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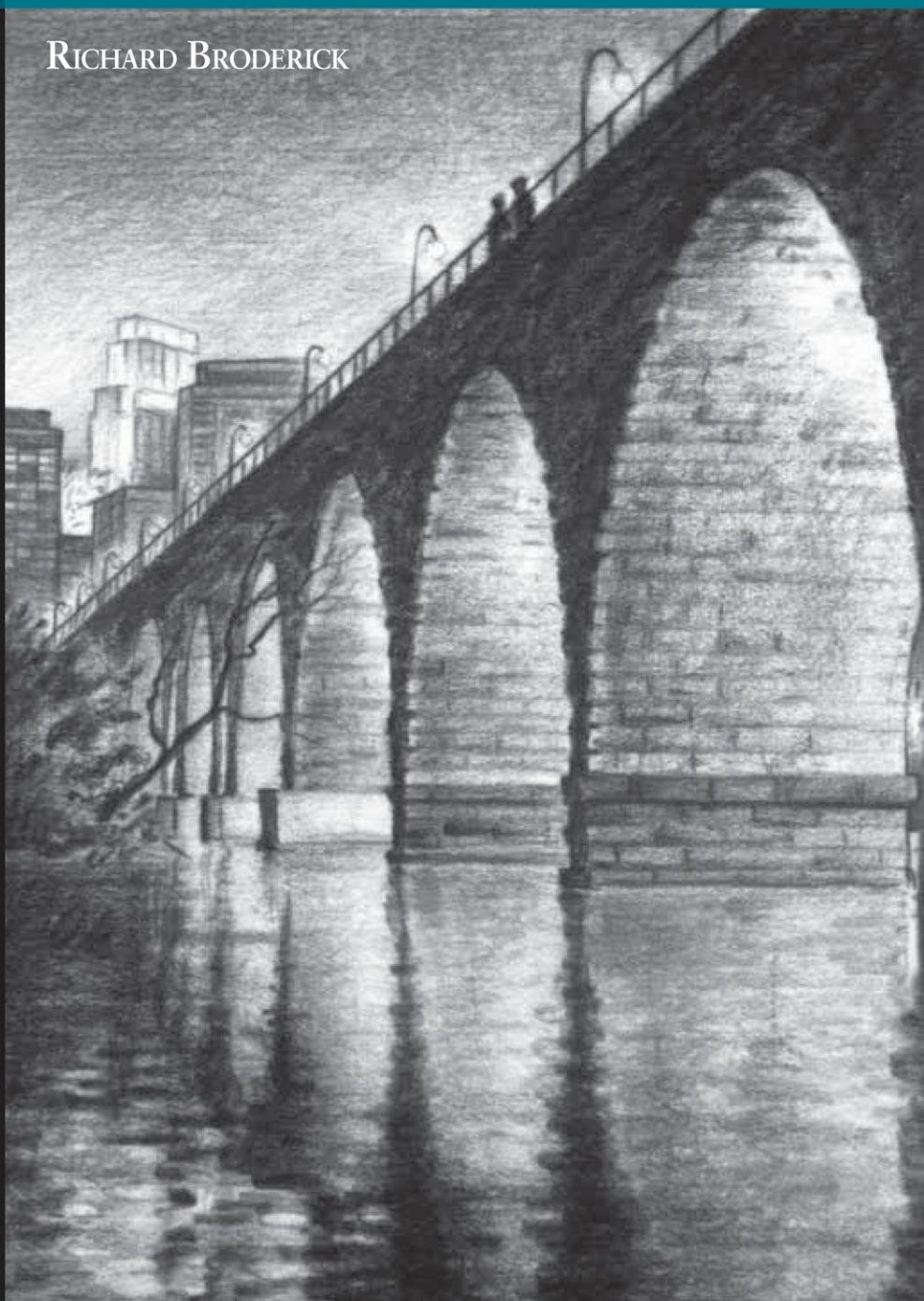
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Rain Dance

