

UP HERE
by
Donald Schenker



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This book is dedicated to the memory of Jerry Zuidema.

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Introduction

Don Schenker is a free spirit in a world of free spirits. As a poet he's taken it upon himself to liberate these spirits, from gravity, from causality, from brute silence. And in the process he frees us, too, from our own speechlessness, from our congeries of facts.

But, as the title immediately suggests, **Up Here** doesn't deal in a weighty spiritualism, American Indian, Cabalist, Neoplatonic, although, doubtless, those also have their virtues. Schenker is much lighter and funnier than "animism," "spiritualism." He works with twinkles, out of eye corners: he creates marvelous, airy structures from things most of us censor out as preposterous, lose in a casual turning of our heads. His poems are quicksilver, momentary.

And the essence of their momentary quality is the sense of conversation, a truncated burst of speech. Schenker makes us feel we've been talking with him for a long time, intimate, let-it-all-hang-out. He catches this talking at the peak of its parabola, the moment of weightlessness, and cuts it there. So his writing, frozen, out of time, as all writing is, makes us believe in its motion: it yields intimacy, a quixotic flash.

There's more to this book, though, than the modular Schenker flash I've been analyzing. **Up Here** conveys a powerful sense of place, the rural settings of Hurd's Gulch and Austin Creek. We can feel a deep undertone of relationship, Alice, Schenker's wife, Ona, their daughter. But the book's deepest gift is Don Schenker's own humanity. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, to whom Schenker dedicates one of these poems, when you touch this book, "camarado," you touch a man.

Richard Silberg
Berkeley, California
August, 1987

Hurd's Gulch, 1986-87

Saying Hello to the Place

Just arrived,
all the stuff moved in,
standing with my back to the empty car
in the dead, silent night,
looking up at the few, veiled stars,

all at once here,
alone,

peeing.

This Light

This is serious light.
At the crack of dawn, this light
stopped the rain. This light
has the housetimbers talking to themselves.
This light bangs on eyelids
like a kid raised by wolves bangs on pots and pans.
Hardly started yet and this light already shows
powerful colors in the woods.
Got to put on dark clothes to walk around in this light.

Secrets of the Sleeping Loft

The living body of this pine
never imagined
a future of walls and ceilings.

yet deep within its plank-sawn nakedness
dark geese are striving in Jovian whorls,
siren eyes stare from Black Holes,
splintered sperm stain expanding clouds
on the secret lakes of Venus.

I close my eyes and pretend
to be dead: Does my human body have its own
imaginings?

Do my empty pants,
hanging from a nail on the wall,
imagine me?

Dawn Rain

"Here's more," says the rain,
and sure enough,
down comes another shower

rinsing the shingles on the roof, front and back,
and the house, it being morning,
stretching its big, dry shoulders into it.

"Like it?" the rain wants to know.
"Sure enough," smiles the house, with wet hair.

Rape of the Deck

Nailed down,
its amputated ends
groan.

Only the sun and the nearby trees have
enough patience to witness its suffering

and they don't give a damn.
So why shouldn't I give the kids hammers;
go out there and
pound those nails back in?

Besides,
where could it possibly go if it got loose
at this stage of the game?

Anomaly

So well rested, so plentifully rested,
there's plenty rest to spare,
rest I haven't even used yet,
extra rest to bestow on anything
restless.

I feel like floating
amongst the branches of the trees,
gathering birds,
sailing in the sky inviting
feathered friends tenderly down to rest.

have them set a spell
even if their legs do fold the wrong way,
poor things,

working all day long aloft, wings pumping,
searching for nourishment all day long
just to keep aloft all day, wings pumping,

never letting themselves relax,
take a load off their feet.

Barking Birds

Locals in the woods don't want me.
Barking birds.
Climbing the hillside, strolling the meadow,
barking birds.

Sleeping, they throw things
at the house. Go home noises
all night long.

In the morning there's the sunup clamor
of lynch mob trees.

