I N THE LONG summers of my childhood, games flared up sud-
denly, burned to a brightness, and vanished forever. The sum-
ners were so long that they gradually grew longer than the whole
year, they stretched out slowly beyond the edges of our lives, but at
every moment of their vastness they were drawing to an end, for
that’s what summers mostly did: they taunted us with endings,
Marched always into the long shadow thrown backward by the end
of vacation. And because our summers were always ending, and
because they lasted forever, we grew impatient with our games, we
sought new and more intense ones; and as the crickets of August
grew louder, and a single red leaf appeared on branches green with
summer, we threw ourselves as if desperately into new adventures,
while the long days, never changing, grew heavy with boredom and
longing.

I first saw the carpets in the back yards of other neighborhoods.
Glimpses of them came to me from behind garages, flickers of color at the corners of two-family houses where clotheslines on pulleys stretched from upper porches to high gray poles, and old Italian men in straw hats stood hoeing between rows of tomatoes and waist-high corn. I saw one once at the far end of a narrow strip of grass between two stucco houses, skimming lightly over the ground at the level of the garbage cans. Although I took note of them, they were of no more interest to me than games of jump rope I idly watched on the school playground, or dangerous games with jack-knives I saw the older boys playing at the back of the candy store. One morning I noticed one in a back yard in my neighborhood; four boys stood tensely watching. I was not surprised a few days later when my father came home from work with a long package under his arm, wrapped in heavy brown paper, tied with straw-colored twine from which little prickly hairs stuck up.

The colors were duller than I had expected, less magical—only maroon and green: dark green curlings and loopings against a maroon that was nearly brown. At each end the fringes were thickish rough strings. I had imagined crimson, emerald, the orange of exotic birds. The underside of the carpet was covered with a coarse, scratchy material like burlap; in one corner I noticed a small black mark, circled in red, shaped like a capital H with a slanting middle line. In the back yard I practiced cautiously, close to the ground, following the blurred blue directions printed on a piece of paper so thin I could see my fingertips touching the other side. It was all a matter of artfully shifted weight: seated cross-legged just behind the center of the carpet, you leaned forward slightly to send the carpet forward, left to make it turn left; right, right. The carpet rose when you lifted both sides with fingers cupped beneath, lowered when you pushed lightly down. It slowed to a stop when the bottom felt the pressure of a surface.

At night I kept it rolled up in the narrow space at the foot of my bed, alongside old puzzle boxes at the bottom of my bookcase.

For days I was content to practice gliding back and forth about the yard, passing under the branches of the crab-apple trees, squeezing between the swing and ladder of the yellow swing set, flying into the bottoms of sheets on the clothesline, drifting above the row of zinnias at the edge of the garden to skim along the carrots and radishes and four rows of corn, passing back and forth over the wooden floor of the old chicken coop that was nothing but a roof and posts at the back of the garage, while my mother watched anxiously from the kitchen window. I was no more tempted to rise into the sky than I was tempted to plunge downhill on my bike with my arms crossed over my chest. Sometimes I liked to watch the shadow of my carpet moving on the ground, a little below me and to one side; and now and then, in a nearby yard, I would see an older boy rise on his carpet above a kitchen window, or pass over the sunlit shingles of a garage roof.

Sometimes my friend Joey came skimming over his low picket fence into my yard. Then I followed him around and around the crab-apple trees and through the open chicken coop. He went faster than I did, leaning far forward, tipping sharply left or right. He even swooped over my head, so that for a moment a shadow passed over me. One day he landed on the flat papered roof of the chicken coop, where I soon joined him. Standing with my hands on my hips, the sun burning down on my face, I could see over the tall backyard hedge into the weed-grown lot where in past summers I had hunted for frogs and garden snakes. Beyond the lot
approached the open window and began to squeeze the carpet through. The wooden bottom of the raised window scraped along my back, the sides of the frame pressed against me. It was like the dream where I tried to push myself through the small doorway, tried and tried, though my bones hurt, and my skin burned, till suddenly I pulled free. For a moment I seemed to sit suspended in the air beyond my window; below I saw the green hose looped on its hook, the handles and the handle-shadows on the tops of the metal garbage cans, the mountain laurel bush pressed against the cellar window; then I was floating out over the top of the swing and the crab-apple trees; below me I saw the shadow of the carpet rippling over grass; and drifting high over the hedge and out over the vacant lot, I looked down on the sunny tall grass, the milkweed pods and pink thistles, a green Coke bottle gleaming in the sun; beyond the lot the houses rose behind each other on the hill, the red chimneys clear against the blue sky; and all was sunny, all was peaceful and still; the hum of insects; the far sound of a hand mower, like distant scissors; soft shouts of children in the warm, drowsy air; heavily my eyelids began to close; but far below I saw a boy in brown shorts looking up at me, shading his eyes; and seeing him there, I felt suddenly where I was, way up in the dangerous air; and leaning fearfully to one side I steered the carpet back to my yard, dropped past the swing, and landed on the grass near the back steps. As I sat safe in my yard I glanced up at the high, open window; and far above the window the red shingles of the roof glittered in the sun.

