

Eric Baus, *Scared Text*  
Center for Literary Publishing, 2011  
Reviewed by April Joseph

My understanding of “first thought-best thought,” or the notion that I see what I want to see provoked my initial reading of Baus’s title as “sacred” instead of “scared.” *Scared Text* begins with the cover, a fragment of a chromolithograph of insects, printed in 1902, by Morin. Having an affinity for beetle-lore, I immediately linked the illustration to the Ancient Egyptian scarab beetle, which is closely linked to the sun god, Ra, representing regeneration and transformation. What is the connection between coleoptera (beetles) and fable-ish prose poetry that begins with the moral: “There is no such thing as ‘There is no ghost.’”?

Fascinated as I am with beetles and ghosts, it was only appropriate to read *Scared Text* before bed to be swept away to dream of a “house with a tree growing through it.” The cover image—“Detail from ‘Käfer II. (Exotische Käfer.) (Alle Käfer in natürlicher Größe.),”” roughly translated as “exotic beetles; all beetles in natural size”—importantly contextualizes the book. A Google search of these “exotic beetles” elicits the names, “executioner, common grave digger, German grave digger, stag beetle, rhinoceros beetle, gold bug, buck-chuck horned beetle, the thread diver, and Procrustes scabrosus.” Eric Baus, you give me the chills—in a good way. It is no coincidence that each beetle also plays a role within the text, a disorienting world where death and rebirth loom over the page. In addition, this enchanting illustration centers on a dead rodent (rat?) upon which these clusters of beetles encroach. These symbols of hungry ghosts feeding off the dead in the realm of the living illustrate the processes of death, mourning, and regeneration. The beetle also stands as guardian of myth with its “Exoskeleton Gesture.”

Venom erupted from the trees when the vital system of the brook reset its serum stem.  
Can suspended snakes compose more careless music? Do two detached wings count as  
an exoskeletal gesture? A hiss is the sound the sky would make if these leaves revived  
their flight.

*Scared Text* is not so much frightened as it is revelatory and mystical, beginning with the poem, “Glass Ear.” Yet, as Baus breathes life into his work, the abstract syntax invokes the spirits of the text, voices of truth, which can strike fear in us the most.

Approach the smallest ghost after he has turned his back. A buzz of definition surrounds  
him. This is the sting of the fleeing beetle. How soon before the house becomes soot?  
The statue of elderly hornets is delicately connected to the floor. On the other side of the  
wall an apple hangs suspended. There is no such thing as “There is no ghost.”

Right away, Baus links death and myth with the (executioner) beetle sting, dismantling invisible walls to reveal ghosts enjoying the fruit of paradise, a symbol of myth. As the book unfolds, characters materialize out of language; there is the phantom “I” and Minus and Iris. Baus’s creations of “Minus” and, the first section, “Minotaur Stable” share a striking resemblance to the Greek myth, “Minos and the Minotaur,” alluding to the moral: “beware of what you wish for.” Iris also evokes the myth of “Icarus,” who died as he flew too close to the sun after he and his father, Daedalus, who built a labyrinth for the Minotaur, tried to escape their fate with flight. “A Delphi,” the last poem in the “Minotaur Stable” section, continues to persuade my venture of

*Scared Text* as myth since Delphi was known as the center of the world during ancient Greece and the site of the Delphic oracle. Skin tingling yet?

Minus tried to write his own bible. It began, *So what, saliva. So what, milk.*

Iris told us her dad died in space. The whited-out vowels rang in my ears. *Stupid moon. Stupid burned-up blind spot.*

The doctors said his name had burned up. We never knew how it sounded.

Page after page, there is an overwhelming sense of death and decay that language begins to mourn. Baus directs language to be at a loss, to witness, taste, and smell these not-bodies, and “sleep beside what the house keeps out.” As ghosts haunt the living, who inherit their remains and memories, myth and fable hover over the pages of “Stunned Cove” and the section “Flooded Cloud”.

Whenever Iris surfaces, the river cannot swim. Her worms mirror the surge of a squid ascending. Her waves are clotted with clouds. She salts the shore with an inch of her skin. Swallows orbit her steam.

Each of the eight sections within *Scared Text* contain one to nine paragraph-prose-poems. While the story unfolds in vectors, a series of storylines that intersect and others that do not, I recommend reading “Stupid Moon” and “Negative Moon” under full moon light, in an alley with others in a circle—hail moon! In fact, Baus seems to capture an energetic force by naming the un-namable, possessing ghosts, and creating language that calls the mythical and phenomenal, the insect and animal to collide. The text is rich in imaginative references with a sound-scape that sings at in-between spaces of regeneration.

He called himself Creature and Creature’s Creature. It named the surface beneath his scales.

He claimed it calmed his ghost whenever he spoke to the well of its engine.

An alias for enemy, memory means the moan that precedes me.

The sun a moth is in a strong clot of ether blinds its antlers.

Circling back to the sun, what we know as the bright warmth that squints our eyes, various poems (“Egret Eyes”) throughout the piece anthropomorphize the sun as something not to be trusted as it is broken, or has betrayed the phantom “I.”

I am suspicious of the sun.

I HAVE NEVER SEEN THE SUN.

Has the sun repaired yet?

*Scared Text* dares to take readers through a sacred journey to face loss, love, and the return. “Then the sun found me” implies the truth and beauty of awakening and transformation that emits through “parallel rays.” On the poetic-star scale, Eric Baus’s brilliance is an illustrious galaxy that leads a car full of travelers on the road towards what Kerouac called “the next crazy venture beneath the skies.”