Eric Baus. *Scared Text*. Center for Literary Publishing, 2011.

Entomology and etymology are blood cousins. Insects and words are segmented by history: their light travels leave heavy marks, and both have the ability to confound, despite their ubiquity. Eric Baus's curious volume, *Scared Text*, folds the two topics together. The work is a hybrid of form and function, a descendent, somehow, of disparate ancestors.

One ancestor could be William Gass's "Order of Insects," narrated by a woman who discovers legions of dead, overturned insects, who were once "fierce, ugly, armored things: they used their shadows to seem large." The woman tames their foreignness by sucking them up in a vacuum, recalling "the sudden thrill of horror I had hearing one rattle up the wand." That wonder leads to the "manly" step of research using the only resource she owns: a "dated handbook in French" about insects, which Gass excerpts, untranslated: "*Le tube digestif des Insects est situé dans le grand axe de la cavité générale du corps*."

Baus's mode is different, his context is altered, but he similarly uses syntax and narrative dislocation to create a new schema for his words. *Scared Text* is lexical play in the form of prose poetry. Exercise for the tongue, without even having to speak these words aloud. In Molting Solos, the narrator wonders: "Why was it so difficult to picture a bird?" Baus would rather leave that question unanswered, mostly because his entire text is difficult. The schemata of his poems are so dense that the play threatens to collapse the narratives. For some readers, these words will lodge in the throat and stick. While there is sufficient air in the form of white space on the page, Baus's poems require undiscovered ciphers. The narrators are mysterious, sometimes direct, as in "Spoiled Swan" ("Follow the trail to the minotaur stable. Be a diorama."), but typically malleable, as in the first person of "Mirror Seed."

Such observations are not meant to be complaints, merely the initial steps on the path toward dislocation within a book that resists the classification we so greatly desire for the insects of its content. A ghost appears early in *Scared Text*, and is reflected in the ghosts of dislocation, both of content and language. In "The Worm's First Film," sentences are connected by something other than the glues of grammar and referent: "Two horses climb a hive. The plumage around their waists retracts. *I ate mace*, one thinks. *No one knows I ate mace.* His mouth repeats a top lip twice. *Don't tell my brother. Please*."

Readers—and perhaps some reviewers of *Scared Text*—might search for repeated characters, an overarching narrative. Those inquiries are understandable, but desire for discovery does not always translate into existence. Baus's experiment is something different, beyond the narrative and the lyrical, far from the analogical, not even the surreal. Take the first sentence of "Gored Ox": "A man with a lantern buried the tail of a gored ox in reddened wool." The poem, rather than moving forward, pivots; Baus often uses the persona of Minus to bend these narratives, and here Minus inscribes a statement. Elsewhere Minus wonders about the letter "f," but he also sleeps, flees rivers, and conjoins with Iris, whose presence gives the collection its firmest anchoring.

That is, until the titular poem, which promises "Omnivores cannot survive." Here "citizens merge amorphously," as Baus's words blend and blur: "Don latex, martyrs, the corporeal Yes pleads." Tired tongues will find even more strain, but more signifiers appear like welcome breath, including senators, on a "meditation bus," who "remain invisible." And finally, in a "Common Cloud," the collection ends as fragmentary as it began, but perhaps with fresh awareness, the recognition that there "is always a different cost. A different cloth. A second coat." *Scared Text* should be considered linguistic calisthenics: a poet stretching language to its widest pliability. We see words and insects everywhere, but that does not mean we understand either. Readers will leave with sore mouths, but that discomfort is a necessary step, a means toward the end of what appears to be Baus's ultimate, and laudable, goal: to test the efficacy of language when that referred world has lost its own efficacy. When Minus says "*I am awake . . . but I think I need to describe myself*," the reader of Baus's work might never undertake that same action in the usual manner. Like the midcentury housewife who thrills in accumulating the segmented corpses who litter her rugs in Gass's story, Baus's reader will return to *Scared Text* for language made new.

—Nick Ripatrazone