Well, go ahead and bark, throw things.
Here I am and here I stay.
Two weeks and not a minute longer.

Message

The orchard clamors
in the sun
for my attention.

Trees wave
all together,
letters in a grid:

Read me,
read me.
Now read me again.

Beeline

Up here, Steve beelines
place to place over the hills
on foot with greetings in his big, oiled shoes.
"Well, hello!" he says.

The pace he keeps is like
Roman marching: one two, one two;
keep going til you get there.

Of course he'll go around trees,
or buckbrush,
but that's about all.
Builds the legs.

Quail

All wound up in the pond grass,
feather-triggered,

their rubberband motors fire up
flushed into flight expecting

Gunshot! Dog! Death! Hey,
it's only me!

Mantrap

Oh, an animal path, intriguing.
No ordinary road. Come, let's
see where it goes.

Such fun following the footsteps
of real creatures. Look.
Goes under trees, brush, around that rock.

They're waiting.
A million rabbits. A hundred million mice.
Silent crowds of rats and squirrels
waiting.

Cows on a Hill

What are they doing there
besides standing around?

If they were people, they'd be
peopling that hill, populating it.
But they're cows.

Are they bovinating?
Are they cowing?

Besides chewing their cuds,
what are they doing up there?

The Light at Five Thousand Feet

Climbing, the mind goes first.
In such bright height identity dissolves,
takes forever to settle.

You are the bones you crunch on as you stand
squinting. You are the view.

Having come this far,
one comes disguised as glass
like everything else seen through
by the color nothing
as it radiates.

Hunter Death Approaching A Flock of Birds

Here comes Hunter Death.
Uh-oh.

You sure it's him?
Yeah.
Uh-oh.

Is he headed this way?
Yeah.
Uh-oh.

Fast or slow?
A fair clip.
Uh-oh.

Is he carrying his gun?
Yeah.
Uh-oh.

Single shot or scattergun?
Scattergun.
Uh-oh.

You see any extra shells?
A full bandolier.
Uh-oh.

Is he carrying a sack?
Yeah.
Uh-oh.

Big sack or small sack?
Big sack.
Uh-oh.

I hope it ain't me.
Me, too.

Rain

Indistinguishable from sky,
she walks this way on her haunches
knocking down trees,
taking her sweet time,

and something tells me this is it.
She'll get here and find me
soaked and staring like the rest of them.
Because this is it. This is all there is.

Free the Woods

A surprise hailstorm, freezing sparks.
vertical wires of light yanking
at leaves, branches, limbs.
igniting roots.

So this is what trees are for:
to strive for the outward, accumulate
thrust, escape velocity, power

to smash the grip of earth and free the woods,
pull up and burn for fuel all chains and lift
into the electric rain of space

each tree a planet of its own,
the woods a galaxy.

Signs

This stone has lain in a hole
under the belly of a snake.

The stem of this flower was broken
by a lame rabbit
running.

The stain on this twig
is the urine of a salamander.

This feather fell
from the body of a sparrow
seized in flight.

That glint in the high trees
was the eye of a cat
looking this way.

This fallen limb,
so worn on one side,
was the perch of one too many bats.

This patch of flowers, each spring, grows
in the shape of the fallen tree that nourishes it,
like a persisting shadow.

The blemish on the picture window is
dried blood and bits of broken beak
of a finch who died there suddenly
in the midst of full flight last September.

Under inches of these moulding leaves are coins
lost last spring when a city child
tripped headlong over that rock there
and went home chastened.

Those clouds passing to the east are warnings
that never stop.

Kinds of Light

In high sun, brass is as good as gold.
Or wood, if it could, if it's very old, is good.
But only the bone of wood.

In low sun, leaves light slow, green wicks
burning dry red, dangling moments only,
warm flames jangling in darkening tinder air fading
back through black to silence.

Just before dawn, musicians
begin to play the trees.
They seem to need
hardly more than darkness to read the score.

