

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.