RICHARD BRODERICK

parallel press **poetry series**



A Parallel Press Chapbook

Rain Dance

Poetry by
Richard Broderick

Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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"A Russian Sailor Recalls Dying on the Kursk" in *Art Word Quarterly*;
"From the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children" in *Eclipse*;
"This Endless Night" in *The Fifth Column*; "Hardly Paradise" and "Rain
Dance" in *Green Blade*; "The President Speaks" in *Mizna*; "Memories
of Our Extinction" and "North of San Diego" in *Notre Dame Review*;
"Neanderthal Burial Site" in *Permafrost*; "The Fathers" in *Poetry East*; "At
the Auto Junkyard," "Black Flags over Fallujah," "Ides of March in a Cold
Climate," "Imperial Lexicon," and "The Stone Arch Bridge" in *Out of Line*;
"A Dog's Life" in *Slant*; "The Fishmonger's Wife" in *Turtle Quarterly*; and
"After Reading the Unabomber Manifesto," in the anthology
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Cover illustration by Barry Roal Carlsen

To my family

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After Reading the Unabomber Manifesto

I know the kind of hut he hid out in,
the heaps of paper yellowing
like rotten snow beneath freckled
windows, the pages of magazines
and books rustled by the wind's
forefinger, up a rocky draw
where the pine boughs swish
like beaded curtains, the silence outside
a physical presence, the air at noon
baking in the reflected heat
of black scree sprawling downslope,
a solitary Camp Jay preening and
screeching on a lower branch,
and always the dryness, cracking
the mouth from the inside out,
tongue whiskery, the lips looking branded
as if they'd held smoldering words too long.
And no relief in the distances,
no dust of someone approaching
with a cry of love, no news
of a reprieve. In that solitude, he
came at last to see the way they
put him together, intricate mechanism
hair-triggered to explode like a fireweed
releasing its seed to the flames.
But there was no fire here, nothing
but the slow combustion of being
alone all the time, day and night.
And so, from the parts of himself,
he reconfigured his packages,
wrapped in plain brown paper to signify
simplicity, and dispatched them
to places beyond the thunder,
messages from a new Thoreau.

The Hunger

Everyday
I feed my loneliness,
but no matter what
I set before it—
friendships,
family members,
even the chance for happiness—
it is never satisfied,
it's never enough.

So I set about
frantically trying
to create distractions.
I read and write emails,
run errands,
yell at the TV,
rage about my neighbor's
untidy lawn,
start wars,

anything
to keep my loneliness
from turning
its eyes on me.

The Fishmonger's Wife

Evenings he comes home smelling
of those parts of the sea that cannot escape,
entangled in old nets, thrashing
and moaning as it tries to break free.
She met him when she was the girl
behind the counter who kept
the pierside café open late
so he could come and eat,
their banter tart as lemon juice.
Now they eat chowder and fishcakes,
the same silence every night.
In bed, he becomes the back slope
of a nor'easter, breathing the names
of storms and shipwreck shoals
while she lies beside him, rocking
in his wake, waiting for the tide
to come in and sweep her away.

The President Speaks

And another word is removed from the dictionary.
Grandfathers disappear, leaving behind specks of tobacco.
The hour you spent this morning with your little boy
 is picked up and sent to the recycling plant.
The first shot is fired in the hunting season on doves.
Parents discover their children do not belong to them.
An acre of sweetgrass is buried in an unmarked grave.
A courier arrives with a package marked
 “Hazardous Material.”

A young man turns up the volume on his CD player
 to drown out the screams coming from the basement.
The horizon quietly accepts the sun's burning body.
For the first and only moment of the day, biting insects
 flare into view.

Let every sentence begin with the invocation “We!”
Let us work toward the time when we shall know
 the shame of other countries!

It's not necessary to listen: the music tells the story.
Freshly turned soil stirs and begins to graze.

Imperial Lexicon

Theoretically,
death is not a personal experience.
Historically,
there's no comparison
between us and the Mongols.
Scripturally speaking,
there was Cain and Abel.
In the long run,
many mothers have lost their sons.
Placed in proper perspective,
worse things have happened.
In hindsight,
we had no choice.
Upon reflection,
we've never been a warlike people.
Biologically,
it's in our genes.
If you were in our shoes,
what would you have done?
Amazingly enough,
civilians often resemble tanks.
In geological terms,
this was just a blink in time.
Philosophically,
the truth is always relative.
Depending upon whom you believe,
it's all just a lie.
According to Darwin,
only the strong survive.
Strictly speaking,
who is my neighbor anyway?
In the words of Jesus,
suffer the little children.

