

## The Astronaut and Red

*And I think it's gonna be a long, long time, 'til touch down brings me  
round again to find I'm not the man they think I am at home.*  
—Elton John, “Rocket Man”

Red's at the gas station again, sleeping  
on the ground between the pumps,  
his shopping cart full of cans silent  
underneath the thick morning fog,  
not like when he wheels clanging  
from car to car asking annoyed folks,  
*Spare change? Bum a smoke?*  
or announces *Earthquake's coming!*  
hands tangled in his thick red beard.

The station manager arrives at 5:30 a.m.,  
looks down and asks Red to move,  
but he means to the side of the station,  
the place the sun warms when it rises.  
He lights two smokes and gives one to Red,  
who says he sees loneliness in the clouds.  
The manager wanted to be an astronaut once,  
and the two of them stare at their smoke  
launching up and away in the sky, spiraling  
around and eventually into one another's.

Later, the manager thinks about zero gravity  
while customers pay without looking at him,  
thinks about how things are weightless in space  
when customers complain the restroom is dirty,  
steal beer, draw a mustard face on his clean floor.  
*What do you think I need seven cents for?*  
a greasy kid smirks at the change  
left from his 7:00 a.m. condom purchase.

Red knows not to come inside,  
but one day the bell announces his arrival  
and he calls bluntly into the store:  
*The moon is falling into the ocean.*  
No one is listening—Slurpee overflow,  
Pringles out of stock, error on pump four.  
A woman pushes around Red to get inside.  
The manager watches Red leave to sit alone  
in the sun as the woman complains, *Hurry up—*  
*Do you even understand what I'm saying?*

At two a.m. the manager leaves to go  
home to his cat and his twelve-pack of beer.  
It's dark and it's cold when he leaves,  
so he buys Red a hot coffee, and they talk  
while they watch the stars wink down at them.  
He's going home to no one, so he stays with Red  
a while, watching and sipping, hands cupping warmth.  
Finally, he waves to Red, only living soul awake.  
He looks at the sky and swears the moon is sagging.

\*Originally appeared in *Slipstream*