Portrait of a Lamplit Interior Suspended Over a Hillside with Oaks at Dusk

The reflected room cantilevers out
into dark, thin air
the other side of the picture window

backwards. There's the interior lamplight.
There's the walls blocking out the darkness.
There's the sink behind us hovering
under the dewline of the oak fifty feet away
filled with dirty dishes.
There's you and I at the table just cleared
seeing our other room with

ephemeral focus on our faces. There's no
real room out there. It's only
light from the house
reaching for the usual nothing
and being betrayed back to us. There'd

better not be any other
place than where we are; no room
where you and I pose
in light more wonderful than this.

Beggars

Nights the oaks
crowd around the windows
for light.

When we have blown out the lamps
they watch the stars.

Young

There is a new Crier among the coyotes.
He is young. His voice is not big
but sharp as the moon. It penetrates bone,
cuts every mind for miles.

His First Announcement of Blood
after the raid on a rat's nest last night
was incisive, thrilling.
The pack's howl lifted him to the sky.

But turning north for the prescribed
Second Cry,
he muffed a single syllable of the song.

There was outrage, vomiting, bared teeth,
gesturing at throats.
He is young.

Escaping the Owl

I dream the owl,
hooting outside the window
over the warm body of a mouse.

has us
by surprise
at the foot of our bed,
one of us under each claw.

In the cold, black bulb of his eye
I see me turn my back,
draw the opaque membrane of your sleeping body
over my shoulders
and vanish in the dark uneaten.

Wings

I wake from a dead sleep
at a gallop, writing.
A bladder full of words.
Standing there, I am half poetry,
half asleep.

Later, trying
to make this poem about
the anxiety of making poems,

I sit here,
half poetry, half desk.
I have an urge

to let the desk half go, let it
drop away, down down
until it lands with a little
splash far far
behind me.

Money

At dusk the dark moths
flutter like folding coins.
They have come to buy the oaks
at the per leaf price.

At dawn the phones are ringing
in the woods. Woodpeckers.
It is money.
Do I want some.

Good Morning California

The curtain goes up and the sun
comes out and shines light
right in the eyes of the trees
ready or not.

and the scene
stands there blinking.

and if it weren't
for wanting so terribly much to watch
another wonderful day begin
before our very eyes

anyone with half a notion
could walk right up to the woods and,
with one kick,
knock the whole thing over
backwards, and that'd be something
to really see.

Sunrise High

Light comes barreling down the hill this morning
like a school bus, lights on and
kids sticking out the open windows waving
signs of clear orange ruckus

and me, the teacher.
sun in my eyes and heart in my mouth, begging
"Johnny stop that," and "Sue, be careful," and
"Kids, stop rocking that boat this minute!" knowing

it's going down anyway, end over end
and all of us with it, like it or not, all the way
down to the bottom and up again. all of us
always carrying on like that.

Breakfast Candles

Wrong dream. This is not our table
set for breakfast: a dark room,

bunches of worn silver strewn
on old linen, stacks of cracked china.
And where did those candlesticks come from?

This must be the table abandoned in Roumania
when Grandma left for America. She said
they drew the curtains, locked the doors forever.

But these are the hills of California.
There's clean, green sunlight in the kitchen.
There's coffee brewing. Let's eat.

There's sausages and eggs and home fries, toast,
and candles burning in the clean, green sunlight.

Looking Forward

When I get home
I'll be looking for rabbit turds
and deer droppings behind the house in Berkeley.

And tiny purple and yellow flowers
growing from the cracks in the sidewalks
of Oakland Chinatown.

Vacation Spot

Wipes my kiss off its cheek with
the back of its hand
without even waiting for me to turn my back,

shoos me. swats my rump and
brooms me away good riddance.
Can damned well
fall in the forest without the likes of me.

Who Goes There?

At first light the stones
on the road in to our place
stand up and cast
long, sharp challenges at the tires
of unknown cars,

dark, thin, protecting arms
like lances across the road.