Ides of March in a Cold Climate

March 2003

This is the season that breeds misgivings,
An in-between time when the matted grass
And bare trees ask themselves
Do we really want to bring our green
Children into this world again?
At least the river seems
To keep faith. Ice breaks up.
In the depths something stirs.

This morning I woke to the cry
Of the first blue jay of the year.
Is this the call of the new millennium,
Harsh, blinded with self-importance?
Or is it a warning? Beware:
Weeds flourish in bomb craters.
Meat flies hatch in broken skulls.

Still, our greed cannot
Exhaust the coming bounty,
Nor our grief hold back the lilacs
when they are ready to bloom.
In a week or so, I'll find
Crocuses sprouting through the leaf mold
In last fall's garden—
The pale green shoots known up here
As Dead Men's Fingers.

At the Auto Junkyard

These engines purr inside the Cave of Shadows now,
the ideal world where rust and pitted windshields
are never known, where twisted frames and faded
paint jobs and roof tops dinked by hail
have no dominion beneath a sun that restores
the manmade products of our dreams
to mint condition. Here is mother's car
and brother's classy chassis and the old man's
brute V-8, all 200 horses run off into the ether,
the missing engine block beneath the missing hood
as mysterious as a fist raised in anger, then withdrawn.
And here the eldest daughter's ride to night school,
the cushions disemboweled like her doomed ambition.
And here, those Sundays at the lake,
those trips out West, those sad processions
to nursing homes and graves,
the letting go and moving on, the amnesia
of America's good intentions, our vain resolutions
to keep it clean, fix it up, stick to the dealer's
maintenance schedule: all here, in a tangle
of steel and rubber and fragments of tinted plastic.
Propped up on tire rims, this fleet of ghost cars
ferries our dead across the brackish river,
those who fell from the sky, those who leaped
from burning buildings, one black body
for every bent steering wheel, lipless smiles
below lidless eyes that stare straight ahead
through shattered glass, past the ranks of ruined cars,
the sagging cyclone fence, the weedy verge,
the litter of abandoned lives.

North of San Diego

Westward the sun, which, in progressing so,
carves deep shadows into hillside arroyos
and raises to a threadbare glow the dry grasses
that grow beside highways that ignore
the country's natural roll, hurrying north and south
across valleys woven into the shape of baskets
once used to gather nuts and seeds and wild grains.
Last year, this county burned for weeks, suburban
cul-de-sacs going up in flames like chaparral
and eucalyptus trees. But whatever has happened
on this coast, whether in history or before,
is buried now beneath 12 lanes of concrete whose
cloverleaf exchanges turn back upon themselves
like the thoughts of a mind so cut off from the world
they have no place else to go. And now, with the sun
dissolving into the horizon, the ocean seems less to heave
than loom, rising from its bed like the trapdoor
to some bright room where the local gods of rivers
and fields, fertility and childbirth have fled,
and are fleeing still, like deer before a firestorm.

Fresco: Departure for Another Imperialist War

after Tom McGrath

This time the images are filled with torpor
and a ritualized dread. No glory here.
This has all happened before, the same war
fought under different names, the outcome
preordained: death by historical accident.

Their future sold into the secondary market,
dust settles on their shoulders, filling in the lines
around her mouth, the weary lines around his eyes.
Only the children display emotion, a last
tearful look before the cage door shuts forever.

Now the couples exchange words issued to them
by high command. Now he turns and begins to leave.
Now she wraps her arms around him tightly
to keep from exploding into pieces.

Black Flags over Fallujah

March 31, 2004

Once human,
they have been consumed like crude oil,
a wellhead flare going up
in plumes of greasy smoke.
If you could bring yourself to look,
stuck somewhere to their charred remains
you'd find the ashes of the 500 bucks
they got paid today
to die like dogs.

