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Villanelle: (My grandmother spoke the language of briers and roses)

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## Villanelle

### *(My grandmother spoke the language of briars and roses)*

#### Valerie Wohlfeld

My grandmother spoke the language of briars and roses.  
To the rose, earth is an issuing of carmine, crimson and cinnabar.  
In temperate weather, my grandmother tended the rabbi's roses:

Wild rose, damask rose and tea rose, cabbage rose and moss rose;  
Cuttings of roses brought in by ships from afar.  
My grandmother spoke the language of briars and roses.

In glossy kerosene grandmother drowned beetles; her clothes  
Smelled of oil and bugs, but she let the fireflies live lit in a jar.  
In temperate weather, my grandmother tended the rabbi's roses.

One night in her servant's room, an apparition enclosed  
Her in his mud-enlivened arms: a golem made of fire.  
My grandmother spoke the language of briars and roses.

Fire, water, earth and wraith: disclosed  
The golem stood. His kisses came from some reservoir  
Of ashes like the ashes with which grandmother fertilized the rabbi's roses.

With her dinner's kugel still on the golem's breath he was exposed:  
There stood the rabbi and it was the rabbi's own arms muddied in tar.  
My grandmother spoke the language of briars and roses.  
In temperate weather, my grandmother tended the golem's roses.

## Golem

Slick smoothed in mud the golem slept  
 in Prague, in the attic where the rabbi left him.  
 No longer heroic, no longer the footstep  
 of a monster, the golem lay grim in the grime

of the rafters. Like some silent suicide,  
 hung, he who once was slime and fire  
 with the ashes of Hebrew letters written on the side  
 of his long dull forehead—this man of mute mire

who was not alive and not dead,  
 who had once been drunk on the letters for truth:  
*aleph, mem, tov*; he who bloodless bled  
 and toothless fed, he who was not couth

in his muddy etiquette: now in his seed of soot and sleep  
 he was some little spot the rabbi's widow, in mourning, would sweep-out.

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