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“ON ‘OUR INCREDIBLE SHRINKING DISCOURSE’”

KIM BARNES

2010 MONTANA PRIZE IN CREATIVE NONFICTION JUDGE

Any essay that begins, “I received my first death threat on March 5, 2009,” is sure to catch a reader’s interest, but it is the sharply articulate and intellectually challenging discourse on the lost art of discourse that keeps the reader engaged in this important and provocative piece of writing. “What cannot be asked in contemporary America?” the author wonders--of himself, of his students, of anyone who might be willing to listen and, perhaps, respond with something other than vicious shouts and name-calling. But it is the answers the author receives that I find most disturbing: an idea that might be debated is, instead, decapitated--and far too often the violent refusal to engage in objective and enlightened interaction manifests itself in verbal and physical threat. The “breadth and variety of ideas acceptable in public conversation is beginning to narrow,” the author notes, and those who attempt to resist the censure are too often “silenced.” I am more than grateful, then, for this essay and for its author, who refuses to back down and instead embarks upon an inquiry into the state of inquiry, asking the kind of “indecent questions” that define what it means to be human--and humane.