As Her Pastor

Carroll E. Arkema

As her Pastor,
I went to visit her
In the hospital one day.

Didn’t want to go,
Didn’t like her;
I doubted she liked me.

She was seventy-nine,
A widow, had one son
Who lived in Hawaii.

She was crotchety.
Had exacting standards,
Told it the way she saw it.

On the face of it,
She accorded no favors
To authorities.

I’d known her for three years;

Carroll E. Arkema is a pastoral psychotherapist and Marriage, Family Therapist in New Jersey and New York City. This poem is from his book, Beyond Me: Poems about Spirit in Scripture, Psychotherapy and Life. (Eugene,OR: Resource, 2014) and is used with permission
She always greeted me,  
But she rarely smiled.

She’d probably have said  
That liking each other  
Isn’t what really matters;

What matters is integrity,  
Being honest and true:  
A good heart.

I’d think to myself,  
“A warm heart  
Would go a long way, too.”

I never did learn  
What wounds  
She was covering.

I didn’t know why  
She was in the hospital  
Nor how we learned of it.

So with trepidation,  
I went to see her,  
Expecting criticism –

Where had I been?  
Why not come sooner?  
It’s hard to reach you.

Upon entering the room  
I saw the fear in her eyes.  
Past time for criticism,

Beyond setting things right  
Any more in this life.  
She looked terrified.
I was scared now, too,
Unprepared for this:
Hadn’t known this person.

But my sense of death
In the room
And the fear in her eyes

Did help me shift gears,
Lay down my arms,
And be with her.

I could see in her eyes
For the first time
That she was glad to see me.

A door had opened here;
There was room for me
In her room.

“Not doing well,” she said,
And then she coughed,
Yes, she coughed,

She’d brought her
Hand to her mouth,
Then drew it away.

Sweet Jesus help me!
I’ll never forget
What lay in her hand there:

There lay these pinkish
Gray porous chunks
Of . . . her lungs!

In freeze-frame slow motion
I spent whole seconds
Taking this in.
So shocked
I’m amazed that I stayed
In the room. Thank God.

This was a situation
Where being a role
Helped me function:

Rather than turn, run,
Sick to my stomach,
Dash to the bathroom.

Everything was
Different from here on;
Terms not the same.

I knew for sure now
What was happening.
Poor vulnerable Being.

Her cough made clear to me,
And maybe to herself, too,
What was happening.

Death was definitely
Rattling us,
A daunting force.

Though outmaneuvered and
Momentarily disarmed,
I was still her Pastor.

As her Pastor
I saw her disintegration,
Shared her anguish.
She’d kept so much inside;
Couldn’t any more.
She was undone.
I don’t remember
What I said.
But I stayed.

The Spirit spoke
Through my presence.
“O Esther,” I said.

The nurse came,
Cleaned her hand.
I held her hand.

I didn’t stay long;
She was drained.
She was dying.

I said a prayer;
Saw deep love
In her eyes,

Eyes full of tears,
Heading into rest.
Still in shock, I left.

The next day
The Church Receptionist
Told me of her death.

Peace at the last?
I think so. God knows
Her Pastor had come.

It’s thirty-five years hence;
I’m still trying to process
All that happened between us.

I was her Pastor.
What an honor,
What a horror!
The Spirit helps
Us do far better
Than we could muster.

The Senior Pastor
Presided at her funeral.
But a few months later

I received a Greeting Card
From her son —
Postmarked “Hawaii” —

In which he thanked me
For my kindness
To his mother!

Adding that she had often
Spoken well of me
As her “fine young Pastor.”

A final shock—this blessing
That the Spirit sent me
From her through her son.

One doesn’t learn this stuff
In Theological Seminary:
One can’t really:

The guarded forms love takes
So as to keep intact
The ways wounded souls cope.