Now they hang
over the bridge in Fallujah,
black flags of every nation,
their bodies swinging stiff
above the swift Euphrates.
Tattered banners of a "blessed lifestyle,"
call them the black of night made visible
in noontime's glare,
two pockets of decay exposed
in the tooth of appetite.

Memories of Our Extinction

They do not end in sudden dark,
but in slowly fading light,
dry twigs shivering in chill gusts,
our feet sinking unexpectedly
into meadows of cold, denuded mud.
Then we found that our antlers,
wide as a grand staircase, furred

like pussywillows, ornamentation
for ornamentation's sake,
were really meant for entangling us
in trees stripped for the first time
of leaves, a rack for holding us
upright through seasons of slow
starvation. O, our multiple tusks,

elaborated over so many generations,
our useless neck pouches,
our bright maladaptive coloring
and delicate stomachs suited
only for digesting flora growing
in a warm epoch and no other.
O, our eyes made dim by so much

abundance. No instincts to hoard
or even go to den and huddle,
just the dumb certainty that all
must go on as it always had, even as
we raised sensitive snouts and sniffed
uneasily at the unfamiliar scent
of winter on a cold north wind.

Neanderthal Burial Site

How keenly they must have felt the loss,
they who were so few, they who spent
their days peering off into the distances,
at herds of animals that vastly
outnumbered them, the sky reminding
them every day they were small
and they were alone. Eyes turned inward,
facing each other across the circle,
maybe they had no name for this.
Maybe they had no names for anything,
just ready-made customs, like the one
where they folded the arms and legs
so that the body cradled itself, or the gesture
they made with the hand, breaking
a flower stem just beneath the blossom
as a way of signifying a wordless pain.

Rain Dance

The rain today comes unbidden
as it always does,
an endless sequence of notes
from the oldest music
ever composed.

I see it peck the dust
with one-toed prints.
I feel it fall on me from above,
unfurling dark wings
upon my shoulders,
eyeing the watery elements
it plans to carry off some day,
rain that returns
our sulfur dioxide,
our strontium-90,
the ash and soot of buildings
we've set ablaze,
the cities we turn
into clouds of smoke,
all come back to us,
the sacrifice of Cain
refused once more,
rain that leaves a dry outline
beneath my feet
like the rim of a hole
dug in the ground,
rain that marks the path

when I finally move,
rain that lifts from the trees
like a flock of invisible birds,
that fishes the river,
that glistens like a blade
on the turning whetstone,
rain that whispers and whispers
this mild spring day
in a disembodied voice
that makes me shiver.

The Snow

It's almost my oldest habit of all,
watching the snow fall in thick
white ropes that hiss as they uncoil,
or that studiously frost the dark peaks

of spruce, or that, on days like this,
come down as thin flakes, sparsely spaced,
wavering rhythmically on the breeze
before turning into tearstreaks

when they touch the windshield, the year's
accumulated burden of frozen grief—
the wars, the dangers, the deaths—
thawing on contact.

And let me not forget a snowfall's
restorative effects: how it brings me
wide awake when I'm drowsy
or can bestow a measure of peace

if I'm tense, or turn me instantly
into a child again when I'm feeling old.
I climb out of the car and stretch
my arms as wide as I can.

Snowflakes touch my ungloved palms
with fingertips that are delicate
and chill ("Cold hands, warm heart!").
We dance.

The Fathers

Down in the basement, dead fathers move about,
bumping their heads on exposed beams,
trying without success to pick up tools
from the dusty workbench. If their words could reach us,
they'd ask for hot coffee and a smoke.
If their words could reach us they'd tell us how much
they regret having deployed the squadron of bombers
that drones overhead in our dreams every night.
They long to upgrade the circuit breaker,
replace the stained tile, paint the foundation red,
but instead all they can do is eye an empty pack
of cigarettes crumpled in the corner, then
go back to searching for the blueprints
to the family room that never got built.

From the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

"Have you seen me?" they ask on the black-and-white flyers that drift into my mailbox, veinless leaves abandoned by the tree of light.

"Have you seen me?" in truck parks late at night or loitering outside convenience stores or floating face down on the shimmer

of a rainbowed ditch. "Have you seen me?" Here he is in a photo taken at age five, all gap-toothed innocence. Here she is,

the apple of some father's eye, her picture aged to what she might have looked like at fifteen, a girl missing more years than she was alive.

