Prayer Rug

By Agha Shahid Ali

Those intervals
    between the day’s
    five calls to prayer

the women of the house
    pulling thick threads
    through vegetables

rosaries of ginger
    of rustling peppers
    in autumn drying for winter

in those intervals this rug
    part of Grandma’s dowry
    folded

so the Devil’s shadow
    would not desecrate
    Mecca scarlet-woven

with minarets of gold
    but then the sunset
    call to prayer

the servants
    their straw mats unrolled
    praying or in the garden

in summer on grass
    the children wanting
    the prayers to end

the women’s foreheads
    touching Abraham’s
    silk stone of sacrifice

black stone descended
    from Heaven
    the pilgrims in white circling it

this year my grandmother
    also a pilgrim
    in Mecca she weeps

as the stone is unveiled
    she weeps holding on
    to the pillars

(for Begum Zafar Ali)