flaming Tongue
speak Its Nameless Name

you find This Name —
bread on your tongue —
becoming you

A steep climb to God
but the trip
is no easier
in the other direction:

Incessant Enormity
cramming Itself
into something
the size of you!

old apple tree —
blossoms wreathe
the motionless crow

DEATH

behind
your face
the skull's
strange hills
and holes

your flesh
and teeth
erode
mistakes
remain

LIFE

now I lay
upon a stone
in dream I prostrate
at Your throne

if I must wake
before I die
let this flesh
Christ testify

sea froth

quivering in peaks
— sand sticks to the skin

RIVER ME

not to honor God
as some pedestaled Thing
but to go along all day,
a current in the easy clutch
of Current —
O Divine Flow, river me

breath barely visible —
under the dawn moon
white mushrooms

Brahms Sonata in A Major

the violin weeps
and God is created
from almost nothing

no howling infant, this manifestation:
lightshot honey that pours out in waves:
Give yourself to Me, give

the throat sweats tears, the amber ribbon
crests and troughs into the thousand ears
of the body's delight

Dear One, as swell after swell of You
lifts and rocks me, I release myself
into the flood of Your urgent love

I HAVE GIVEN UP MORE BLOOD THAN CHRIST

Bullets of Divine Fullness bombard
you, striking your tight self-focus

God's Madness flashes, Energy clashes
with human walls, Current flows amok

Someone must be the step-down locus
someone must be sick: here I am, Lord

Acupuncture, injections, cannulation
electro-&-echo-this-&-that-a-grams

I have given up more blood than Christ
fifty needles to each of his thorns

Friends: retreat from this carcass
scapegoated by God for the apple sin

In exile I am partnered with Lucifer
to wed pain and bliss

My capillaries burst like fireworks
yet in my flesh I see the bread of God

Burgundy bruises, pasty complexion,
gastric juices expatiating in prophecy

Break me in fists of duality
wash all over in my singular blood

Arrows of Holy Wholeness will
snag you by the armpits and lift

Your wounds will spill onto our world
the self-replenishing wine of love

OUR GODSHIP BROKE UP

Blasting into time
our Godship broke up.

Divinity litters the planet
from the Mormon Temple
to Hagia Sophia. We tread on
Sacred Shreds at Fatima and Mecca,
dive for Fragments of Omnipotence
in the Ganges, capture Holy Flotage
on the Dead Sea.

We hide our tokens of Sublimity
under our pillows, hoping they will

treble somehow and by morning
more nearly match the diameter
of our Godneed.

Hurry, brothers/sisters —
Christian Jew
Muslim Hindu
all you buddhas
priests gurus & saints

bring the shards
you have reclaimed.

Let us mend our God.

I'M READY FOR SOMETHING ELSE

On the hill
I lay my cheek
against a fir
folding naked arms
around its rough comfort

Suffering, my teachers said, is the easy way to God. I have gone down down down on my knees to God Masculine cross-riveted. I have bent to God Feminine at his side: Woman of Seven Sorrows, the number to use when the legion is too large to count. She knew every grief going.

Strangers with an appetite for other people's pain: "Get a load of Mary, would ya? They say she had him in the oven when they tied the knot." "I heard she nagged him into his first miracle before he was ready." "Yeah, he hung around the house till he was thirty."

An afternoon's entertainment from a man whose
hands are nailed: "Look at you, preacher.
Claimed you were closer to God than the rest
of us. Well, you're about half an hour away now."
Doubt trespasses on the human heart of Jesus: "Father,
why have You abandoned me?" His body, a
bone-broken compass, fixedly points to the easy way.

It's easy, all right: when I hurt, I know I'm in the groove.
But after fifty years on this circuit,
I find the charm has gone out of death and resurrection.

[More]

I want to meet the god of the cat sunbathing on the window seat whose sigh is the rising of a covey of quail the god of instant gratification, hand-holding, banana-mashing, the eagle's tidepool-splashing, cashews, cranberry-honey, and lime green, who hiccoughs in the voice of the frog, licks dew from the violets, hides nectar for the gentle moths, the god of coconut milk and slurp-ripe tomatoes, the Childgod who hasn't learned how to lie, whose snore is the hum of the hummingbird who invites me home to build tinker toys, who hugs the world through winter wind, pets the wooly caterpillar and made galaxies as liberally as chocolate chip cookies who watches the remakes of sand dunes whose high sign is the rainbow, who designed an Earth that tosses out a sunset a night, who swears love in every creature's every heartpulse, the god who slow-dances with the unfolding rose.

I'm ready for the hard way.

My God, I will be coming to You

burdened with bliss.

everything he owns
rides on a luggage carrier
- the bottom bag
with the Sanskrit symbol
for Om

When I wake
at night
I wrap myself
around memories
to keep them warm

CRUSH ME

all this separation
every soul to its own tabernacle
each tabernacle to its own house
You in Your high heaven

a walled-in heart: that's hell
I can't stand it anymore
let the Insupportable Love
crush me, let the dust of me

rush indiscriminately up nostrils
where I'll find You: Everyone;
float through a gap in the ozone
where I'll find You: No one;

and all of Your love
will be gently borne
within the smallest quark
of this dispersed heart

Friday at mosque
forehead to carpet
in a sun-warmed place

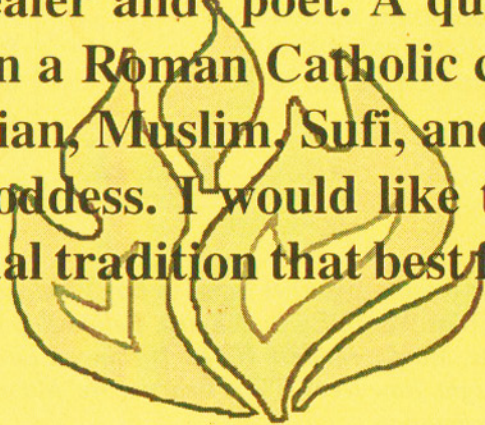
all that's left
a few dried leaves
on the windowsill

wind lifting
the loosened maple leaf
gentles its fall

Credits:

Some of these poems appeared in their present or earlier forms in *Bay Windows*, *black bough*, *Brussels Sprout*, *Canadian Writers Journal*, *Cicada*, *Color Wheel*, *Earth & Spirit*, *Fellowship in Prayer*, *Fireweed*, *Five Lines Down*, *Frogpond*, *Hummingbird*, *Lynx*, *Mayfly*, *Modern Haiku*, *Northwest Literary Forum*, *Oregon East*, *Piedmont Literary Review*, *Point Judith Light*, *Raw NerVZ*, *The Beacon*, *We' Moon* and *Woodnotes*. Thank you, editors, for your encouragement and mentoring.

I am a priest, healer and poet. A quarter century ago, I spent five years in a Roman Catholic convent. Now I am a practicing Christian, Muslim, Sufi, and Hindu, as well as a devotee of the Goddess. I would like to see people free to turn to the spiritual tradition that best fills their needs at the moment.



Nasira Alma