

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)

Agha Shahid Ali, "Prayer Rug" from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Copyright © 1987 by Agha Shahid Ali. Reprinted with the permission of Wesleyan University Press, www.wesleyan.edu/wespress/.

Source: *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987)



Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi and grew up in Kashmir before becoming a United States citizen. The themes of exile, nostalgia for lost or ruined landscapes, and political conflict inform many of his poems. He was a superb practitioner of the ghazal, a medieval Persian lyric form of couplets loosely linked by rhymes or repeated words.