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Poems

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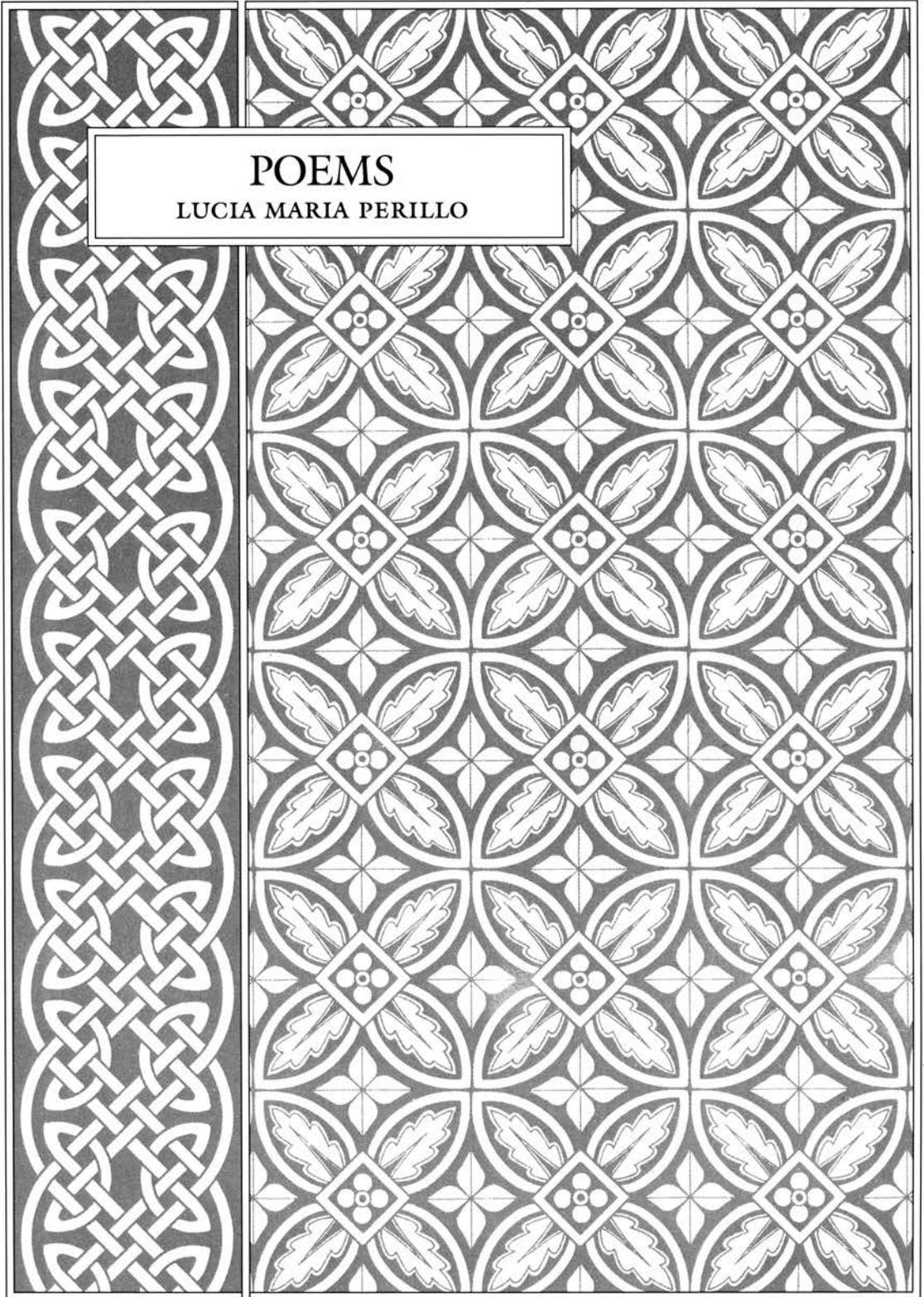