A Hundred Blackbirds

Up out of the alfalfa swirling
in a cartoon balloon.
Connect-the-dots.
Now you see 'em. now you don't.

No particular message.
Only the field
dreaming.

Pulling Over

Driving back, my wake
eats the past with blunt teeth.

Insects crowd down the center of the fast lane tapping
warnings on the windshield.

Stop. There's nowhere to go.
The future ends

here, where your brakes alone can stop you.
Now. The edge of the world.

Austin Creek, 1969-70

Here I Am Again, Folks

Alice's laughter in the black Buick ten years ago, red hair loose in the open window, forty miles an hour in the spring, this very hill, pointing barearm O Looka The Cow to Ona, two, standing between our bodies on the front seat.

And here I am again, folks, drawn back to the ears in a bow aimed north, the muscles of intention feathered at both ends:

a bunch of simple, ordinary fingers with nothing up their sleeves describing a wheel.

Only

this meadow again, odor of yellow grass, manure smile of year-end air through the windshield of the red Rambler, brown throb of the motor going North over the last hill on Sir Francis Drake Highway near Olema & U.S. 1.

Here I am again

hanging onto a panicked gazelle with one hand, the other gone ahead with a warning bell ringing.

South

South Forever

Hopelessly Saltwater South

All the while heading North, Pacificways. Where can I go and be out of sight of the south, see only meadows, trees, cows, barns & salt water?

Ah, well.

It's only a gazelle. It could have been an elephant with splintered, antique ivory trudging wearily to a secret yard.

Barnett's Cabins

The man who built this place might have been annoyed
by pine needles in his shoes. His Pall Mall butts
have long since fostered new growth.
At least a barrellfull of unstraightenable nails
have put iron in the forest floor.

This eighth acre
stands exactly as situated in the deed, the site
precisely where the title says it should be. Before Barnett
made the deal, flush with his mother's money,
it might have been room enough for one traveller
to spend one day, one night.

But a crowd of seven
small tourist cabins were built here, cute dilapidations now,
unsuspected from the highway, knocked together
with the view in mind of overlooking the creek,
still running strong below the ledge of walkways,
damp, dark & single file, he fit between those cabins with
his ungenerous genius.

Put them all up in three weeks,
& then, one reason or another, maybe just wanting a beer,
let the painting go, returning dry, two years later,
with ten gallons of Army Surplus White, useless
as locking the seven little doors
for sealing out the damp of the woods now.

In the metaphysical
silence of the woods, a lost ear like mine can hear back
twenty years to the echoes of the hammer clapping
the dry, cheap, used lumber to pattern, the skilsaw
ripping the board feet counted to the inch
by the contractor's credit limitations.

A few birds
fly out of the full, foot-deep carpet of fir
on the peaked roofs, shaking a whole patch of it
down between the cabins with a whisper

Through one
unhinged door you can see, nestled against
an unconnected gas range originally from Sears,
a mildewed sleeping bag abandoned. Possibly
because of loneliness, some hitchhiker decided
never to sleep alone in the woods again. Or even

to end his travels altogether.

when out of it leaps
a frog across the room & crashes into the wall
eight feet away almost scaring the life out of me.

anyone rest here who doesn't have to? Unless
it's to tear this stingy place apart and,
illogically, bury the pieces.

How could

Bodega Bay at 25 MPH, North; A Catalog of Sights & Views Listed in Order of Seeing Over the Distance Covered; Including Adjectival & Adverbial Comments on the Scenery & Architecture Made in Parentheses as Asides; In Good Spirits

The Pacific (visible on the left again. good to know:
going north. I've driven toward it & it's been
behind me. left shoulder & right).

the sun (low and gorgeous).

the road (organic to the places it passes through.
towns along the coast. the way being
the places by agreement in number. a flat
rock flung sidearm out to sea a certain way
along the surface of the water. bounce.
bounce. bouce. bonce. bnce. bnc. bc).

boats (bobbing).

