

DANIEL ZIMMERMAN

BARRY MCKINNON, *SONGS & SPEECHES*, CALEDONIA WRITING SERIES, 1976
WHOLEHEARTEDLY ILLUSTRATED BY CLAIRE MCKINNON.

It shouldn't be such a rare pleasure to read a book of poetry. It wasn't for the ancients who, as a matter of course, respected the use of poetry; but they respected speech, too: nor songs nor speeches came cheap, and neither do these. This isn't just the sort of potpourri we've more & more been asked we get accustomed to: it's a conscious book, 'shapely', tough as the sea.

The "poetry becomes complaint", complaint against the arbitrariness of language & the acts of men proceeding from its misappropriation. The captive whale, doing tricks for food, lost brother of the vocal sea—the only chance to talk to men is to his trainers, and then only through their projections, these great, unbeastly creatures. To speak to the trainers, who ask onlookers to applaud the whales, to encourage them in their performances?—"their hearing is very / good". We only wish it were, that that of both were better.

The terrible responsibility of words deferred—not just that the drunk "I'm tony bennet" sings, nor fences of the language, legal banter—the detail of experience impersonal, "how much?", gives no measure. Likewise anyone can swim below the tide, but you can't talk under water, much as you might or might not need to, in the whales' way. The imperative—to write "of things we *all* recognize", eg "that n.y. steak is \$4.39 / a lb.", countered within by that "to go beyond all things, & sometimes sing // of nothing"—both recognized as "necessary" from the rocky vantage where the sea & land worlds meet—chafes, incongruous of resolution in their images.

Of songs & speeches men construct their world: here it is, they say, now paint it, keep it up, that we in our repairs not let it slip away. mckinnon, painting, the sea world gently, gently repudiated for regaining his "womans eye", past the whale/deer/steak/spring/lady to the name this side of drunkenness we all begin with, the first word spoken in the book & where the care outlasting all complaint brings us, despite Heraclitus, *home*.