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To Bill Buckner on His Release by the Boston Red Sox

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TO BILL BUCKNER ON HIS RELEASE BY THE
BOSTON RED SOX

July 24, 1987

The papers total your career
in easy symmetry: 2,542
big league hits and one
stupendous World Series whiff.
Fate's a bad hop, Billy Buck,
or no hop at all. We had to watch
nothing change on the TV replay.
You were playing Mookie perfectly
though I bet some nights sleep would come easier
if you'd been hopelessly out of range.

Okay, maybe Stanley wouldn't have
gotten to the bag in time.
Knowing this you know nothing
except what makes a life look back.
One stupid grounder (that replay in the mind)—
enough to justify ten thousand coaches shouting
ten million times: Eye on the ball!
How many times can you wrap your ankles in ice
and Ace bandages and lace those ridiculous high-tops
to your rickety shins? In a week, Buck,

I'm forty, and you're a lousy reminder
of how young thirty-seven is.
Sure, you can still get around
on a fastball, foul off junk from the corners
and slap any fat-hanging curve into the gap.
But even designated hitters have to
get down the line, Buck.
You're a jalopy with bad wheels.
You're the only ballplayer I ever saw
run with his arms. I remember

how you scored from second in the fifth game
on Dewey's hit and made it look incredibly
difficult – windmilling around third,
bowlegged and flatfooted, shimmying
till you flopped and skidded home.
NBC loved it and so did we each time
the replay took forever. But that was before
the ground ball and the blank ending,
early winter and its unredeeming spring, and now –
getting cut midseason, a thing they call release.

ETHERIDGE

July. Port Townsend. Early afternoon
and already you were pathetic, fingers
around the neck of a brown sack
under the trees, words botched and rambling.
And that evening, after we'd waited so long
in the dark of the theater
for the only black man in town,
when you came on stage,
brushed aside the mike and opened your throat
to *Willow, Weep for Me*, slow and deep, wavering –
I cringed. But then you turned to poems –
belly songs made up in the joint, about Slick
and Hard Rock and Malcolm and Mr. K
the Love of My Life, and said them by heart
in perfect pitch, never missing a syllable.
Next morning, catching you
weaving across the grass, as barn swallows
flew sheer in the sun, I thought perhaps
you'd climb into the light again to sing.