warehouses (abandoned fish storeshacks. or).

canning plants (they might have been. appearing
to be kept closer to the vertical
than to the horizontal; appearing
to be kept from falling down
by the offers to sell
painted on, or tacked onto
their weathered boards).

houses (ramshackle.
the four by eight foot module
no match for the salt)

fenced (leaning),

cactus plants on (leaning) porches.

side roads (like walls, intersecting the road
in hard laterals, sharp
left, right,
then up
almost vertically to the hills).

signs (plastic, wood, sheet metal: GROCERY HARBOR CAFE
PEPSI-COLA FRESH CRABS haMYSTERY SPOT 200 YDS.
& here's the BODEGA BAY VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT
COCA-COLA FRESH CRABS OPEN FRANK'S SNACK SHACK
HARBOR VIEW MOTEL THE BODEGA BAY GARAGE END 25
MILE SPEED LIMIT)

(& back into the countryside).

& More houses (built by the same men who nailed up the signs
with ball peen rocks & rusty nails,
that kind of architecture here, shelters
banged together by word of mouth,
by itching & articulate palms).

the colors of the houses (the only concession to a life
of the imagination,
it's the little woman,
curlers in her hair, choosing paint,
that particular shade of)

sand (or
rust), a kind of
redwood color (with a little, oh, say.)
off-white (thrown in).

(The Pacific on my left, the sun low & gorgeous,
monolithic stones ignored by the tide's urgency,
explosive sea sands & sands of salt, unperching birds.

But now, driving in the crevices of the hills,
where I can't see Bodega Bay, can't see
which is north, the easterly hills,
not even the ocean now.

Oh, I just
passed a small, grey cat back there, watching me
pass out of town: he's on his way back in
before dark, strangers in the evening.)

Field Throwing Birds at a Sky

A flock of black birds amongst
a flock of white sheep grazing
in areas of green over a brown field.

Out of a blue sky red car
muffler blown, backfire, slam
the picture book shut. Punch
of wind through the scene firing

volleys of itself after itself.
Birds up, sheep away, shoots of grass
twisting silver straining to unreact.

Arrows. Directions rain. Eccentric lines dash
and dot, bounce around
the insides of the getaway car
scratching one more passing trace directly

here to this telling,
words, sheep, and birds still
settling.

Or I would
have us all stones. Here & now. Us,
& all our belongings turned into stones.
Stones in the dry rivers.
Stones in the bellies of fishes.
Stones in the deepest trenches of the oceans. Stones
heavy as planets yielding finally
to the anti-gravity of the sky.

Verbatim Talking Song for a Bathing Bluejay

Oh there's a bluejay across the river in a tree & he just
dived right into the stream
KAPLUNK
WOW the third time
He did it again He
jumps in & then he flies right back up on his limb
Shakes himself Waiting again Swishes his tail
i wish I'd brought those glasses Binoculars
AGAIN & Up again Four times
How many times will he do it?
He's waiting now Cocking his head Looking about
Snap Twitch Shake the head quickly
Look around
UhGAIN
FIVE He's in He's in He's jumping around like a fish
A fish He's up again Five times he's done it now
Shaking his head His wings Mmm
What does he wait for there between dives?
Checking under his wings with his beak
He's probably waiting for the water to seep
perhaps to run off his back Mmmm
Cleaning now Turning around
Uh
Nuh I don't think he's gonna do it again
Lifts his wings Cleans There he goes
He flew away

Duncan's Mills, Pop: 20, Elev: 35

for Walt Whitman

Neglected barns, grey farmhouses.
The "en masse" of a century ago and more.
Trucks with rotting rubber, rusted engines
in the sheep-worn yards, marked, "For Sale."
Even the mills aren't roaring any more. The stock
don't seem to like the grass much either, past few years.

Fences put together piecemeal of old
lengths of weathered outhouses collapsed
before so-an-so was a boy, & saved outside.

