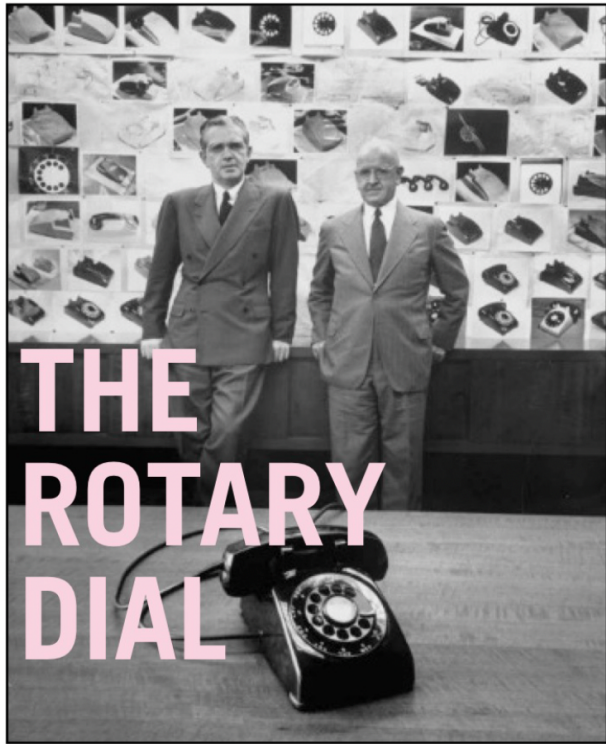




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best dial poems of 2013

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NED BALBO

Venetian Courtesan

A variation on Rilke's "Die Kurtisane"

It's almost as if Venice knows a secret
alchemists once knew: how any substance –
hair or skin or lips – beneath the sun's
gaze turns to gold. You touched that secret, once,

and can't let go. I wish you *could* forget,
but you're one more who can't survive the night
unless he finds some bridge from dark to light
over the dim canals, the rising tide

that drowns or bears us homeward...This dog I walk
I sleep with, too: his presence comforts me,
as love and strangers' company do not,

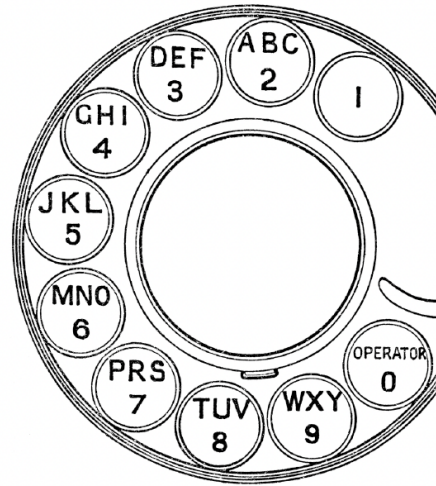
though, yes, I occupy your every thought,
or so you claim... I smile occasionally –

How much more dangerous it is to talk.

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NED BALBO

Ghost Armada

A variation on Rilke's "Spätherbst in Venedig"

This Venice – once our Venice – is no longer
quite the city we recall from days
when every palace window held a stranger,
someone's tryst, another's fall from grace,

and murder thrived in plain sight on the Square.
We were assassins, lethal marionettes
sent on clandestine missions far and near,
imposters patient in the epaulets

of hired musicians, brass, baton, or bow
completing our disguise....

And now, at sea,
a ghost armada turns back with its show

of force, ships long forgotten, guns eternal
like their crew, a thunder audible –
and all invisible, like you or me.

Nearing the Buddha

A variation on Rilke's "Buddha"

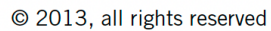
From far away, the pilgrim feels a light
that touches him then falls away like rain –
as if great wealth were hoarded here in secret
where he might discover it again.

Nearer, he's in doubt: the solemn furrow
of that brow compels him to reflect
not on some craftsman's object but its glow,
surpassing lesser art or artifact

with elemental light that's born within....
What things were melted – earrings, chain, or chalice –
to create this figure not as golden

as the One it represents, all-seeing
in his wisdom, seated on the lotus –
silent, calm, connected to all Being?

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Was I the only customer that day, willing to brave the dark and wait for bread, or just the first? She smiled, and I fed.



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NED BALBO

Lost Prayer in Time of War

A variation on Rimbaud's "Le Mal"

When machine gun fire sprays tirelessly
under a blue sky endless, sunlit, empty,
and the troops – oppressors, terrorists,
heroes, or freedom fighters – fill the lists

of casualties whose names will be released
not yet, but soon – the wounded, the deceased –
poor soldiers, what will find you in the field?
Artillery; the choice – kill or be killed –

and, somewhere, maybe, God, if He exists,
waking once more, perplexed, nourished by worship,
flattered by prayer in any tongue or faith,

yet unimpressed, indifferent to requests,
and tired, so tired, His sole reward this sleep
too easily breached and not enough like death.