In a land that devours childhood, we hide them in plain sight everywhere. They are nothing now but the flicker of sun and shadow

when our cars click down the pavement, the wind-torn voice that wakens us those nights we can't remember who we are or where

we lie in darkness; the gray face staring at us in the mirror each morning, flesh unnaturally aged, a lost look haunting the furtive gaze.

The Protestor

Each morning, sometimes alone, sometimes
in the company of a handful of like-minded others,
he takes up his station on the sidewalk
just outside the clinic, his only concession
to personal comfort a thermos of coffee
he brings along when the day is cold—
how can he concern himself with his own happiness
when, inside, babies are being murdered?

Raising a placard with a brightly-colored
picture of a “pre-born” child,
he thinks of how easily his parents
might have abandoned him, how many times
he believed they were about to,
the times he disappointed them, the times
he was caught in a lie or spilled food on the new
carpet, or brought home a bad report card.

He thinks now of a little fetus floating happily
in the golden light of mommy’s tummy,
wriggling tiny fingers and toes like a sea monkey,
unaware, as he sleeps in the peace of God
of the times that lie ahead, of spilled food,
bad report cards, the sound of his parents’ curses,
the silence at the dinner table that seems
to cast a spell backward over the years,
past the bright birthday candles, the photo
album’s fixed smiles, to communicate
the words all children will eventually mutter,
“I wish I’d never been born.”

A Dog's Life

for my grandmother

He'd been angry before,
stomping around the storage shed,
but this time he strangled
on his rage. *I'll teach him a lesson!*
He'll see this time! eyes bulging,
veins in his neck standing out.
Behind the creamery
he marched the children now,
into the weedy lot backed up
against the Wicklow Mountains,
threatening to whip their legs
if they refused to look—*Look,*
I tell you! It was a warning to them
as much as punishment for the thief:
This is what happens if you
lap milk out of the tankards;
this is what happens if you eat
a round of cheese, then throw up
the evidence on the hearth rug.
Hanging from an old oak
they would never climb again,
the family dog, a big black mutt,
struggled and kicked and then
went still. Years later, she migrated,
and married a man whose anger
was cold, unlike her father's.
Fifty years, they lived without warmth,
until the day a month or so before
the death she knew was coming
she told me this story in the quiet voice
of a cowed, but still furious, child.

In Exile

What secrets are they sharing,
the sparrows in the bare tree?
All morning they fatten themselves
on the thin syrup of winter light.

Over the hum of the space heater
I listen to the chatter, smiling distractedly.
I am like a refugee, newly arrived
in a land whose melodious tongue
I might one day understand
though never hope to master.

African Students at the Community College

They linger in the central courtyard
after other students have retreated inside,
three young women, the midday heat
a reminder of Liberia, the brick planters
on which they sit hard as the sun-baked soil
back home. Their singsong voices carry to me
like water chuckling out of a standpipe.
Free for now from the nightmares
they write about in composition class,
everything about them is graceful,
the way they sweep aside invisible insects
from their shining faces, the way they
rock back and forth with laughter,
mocking in their mother tongue
the pretense of teachers who think they
know so much but really know so little.

This Endless Night

title of a Palestinian lullaby
from the CD *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*

This endless night,
this endless night,
I hear you cry
but cannot see you.
Jackals in the olive grove,
wolves at the checkpoints,
and in a suitcase
waiting by the door,
what's left of baba's bones.

Who built this house
on the bridge of life?
How long will it stand
if we never return?
Each dawn is swallowed
by a hissing flare.
Water from our well flushes
the keepers' drains.

This endless night,
this endless night,
how can I soothe you
when I myself am afraid?
What can I leave you,
except eyes that refuse
to adjust to darkness,
except a dream of daylight
finally breaking
on our side of the sky?

Riddle of the Innocent By-Stander

I am the broken leg at the bottom of the hill,
the raccoon washing its paws in the stream.

I am the light that deserts you when you think
of your father, the ruin of bombed-out buildings
in the defeated city.

Every year I change disguises.