Or, finally, some new owner, proud
of a good price & in an enthusiasm of ownership,
goes out & tears the thing down, builds
a new one; or, to save costs, on the same old railing,
nodding to the modern age, he'll set one strip
of brand new barbed wire up on top,
pulled taut & gleaming, & make done
his punctuation of history.

Almost as if
the land itself defeats the building on it,
confounds the people who live there in their need
to live there as something more than men.
Or less.

As if they've heard, 'way back when, that
husbandry gets you something more
than any man ever got from it before.

As if
being privileged with acreage so fat,
why shouldn't it rub off on their bones,
the bones of their children?

As if
"en masse." a century & more ago, something
was let get out of hand.

Tobacco ads on barn walls, maybe.
Getting credit at the the general store & needing
a faster way to get there. Letting
the John Deere salesman convince you nothing's to be done
unless you motorize like so-and-so up to Guerneville.
Perhaps it was reading Walt Whitman instead of
loving your wife. Or trusting in a mistranslated Lord.

Land don't pay like some people. long time ago,
thought it would. The land hereabouts looks as if it's
smug.

Take those rocks: they're like
icebergs in the Northern Sea. Ninety percent of them
still in the ground. Gave up digging them out
a hundred & twenty years ago.

The land wins clear & away,
as if it's superior to every man who's ever tried it
in hopes it was a human universe to begin with.

No Visitors During Lunch

A young man, sunglasses, like a marine in civvies,
yellow shirt open at the neck, neat brown pants.

I see him

coming down the beach toward me. He gets to
within 200 yards, sees me, looks around quizzically,
pretending he's making a decision not to come this way
for perfectly good reasons of his own.

makes his decision not to come this way,
turns around
& saunters back up the way he came.

The sight of me

(dirty, wrinkled green coat,
huaraches with no socks,
long hair wild in the wind,
salt in the beard,
& masticating)

provoked either

respect for my privacy (a gentleman, isolated
at the end of a lonely beach,
having a quiet noontime repast:
a green wine bottle
lodged in the sand with
tortillas & raw meat)

or fear (see description above:
a stranger,
unknown occupant of
territory in a cul-de-sac),

not to deny

endless other possibilities.

Now he's climbing the path up the cliff to the parking lot.
Just looked back at me
(& caught me watching him) to make sure I'm still here.

still either dangerous
or worthy of his respect some other way, so that
he was certainly justified
in not coming anywhere near me.

Either way,

little do we both know.

Doppler Effect

Doing 60 between neighbor ladies gossiping
across a country road: mailboxes in the morning,
housecoats, eyeglasses;

Mrs. Smith, left fender, in the act of hollering;
Mrs. Jones, right fender, straining to hear;
arms folded, fists clutching robes shut against
what's coming &

gone before you know it
gaping through my windshield at
a sharp right turn; a ditch, a fence;
never make it; no way
to tell those women who I was: the Doppler effect

in the '62 Rambler two-door, red with white top wouldn't
slow down for that bad turn in the road about
3 miles south of Bodega on U.S. 1 between
the Smith place & the Jones place;

brakes screaming hopeless appeals
over their shoulders at life,
at understanding,
at neighbor ladies to please grab hold
& pull, pull.

Donald Schenker

Born Brooklyn, New York, 1930. Grew up in the Bronx. First attempted writing a poem at 15, a novel at 17. Joined the Navy after high school and was stationed in California. Discharged 1949. Studied art and architecture at Cooper Union, New York. Painted. Married and moved to San Francisco in the 1950's and was active in the literary scene of that place and time. Opened a picture framing shop in Berkeley in 1965, selling art reproductions and posters, later publishing posters and underground comix. Sold out in 1985 to devote full time to writing.

*Has published two books of poems, **Poems** (with David Meltzer), privately printed, San Francisco, 1957, and **Say X**, Print Mint, Berkeley, 1971. Presently putting uncollected poems together for publication. Has completed a novel and is at work on another.*

Has wife and three grown children. Lives in Berkeley, California.

