



NEIL CARPATHIOS

Cancer Clinic

I was running oh so late,
couldn't find the new office
my dentist had moved to,
I was cursing the secretary
who had given me instructions,
cursing slow cars and red lights,
cursing the whole goddamn universe,
slapping the steering wheel
when I screeched into a lot,
jumped from my car
into a building
to ask directions,
and who would have thought
you could step onto another planet
so easily, where aliens
looked like skeletons
in skull caps,
some in wheelchairs,
most with bulging eyes,
long bony fingers turning pages,
a little girl creature
being helped toward an open door
by two human-looking women
dressed in white, one on each side
holding a twig-like arm,

all three of them smiling,
the girl-thing staring down at her feet
the way a baby does
learning to walk, tiny steps,
and there was no impatience or anger
even though the door held open
by a human-looking man also in white
must have seemed a mile away
as they scuffed forward
across the planet's linoleum surface
reminding me of turtles,
the way I'd watch them as a boy
near a pond, afternoons in summer,
sun on my face,
fishing pole in one hand
sandwich in the other,
back on my planet,
and it didn't matter
where I was from
or where I was going—
I couldn't remember any more—
as I stood staring
until they made their way,
reached the door,
and passed through.

On This Earth

My friend was late,
so in the coffee shop
I watched a little girl
so excited by her cookie
on the plate

that she giggled
and clapped her hands
and looked up at
her father with wide eyes
then back down

at her cookie,
which was yellow
with a black icing eye
to resemble a bird.
She touched it

with her finger,
smiled a missing tooth
smile, gazed up again
at her father
who also smiled,

and she giggled some more.

Which is when
my friend arrived
and I said thanks
for being late,

which I meant
but he took
as sarcasm, as the father
opened a newspaper
full of things that had

already happened
and the girl—
though I don't know
what words can do
to honor what I saw—

in the perfect bubble
of the present moment
took a nibble
and started to wiggle
on her chair.

Trying to Name It

There's something about Max,
the short pudgy guy who delivers
papers. It's not the fact
that in his thirties he has
a nine or ten year old brain.
Nor that every afternoon he pedals
his sky blue Schwinn with a basket
that holds the rolled-up news of this
big bad world. It's not how when he arrives
at my mailbox and sees me on my porch
he smiles, waves, yells,
"Here's your paper, Mr. Neil!"
It's not his t-shirt always sweat-soaked, sticking
to rolls of fat around his middle.
Not his thick fingers that once handed
me the paper through my open car window,
which must have been a stroke of luck
because he said, "Aren't we lucky,"
then giggled.
It's not his missing front tooth,
the gap that causes him to spray
when he talks, especially if he's excited.
It's not the way he stops pedaling
when a neighbor's black Lab runs up
and he straddles the bike in the middle

of the street stroking the dog's head,
letting the dog lick his news-ink stained beefy hands.
No. It has more to do with how
if you stood beside me on the grass—
I invite you, stand beside me—
you too would hear him telling the dog
something private, in whispers, like a secret
as we strain to make out the words,
the dog resting its chin so calmly
on Max's knee. How looking up into
the pasty pimpled face
which Max has lowered so they are nearly
nose to nose, the animal doesn't blink,
and we watch in wonder
like some cave man or woman looking up
at Sirius, the Dog Star, the brightest,
before things had names,
as he kisses the furry black noggin
three times—a sort of prayer—
then pedals off down the street.

Teresa's World

The neighbor girl, third grade,
made it with her father.
A school project, they carved
entire mountain ranges
out of styrofoam blocks,
crinkled foil to be an ocean,
glued sand for a beach.
They created a jungle from grass
and snips of the backyard pine's
prickly branches.
One day they saw me
walking, invited me in,
so proud to show
the tiny plastic townspeople
boarding a train, marching into
a church, playing on a miniature
playground. There was a farm
with little cows and pigs,
a windmill with twirling blades.
I remember how
the little girl said it took
four whole weeks to build,
almost a year ago. Now
a month since the drowning
I watch from my porch

her father, who could be a god,
drag it out of the garage
to the yard, where
with newspapers and twigs,
he makes a small fire
then stands a long time
studying the flames,
letting it all vanish.