You take me for someone else, a gray day, someone
who looks just like you.

At parties, I am the moment
of mistaken identity, the friend who bears you
a hidden grudge.

In your dreams, I am the bright glare
that makes you shield your eyes, the voice that warns
you to clear out or else.

With my back to the sun,
you can't tell if I am approaching or moving away,
only that I am walking now with a purposeful stride,

as if I finally remembered what I meant to do.

Hardly Paradise

Returning to the garden we were struck
by how much smaller it was than we remembered.
Could the olive tree that seemed to touch
the heavens themselves and whose lowest branch
we could not reach even when we stretched on tiptoes
really be this unprepossessing growth not much taller
than a shrub in the center of a little clearing?

Could the mountain that once took us half a day
to climb and whose summit commanded
a sweeping view of the countryside for miles around
prove to be nothing more than this hillock
looking out over a few acres of wooded parkland
like those we've wandered through countless times?

Could the four rivers that water the garden
and that in memory sweep along faster
than the swiftest horse, the silhouette of their far banks
barely visible in the distance, truly be this quartet
of pleasant but by no means impressive streams
whose deepest pools barely reach our ankles now
and whose width we can cross dry shod
by the end of summer?

It's true, the caretaker who stayed behind to keep
an eye on things when we were asked to leave
has done a wonderful job—what an angel!
Everything has been maintained exactly as it was
the day we departed like the room of a child
whose parents cannot accept his death.

But, really, we must admit now
that we regret, a little, all the fighting and the killing,
the young men maimed in body and spirit
during our great military campaigns,
the multitude of failed marriages, the neglected children,
the drinking and lynching and midnight barn burnings,
the insomnia and depression, the lying and infidelity,
the years of therapy, the lack of love,
the kind word that might have made all the difference
if only we'd spoken it, the bitterness
of broken promises, the years spent nursing grudges,

the lifetime of happiness foregone in the name
of that day when we would finally reclaim
our birthright, recapture our homeland
and return in triumph to dwell once more
in a garden that, it so happens, is a nice enough spot
but hardly Paradise.

A Russian Sailor Recalls Dying on *The Kursk*

Near the end, in the dark and utter cold, the hearts of some of us grew buoyant, rising like bubbles to bump against the frozen bulkhead. Outside the groans of deep sea pressure became the song of wood spirits flitting in and out of birch groves back home and the icy grate beneath our feet sprang up as sun-warmed rye grass between bare toes. And then, one by one, as we slipped out the front of the ruined hull and met the Arctic's weight, our souls divided into a higher and lower order, part floating upward toward shafts of moted light, the rest sinking to the ocean floor where they joined the slow pelagic current, circling the globe, staining the black waters like a cloud of ink.

Lunar Eclipse

The moon looks
stunned, like a patient
going under,

but in truth
it is only drowning,
always drowning

beneath the tide
it sends running
from pole to pole.

Here on Earth's slowly
advancing prow,
we watch

our umbra submerge
the bright disk
in a rusty glow

like bogwater leaching
iron from the soil.
Curious how

the hard winter sky
seems to soften now
until it becomes

almost welcoming,
a landscape to be
ventured across,
our feet sinking
with every step,
but our faces raised

toward a vision
of heaven that,
for once,

we all can share.

The Stone Arch Bridge

Minneapolis, Minnesota

It's been here a century or more,
proof that whenever you cross water
you end up spanning time as well.
Like hand-made arches everywhere
it doesn't derive its strength solely
from resistance but from the way
each rough-cut stone leans
against another, the burden
shared by all, the force of gravity
thrust back into the earth like a taproot
seeking nourishment from the soil.
Kinetic energy fixed in place
this way translates into solid form,
beauty fused to usefulness, function
inseparable from form: The dome
of a stone shelter to keep us dry and warm.
The footings of a bridge that we
might cross to embrace each other.



Richard Broderick is the author of *Night Sale*, a collection of short fiction, and *Woman Lake*, a collection of poetry, both from New Rivers Press. A recipient of a Minnesota Book Award, he is the former poetry editor of *Minnesota Monthly* and a finalist for the Robert Frost Foundation Award.



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