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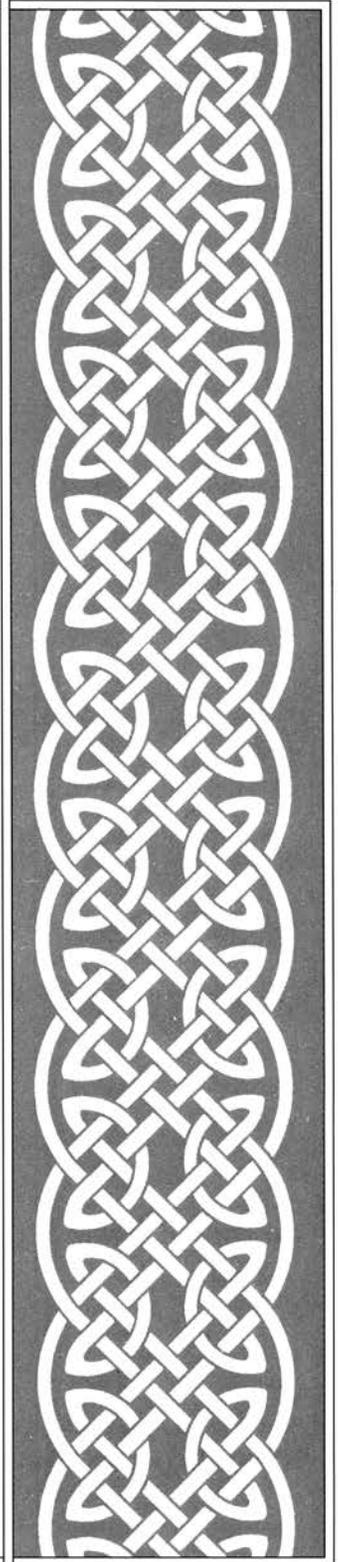


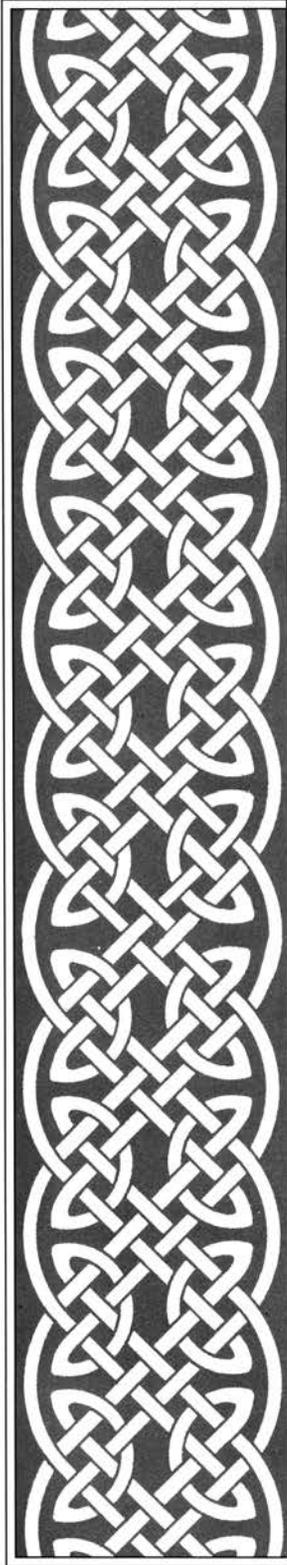
MONORAIL

He stands by the helm, his face full of blue
from the buildings at twilight, his hand
knuckled around a metal pole that keeps him
from falling, as he flies past the vaults
of startled mannequins, the red ohs their lips.
Christmas lights are also falling
through the windshield, onto his chest:
right side green, left side red—
dark then back again.

Wait . . . my father is not moving yet:
no one has claimed the worn leather throne.
But his thoughts are moving, wondering
if movement is the same as growing old
in the province of space, not time. Inside his shoes,
his toes are as blue as the city streets,
and the drum in his chest, his red-lit chest,
is growing dim. He knows the train he's about to ride
has one rail: no steering, no turns.
And the only skill is in the brake.

The brake. His lips roll over the words:
The Dead-Man's Brake. And a small boy
—come to ride up front—hears him,
tugs my father's coat and asks:
Hey mister, are you the driver of this train?