I dragged the heavy carpet up to my room, but the next day I rose high above Joey as he passed over the top of the swing. In a distant yard I saw someone skim over the top of a garage roof and
sink out of sight. At night I lay awake planning voyages, pressing both hands against my heart to slow its violent beating.

One night I woke to a racket of crickets. Through the window screen I could see the shadow of the swing frame in the moonlit back yard. I could see the streetlamp across from the bakery down by the field and the three streetlamps rising with the road as it curved out of sight at the top of the hill. The night sky was the color of a dark blue marble I liked to hold up to a bulb in the table lamp. I dressed quickly, pulled out my carpet, and slowly, so as not to make scraping noises, pushed up the window and the screen. From the foot of the bed I lifted the rolled rug. It suddenly spilled open, like a dark liquid rushing from a bottle. The wood of the window pressed against my back as I bent my way through.

In the blue night I sailed over the back yard, passing high over the hedge and into the lot, where I saw the shadow of the carpet rippling over moonlit high grass. I turned back to the yard, swooped over the garage roof, and circled the house at the level of the upper windows, watching myself pass in the glittery black glass; and rising a little higher, into the dark and dream-blue air, I looked down to see that I was passing over Joey’s yard toward Ciccarelli’s lot, where older boys had rock fights in the choked paths twisting among high weeds and thornbushes; and as when, standing up to my waist in water, I suddenly bent my legs and felt the cold wetness covering my shoulders, so now I plunged into the dark blue night, crossing Ciccarelli’s lot, passing over a street, sailing over garage roofs, till rising higher I looked down on telephone wires glistening as if wet with moonlight, on moon-greened tree-tops stuffed with blackness, on the slanting rafters and open spaces of a half-built house crisscrossed with shadows; in the distance I could see a glassy stream going under a road; spots of light showed the shapes of far streets; and passing over a roof close by a chimney, I saw each brick so sharp and clear in the moonlight that I could make out small bumps and holes in the red and other surfaces; and sweeping upward with the wind in my hair I flew over moon-flooded rooftops striped with chimney shadows, until I saw below me the steeple of a white church, the top of the firehouse, the big red letters of the five-and-dime, the movie marquee sticking out like a drawer, the shop windows dark-shining in the light of streetlamps, the street with its sheen of red from the traffic light; then out over rows of rooftops on the far side of town, a black factory with lit-up windows and white smoke that glowed like light; a field stretching away; gleaming water; till I felt I’d strayed to the farthest edge of things; and turning back I flew high above the moonlit town, when suddenly I saw the hill with three streetlamps, the bakery, the swing frame, the chicken coop—and landing for a moment on the roof of the garage, sitting with my legs astride the peak, exultant, unafraid, I saw, high in the blue night sky, passing slowly across the white moon, another carpet with its rider.

With a feeling of exhilaration and weariness—a weariness like sadness—I rose slowly toward my window, and bending my way through, I plunged into sleep.

The next morning I woke sluggish and heavy-headed. Outside, Joey was waiting for me on his carpet. He wanted to race around the house. But I had no heart for carpets that day, stubbornly I swung on the old swing, threw a tennis ball onto the garage roof and caught it as it came rushing over the edge, squeezed through the hedge into the vacant lot where I’d once caught a frog in a jar. At night I lay remembering my journey in sharp detail—the moon-
glistening telephone wires above their shadow-stripes, the clear bricks in the chimney—while through the window screen I heard the chik-chik-chik of crickets. I sat up in bed and shut the window and turned the metal lock on top.

I had heard tales of other voyages, out beyond the ends of the town, high up into the clouds. Joey knew a boy who'd gone up so high you couldn't see him anymore, like a balloon that grows smaller and smaller and vanishes—as if suddenly—into blue regions beyond the reach of sight. There were towns up there, so they said; I didn't know; white cloud-towns, with towers. Up there, in the blue beyond the blue, there were rivers you could go under the way you could walk under a bridge; birds with rainbow-colored tails; ice mountains and cities of snow; flattened shining masses of light like whistling discs; blue gardens; slow-moving creatures with leathery wings; towns inhabited by the dead. My father had taught me not to believe stories about Martians and spaceships, and these tales were like those stories: even as you refused to believe them, you saw them, as if the sheer effort of not believing them made them glow in your mind. Beside such stories, my forbidden night journey over the rooftops seemed tame as a stroll. I could feel dark desires ripening within me; stubbornly I returned to my old games, as carpets moved in back yards, forming bars of red and green across white shingles.

