Coastlines: One of the things that attracts me to your poetry is the way it grabs at the sounds that surround language—the sounds that get lost in the cracks, so to speak. For example, others have commented on your titles: Tuned Droves is commonly misread as Turned Doves, and The To Sound insinuates that there is sound on the way to sound. I keep misreading your newest book title, Scared Text as Sacred Test. Why is implied sound so important to your work? Why should one pay attention to it?

Baus: I'm interested in writing that creates kinetic and connective reading experiences. I love discovering the shadows of words hovering behind or within other words. There are always undertones and overtones built into sounds that are not consciously perceived. One's experience of the world transforms when those things that initially seem solid or discrete are perceived as vibrating and relational. I think it's the same kind of pleasure one gets from looking into a microscope or speaking into a moving fan. I love to watch and listen to things shift, drift, and change.

Coastlines: The To Sound is an absolute bombardment of vivid imagery—so much so that the syntax seems to pretzel around the images in order to accommodate them. The language in Tuned Droves, on the other hand, while still dependent upon its imagery, seems more informational in its delivery—telegraphic, even. What does each stylistic approach allow you to do with your poetry that the other one doesn’t?
Baus: When I’m writing a particular book I tend to be attracted to (and unconsciously train myself to create) certain syntactical patterns, types of juxtapositions, lengths of utterances, etc. When I’m working on new writing, I try to reverse or break the more easily identifiable patterns of the previous work. However, at some point I start to remember dormant or less emphasized characteristics in the old work that I can use to enrich and complicate the new work. I probably think less about what those different modes allow me to accomplish and more about how the body of work that I’m writing can short-circuit and mutate its own tendencies to get somewhere new.

Coastlines: I’m always fascinated by the different ways poets motivate themselves. Whether you’re writing in the straightforward language of Tuned Droses or employing a thick lexicon, like in The To Sound, you always wind up with rich and exciting imagery. What do you do when the muse just isn’t there? What sort of writing techniques, if any, do you use to coax out these images?

Baus: I am terrible at coming up with poems that start exclusively from my own thoughts, ideas, and emotions. The blank page is a really difficult starting point for me. Bhanu Kapil once asked me about my relationship to exhaustion in writing. She’s always asking everyone these wonderful, difficult, insight-producing questions. I ended writing up some of those thoughts to share with her class when I visited the students in one of her summer graduate workshops at Naropa. You can find a version of those notes here at the online magazine Spine Road (http://www.spineroad.com/currenttext.html#anchor_171).

Coastlines: Do you consider your newest book, Scared Text, to be an amalgamation of the techniques you employed in The To Sound and Tuned Droses, or is it a new experiment altogether?

Baus: Everything that I write contains at least 30% recycled material. Each individual poem feels like an amalgamation, and that sensibility extends to larger movements such as sections within a book as well as entire books. Scared Text is a pretty weird book. I don’t think I could have written it without having written the earlier books. I needed to develop those vocabularies and ways of working with the language that I could pull apart and recombine.

Coastlines: I find that the imagery and imperfect syntax in your poems often deliberately overshadow meaning. To me, they seem designed to leave the readers feeling as though they are at the mercy of language. Image-wise, I’m thinking of the “boy’s mouth” that “collapses into itself” in Tuned Droses and the ghostly “We are leavened in atmosphere. Figures for a darkroom voice. / Bodies sketched in silt” from The To Sound. Do you feel in control of the language when you write, or do you feel as though you are under its control?
Baus: I never wanted to be the kind of writer who sought to “master” or control the writing in a heavy-handed way. In some broad sense I usually do intuitively know what I’m doing when I’m writing a poem or a book. I think of myself as an arranger/recognizer/recorder rather than a creator/controller. I’m always trying to get better at discovering and highlighting unusual and interesting language glitches that can be teased out into something more coherent. I think it’s a real pleasure as a writer and a reader to feel like you’re loosening your grip on the language and entering into a new kind of cognition.

Coastlines: I interpret much of the dissonance in your imagery as a means of highlighting the discrepancy between what we say or do and what we mean. For example, in The To Sound, you write, “If I say my eyes are quotation marks pulled across the sky, I mean the way a beaten wing is parallel to treading water.” It’s as if an impossible metaphor is rolling around on someone’s tongue, and they can’t quite spit the thing out. To what extent do you think language systems fail at representing the images swirling around in our heads?

Baus: I tend to experience language’s slipperiness as a kind of displacement rather than a failure or disintegration. I wanted to try to find a way to write about that experience of always being beside or above or behind what one wants to say.

Coastlines: Characters appear in your work, but they aren’t the sort of characters one would typically find in a novel or in traditional narrative poetry for that matter. The best example that comes to mind is Ding in Tuned Droves. He starts out as a sound and evolves into a speaking, acting character. At least, that’s the way it reads to me. What do these rather irregular characters allow you to do in your poems? What would be lost if they weren’t there?

Baus: I like to think about the ways characters can emerge and evolve out of small gestures (like Ding). Sometimes I hear a fleeting sound or see a glimpse of an object, and it seems like a sentient being for a second. Sometimes when I’m writing I come up with a phrase that feels like an entity. In Scared Text there’s the Ur-Mane, which is this force of strangeness and wilderness that keeps popping up. It’s another way of shifting or complicating categories.

Coastlines: The To Sound reads to me as though someone is swimming around inside a mailbag with a pair of scissors and some Scotch Tape. As soon as one thought gets rolling, it’s immediately punctuated by someone else’s. In Tuned Droves, because so much of the vocabulary is recycled throughout the collection, there’s this sense that each new section is an echo of the last. Is this interconnectedness something that you consciously strive for, or is it more a natural occurrence in the process of composing?

Baus: I think you’re right that Tuned Droves is more concerned with continuity and that the echoes are a little more apparent. I do strive for a certain kind of interconnectedness, but I also
think it’s integral to the way one experiences the world. Distant things really are connected. That book emphasizes the importance of paying attention to echoes a bit more.

*Coastlines:* I want to mention the fact that you run a small chapbook press called Minus House. How has seeing the poetic community from both sides (as both a poet struggling to publish and an active publisher of poetry) impacted the way you view the poetic community at large? Who are some up-and-coming writers that are exciting you right now? What are they doing that seems especially innovative to you?

*Baus:* So far, the work that I’ve published has been drawn directly from my immediate community. Juliana Leslie and Lesley Yalen, whose chapbooks I published, were writers that I got to know during my time in Western Massachusetts. I heard Lesley read from an early version of “This Elizabeth” at a bookstore, and it was one of the most exciting things I’d heard in a long time. She was a talented fiction writer exploring poetry writing in a serious way for the first time, and it was fascinating to hear someone build a new kind of cross-genre text out of that newness. I think Ryan Eckes is a great younger poet. His first book, *Old News*, just came out. Ryan Eckes is exciting to me because he writes a completely engrossing kind of first person narrative poetry that I love but would have no idea how to write myself. H.R. Hegnauer, who I got to know while living in Denver, has a chapbook, “Sir,” that is really amazing. H.R. memorizes her work when she performs it. I’ve seen her read a 30-page piece of prose verbatim from memory. Richard Froude and Andrea Rexilius are doing wonderful things in the intersection between fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. A lot of these people are breaking down genre expectations of some sort in their work. I never find myself at a loss for exciting things to read.