

# *The Guest House*

**Elise Volkman**

*Inspired by a poem of the same title by Jellaludin Rumi (Iranian poet, 13th century)*

Out the age-stained windows set in old panelled walls, you slip through my mind on a distant flightpath. I glance up sometimes, out the windows into the cool grey sky, but my gaze never lingers long.

Too busy, too focused, too frantic,  
too scared.

Scared of the hole once filled by you — scared of the void that replaces you. You always answered my messages like a sentinel, watchful and still. And still, you remain, like a guardian in the corners of my mind. You remind me to think well, to be kind, to have mercy on myself.

Please,  
have mercy on me now.  
I missed my chance to say  
goodbye.

This being human is a guest house. The house is rarely empty; people come and go through the doorways like air on the pathways through their lungs. People come and go — people like you. Here today, gone tomorrow;  
or was it yesterday already?

I keep a portrait of you on the walls of my mind, though the image doesn't bear your face. It's a menagerie of words and hints of strategy, in the form of a poem by Jellaludin Rumi.

I never would have met Rumi if it wasn't for you. I never would have opened my Guest House to joy, depression, the meanness of new arrivals. If you hadn't taught me to sweep out the cobwebs, dust off the tabletops, and bat out the carpets, I'd still be a boarded-up old mansion; so many rooms to offer, but no lights to guide the way.

We made guest beds together in the forgotten corners of my mind, kicking up dust-trails with our feet. We meandered through the guest house like old friends, lingering on every floor. You took my hand to lead me down each darkened hallway, unlit and unwalked, trapped for so long in the recesses of my

world. You guided me even as I showed you where to go. You gave me an answer with every question you asked.

“When’s the first time you remember feeling this way?” you’d ask me again  
and again

and again. We’d go back —

Up and up flights of stairs, to the long-forgotten attics in the closed-up places abandoned since yester-year. You’d ask me to pull wide the curtains and swing wide the windows — it was always my choice.

I always said yes.

You knew what I needed before I believed it. You knew where the sunlight snuck through cracks; where it needed to break through with warmth, to wash me clean. You always managed to find my way there. To lead me,

to guide me

to peace.

I’d follow you anywhere, to any dark corner. I’d take your advice for any old thing. But now you’ve gone to that place, the one where I can’t go.

How do I welcome and entertain this wishing? Wishing you had lived longer?

Died

later?

The question plagues me: why do the good die young? You were older than me, younger than some. Your wisdom and gentleness unmatched, unrivaled. This being human is a Guest House. How do I welcome you in it

when you’re no longer here?

People wander the halls like spectres of thought on the pathways of my mind. The curtains hang open, letting in the light. Sun basks the floors with its warmth. Your kindest words hang in the corners where you cleared away the cobwebs. Your voice echoes in the highest reaches of the attic and the darkest cellar of the basement. You linger, you whisper, you stay.

You’re gone, but I see you everywhere.

You would say, *“Close your eyes. Take us back to the first time you remember...”*

My first memory paints you in a vibrant skirt of many colours. It floats around you like flower petals on a breeze. You sway gently in the doorway, waving me inside with a smile.

You always had a smile  
for me.

You'll never wave me over the threshold of my own guest house again.  
I'll never find you standing there,  
colourful skirt,  
warm smile,  
loving eyes.

You linger, just out of sight. I turn, yet never seem to catch sight of you.  
How do I welcome Sorrow as a guest? It tears at the curtains and brings  
cobwebs to every corner we swept. It tramples over my portrait of you as though  
to banish you forever.

Still, I catch moments. Glimpses.

Pieces of your voice, saying:

*"Be grateful for whatever comes  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond."*

If anyone was sent as a guide,  
it was you.



*Absence 5*  
by Sun Woo Baik