

BLUE ZEBRA

Steven Petkus

I wait until everyone's out of the aisle
before approaching the celery.
There's this couple from New York
taking forever choosing apples;
when they finally go off
in search of gourmet coffee
I stoop over, my face near the stalks,
so close I can feel the chill
from their couch of ice chips.
I want to talk it over.
Specifically, how it is
that I am clinically without you
here in Iowa, having once
shared lunch upon a rusty petrified log
outside the Duke Forestry lab
where we helped examine soils.
On this matter I seek the celery's
crisp licorice wisdom.
I am confused, also, about deli meats:
what exactly are "giraffe popsicles"
and how do they compare, as snacks,
to the hickory-smoked whiting?
I could use advice as well
on dealing with other shoppers:
this tiny limping man who pokes
and shouts, "Blue zebra!
Mammal noise! You give to me
this loaf of bread!" Last week
the lemons at Hy-Vee supported

non-violence in such situations.
I turn and head for the checkout.
In line, I don't look at anyone.
I insist on bagging everything
myself. I can hear the tiny
man explode, "Lingerie eyes!"
and "Marshmallow hoof!" two
customers back. At the clerk's
raised eyebrows—"What do you mean,
bags?"—I shuffle my groceries naked
into the carriage and hasten to the door.
The New Yorkers, though, they go on
thunking melons, deciding what beers.
They've seen worse. Much worse.