Came a day when my mother let me stay home while she went shopping at the market at the top of the hill. I wanted to call out after her: stop! make me go with you! I saw her walking across the lawn toward the open garage. My father had taken the bus to work. In my room I raised the blinds and looked out at the brilliant blue sky. For a long time I looked at that sky before unlocking the window, pushing up the glass and screen.

I set forth high over the back yard and rose smoothly into the blue. I kept my eyes ahead and up, though now and then I let my gaze fall over the carpet's edge. Down below I saw little red and black roofs, the shadows of houses thrown all on one side, a sunny strip of road fringed with sharp-bent tree-shadows, as if they had been blown sideways by a wind—and here and there, on neat squares of lawn, little carpets flying above their moving shadows. The sky was blue, pure blue. When I next glanced down I saw white puffballs hanging motionless over factory smokestacks, oil tanks like white coins by a glittering brown river. Up above, in all that blue, I saw only a small white cloud, with a little rip at the bottom, as if someone had started to tear it in half. The empty sky was so blue, so richly and thickly blue, that it seemed a thing I ought to be able to feel, like lake water or snow. I had read a story once about a boy who walked into a lake and came to a town on the bottom, and now it seemed to me that I was plunging deep into a lake, even though I was climbing. Below me I saw a misty patch of cloud, rectangles of dark green and butterscotch and brown. The blue stretched above like fields of snow, like fire. I imagined myself standing in my yard, looking up at my carpet growing smaller and smaller until it vanished into blue. I felt myself vanishing into blue. He was vanishing into blue. Below my carpet I saw only blue. In this blue beyond blue, all nothing everywhere, was I still? I had passed out of sight, the string holding me to earth had snapped, and in these realms of blue I saw no rivers and white towns, no fabulous birds, but only shimmering distances of skyblue heavenblue blue. In that blaze of blue I tried to remember whether the boy in the lake had ever come back; and looking down at that ungraspable blue, which plunged away on both sides, I longed for the hardness under green grass, tree bark scraping my back, sidewalks, dark
stones. Maybe it was the fear of never coming back, maybe it was
the blue passing into me and soaking me through and through, but
a dizziness came over me, I closed my eyes—and it seemed to me
that I was falling through the sky, that my carpet had blown away,
that the rush of my falling had knocked the wind out of me, that I
had died, was about to die, as in a dream when I felt myself falling
toward the sharp rocks, that I was running, tumbling, crawling,
pursued by blue; and opening my eyes I saw that I had come down
within sight of rooftops, my hands clutching the edges of my car-
pet like claws. I swooped lower and soon recognized the rooftops
of my neighborhood. There was Joey’s yard, there was my garden,
there was my chicken coop, my swing; and landing in the yard I felt
the weight of the earth streaming up through me like a burst of joy.

At dinner I could scarcely keep my eyes open. By bedtime I had
a temperature. There were no fits of coughing, no itchy eyes, or
raw red lines under runny nostrils—only a steady burning, a heavy
weariness, lasting three days. In my bed, under the covers, behind
closed blinds, I lay reading a book that kept falling forward onto
my chest. On the fourth day I woke feeling alert and cool-skinned.
My mother, who for three days had been lowering her hand gently
to my forehead and staring at me with grave, searching eyes, now
walked briskly about the room, opening blinds with a sharp thin
sound, drawing them up with a clatter. In the morning I was
allowed to play quietly in the yard. In the afternoon I stood behind
my mother on an escalator leading up to boys’ pants. School was
less than two weeks away; I had outgrown everything; Grandma
was coming up for a visit; Joey’s uncle had brought real horseshoes
with him; there was no time, no time for anything at all; and as I
walked to school along hot sidewalks shaded by maples, along the
sandy roadside past Ciccarelli’s lot, up Franklin Street and along
Collins Street, I saw, in the warm and summery September air, like
a gigantic birthmark, a brilliant patch of red leaves among the
green.

One rainy day when I was in my room looking for a slipper, I
found my rolled-up carpet under the bed. Fluffs of dust stuck to it
like bees. Irritably I huddled it down into the cellar and laid it on top
of an old trunk under the stairs. On a snowy afternoon in January
I chased a ping-pong ball into the light-striped darkness under the
cellar stairs. Long spiderwebs like delicate rigging had grown in the
dark space, stretching from the rims of barrels to the undersides
of the steps. My old carpet lay on the crumbly floor between the trunk
and a wooden barrel. “I’ve got it!” I cried, seizing the white ball
with its sticky little clump of spiderweb, rubbing it clean with my
thumb, bending low as I ducked back into the yellow light of the
cellar. The sheen on the dark green table made it look silky.
Through a high window I could see the snow slanting down, falling
steadily, piling up against the glass.