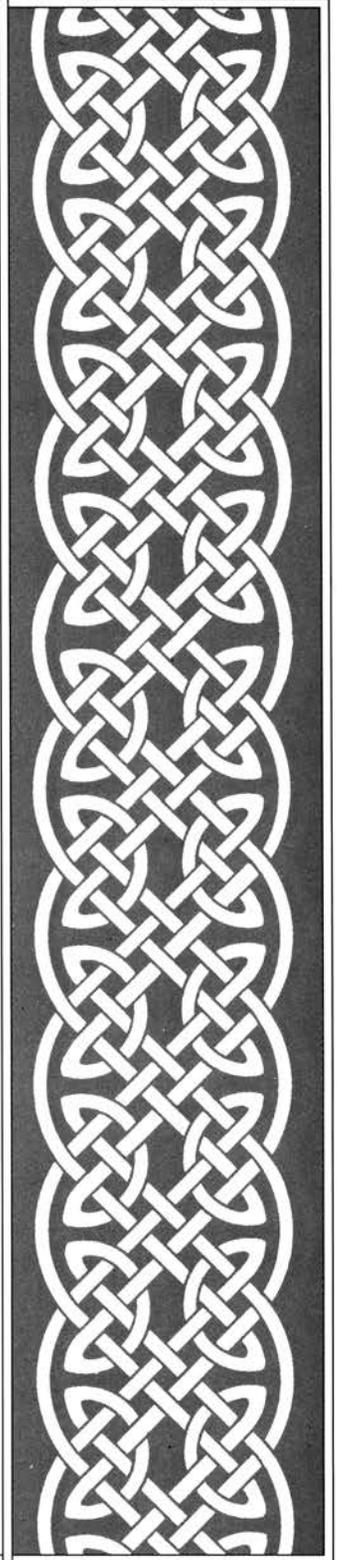
RUTTER'S FIELD

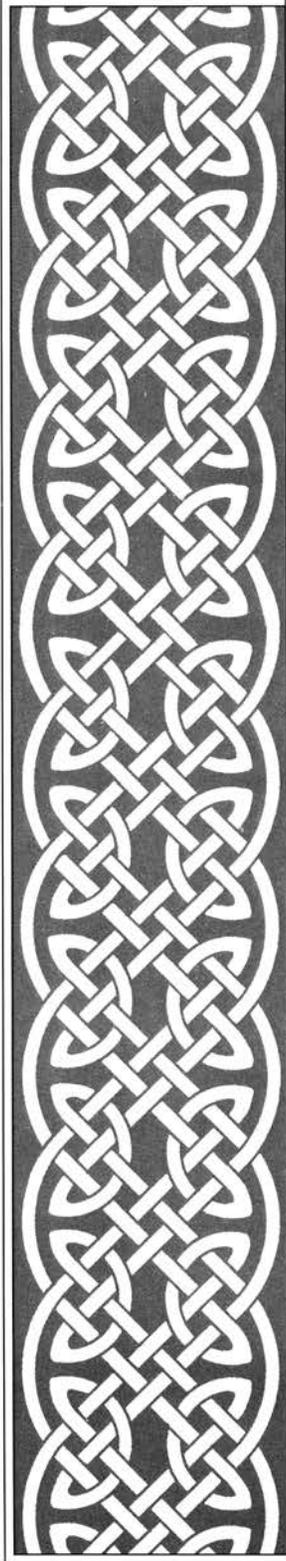
My father parted the barbed wires and eased me through
 as though this were another of my births.
 The moon was bright enough to show each blade of foxgrass
 rippling with our steps.
 Rutter's Field was burning. And the old house, filled
 with a hundred years of
 dust and newspapers and sloughed-off cells belonging
 to the dead, was being thrown
 like splats of orange paint against the tall black night
 through which I rode
 on my father's shoulders: funny now to think, but he was
 young, still a boy.
 Men were running in all different ways, water arcing
 slowly from their buckets,
 while their sooty portraits flared up in the eyes
 of two swaybacked horses
 who bucked and spun in circles. The house was there,
 then it was gone—
 though its jack-o'-lantern windows, the way they grimaced
 as the roofbeam snapped and dropped,
 reappeared each time my eyes choked shut with smoke.
 Suddenly I knew my head was changing.
 From this night on, my bloated toddler skull no longer
 was a hollow globe through which
 things slipped like threadless needles then were gone.
 From here on, things would stick.
 This was the birth of memory, and its dogged retinue
 —shame and longing and regret.
 But from my vantage on his shoulders, all I saw was
 the flame's orange teeth and colorless
 core—the infinite shapes and voices spawning there,
 fields just waiting to be burned.

OLD STORY

The first Chinese brother has drowned a boy,
 for that he'll be killed. *See*, the judge says,
what burdens fall on those who can swallow the sea
 and slates him for tomorrow's guillotine.
 Luckily, he has a brother with an iron neck
 and one who won't burn at the stake, one
 who smiles while the justices smother his face
 and yet another, whose head floats like a melon
 when he's tossed in the sea: his legs stretch deep.
 Death gets passed from one boy to the next
 and they eat from it like their common bowl of rice.
 Each day, the villagers, gathered
 in their black felt shoes, in their disappointment
 march home, where they hit their dogs with sticks.

It is only fair, the judge says, five times,
 when each brother asks to go and kiss his mother
 once again good-bye. All night the five of them lie
 with their heads together, legs out
 like spokes of the wheel that rolls them
 round this old story, the story where we all
 possess someone who wants to swap us for our death—
 Old Yeller or Jesus or even Mary Ann, the steam shovel
 who, for our human sake, digs a hole so deep
 it becomes her grave. As I lie curled in the sickle
 of my mother's arm, she flips the pages,
 pointing to each repetition of his face, his mouth
 always drawn in a smug, pencil-thin smile, even
 as those other mouths—the chopping block, the stake—
 draw inversely larger, showing him their teeth.
 She takes pains to show me
 how no one really dies in the end, which is forgiveness.
 If you can believe that, if you can trust it enough
 to lift your hair and let your brother's blade descend.





THE JOHN

The deadbolt slides from the latch.
 Standing in his driveway, he lets the night air
 peel his skin, so his true body can slide through.
 The car door opens like a thigh.
 Jackson, South Broadway, Main: he keeps
 the domelight on, so boys
 standing on the street can watch him
 run his bluish tongue out from his teeth.

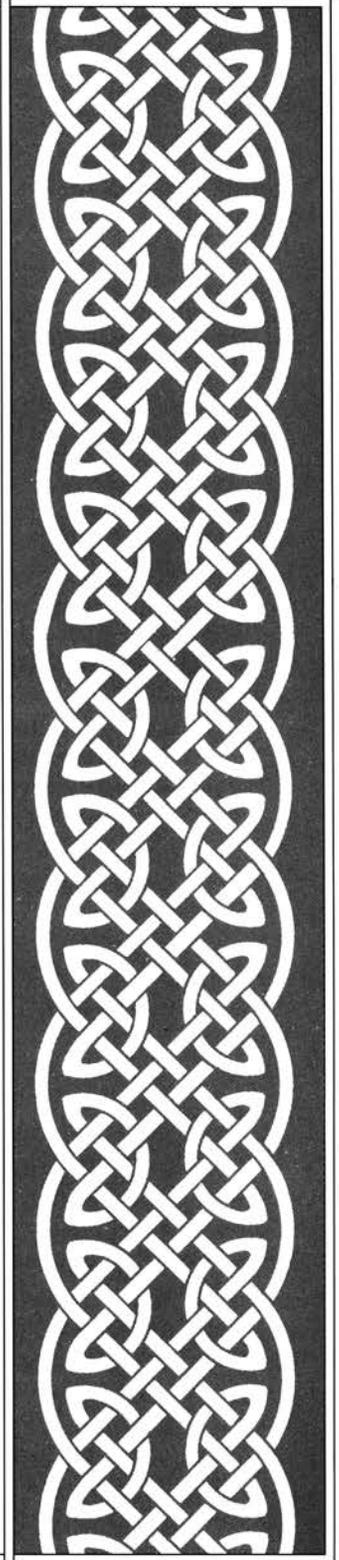
Later, he is back in his den.
 He's coiled in a Naugahyde recliner
 while the T.V. washes shapes over his children's faces.
 A National Geographic show: about Africa,
 about a crater where animals stalk and feed
 while trapped inside its sandstone walls.
 Look. A python has swallowed a gazelle.
 He lies gorged and bloated like a sack of grain,
 so full it seems this meal will split his gut and kill him.
 One last hoof twitches into his jaws
 and the narrator tells us: if we saw him in a day or two
 we'd be amazed. At how lean he'd appear.
 At how he'd seem to have eaten nothing for weeks.

CHEKHOV

All the talk about Chekhov these days—
 authors writing public testimonies
 how they gave up drinking because of Chekhov
 how they saved their marriage because of Chekhov
 how they pulled the gunbarrel from their mouths
 in the nick of time because some line of Chekhov's
 ran suddenly through their heads . . . though in the end
 the author's graces remain mysteriously unexplained.
 Maybe it's his belief that meaning lies in the slow
 accretion of detail, the way the storyteller
 lingers like a camera on the woman's hand
 as it moves to touch the brooch upon her throat.

Today, two actors from New York are speaking
 about their production of his play, *The Seagull*—
 how for months of rehearsal they worked
 with a rolled towel standing for the dead bird,
 the crux of the drama's unravelling. The actors
 —who played Konstantine and Nina, lovers
 off the stage as well, from the looks exchanged—
 had poked the waterfront's odd rubble every day
 and still couldn't find the needed carcass
 before opening night. That night the director
 arrived with a herring gull, shot below the wing.
 "Don't ask," was all he'd say about its source.

So much does art consume, and where's repayment?
 Kostya kills himself for succeeding as a writer,
 while Nina ends up mad for failing on the stage.
 A man will slip to the docks with a .22 and fire shots
 at any squawk that echoes in the darkness.
 Even the author on the wagon soon will learn
 that his liver has already begun to corrode
 irreversibly. But for now, in this small classroom,
 the actors Konstantine and Nina set the clock
 to the beginning, when everything sits as it should.
 Act one, Scene one: the lovers close their lips
 in a kiss that seems, at least for now, without an end.



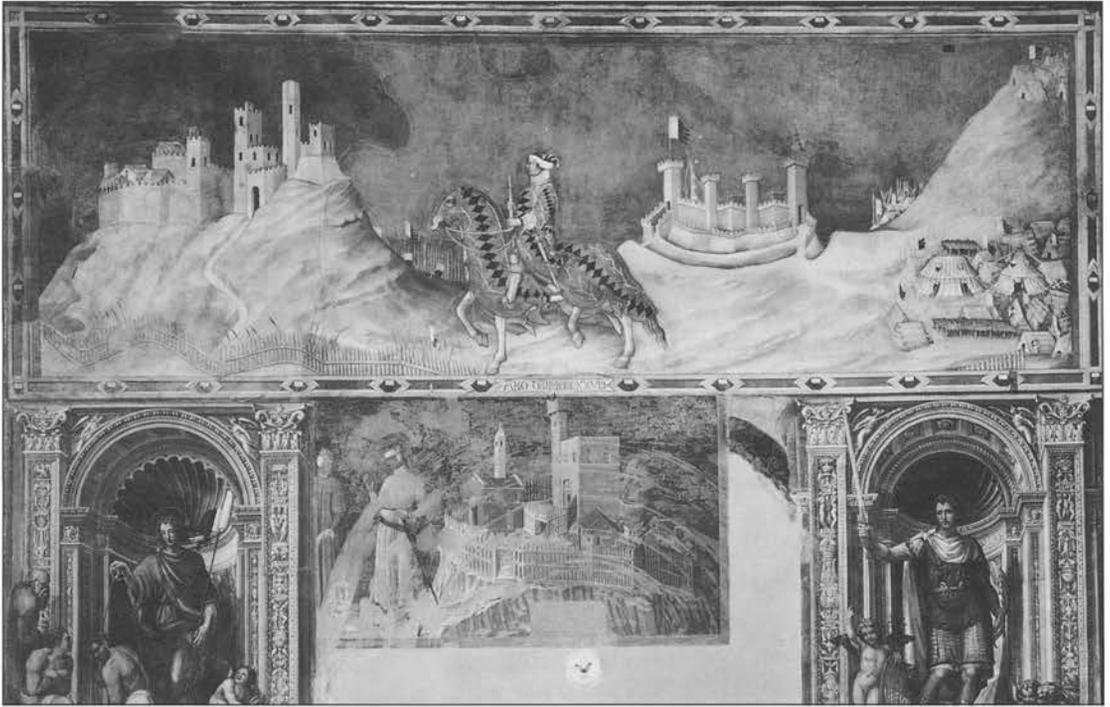


Figure 1. Frescoes on the end wall in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, Italy: the Guido Riccio da Fogliano at the Siege of Montemassi (top panel); the newly discovered fourteenth-century fresco (lower panel, center); and Sodoma's standing saints of the sixteenth century (lower panel, sides). Courtesy of ScalalArt Resource, New York. Simone Martini, Fresco of Guidoriccio da Fogliano (full view of wall). Siena, Palazzo Pubblico.