

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



from *Starfish*

This is what life does. It lets you walk up to  
the store to buy breakfast and the paper, on a  
stiff knee. It lets you choose the way you have  
your eggs, your coffee. Then it sits a fisherman  
down beside you at the counter who says, *Last night,*  
*the channel was full of starfish.* And you wonder,  
is this a message, finally, or just another day?

Eleanor Lerman<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

This is the first stanza of [a longer poem](#), and a poem whose tone is delightfully mysterious to me. The few lines offered here are mostly declarative, flatly reserved, and as the poet Tony Hoagland writes, “not exactly scornful of the offerings of daily life but hardly giddy...”

As a (mostly) persistent optimist, I cling to that last cautiously hopeful line—that word “finally”—with a kind of longing that reminds me of the feeling I have watching clouds cover and unveil and cover again a sliver of moon in the dark: even if fleeting, a small light in the darkness is still a light in the darkness. My own sensibilities in this way lead me to imagine a speaker mustering some vestige of a nearly-gone faith, a sliver: Is this, at last, a sign for me? A sign I did not know I needed? Is this, after all, something to which I can cling?

Never mind the metaphorically-loaded starfish—a species marked by its ability to regenerate what is lost—the strangeness of a channel full of such creatures is worthy of some (spiritual) attention! Interestingly, in its slow regrowth—months or years long—the starfish, even as a fragment, is equipped to live on whatever it has already stored, its backup supply of nutrition, until it is made whole again. In other words, even in its brokenness and as it remakes itself, it has, all the while, everything it needs.

I dare not shine too bright a light on that symbolism, or speak too confidently of the poet's intent, but it is hard not to study the implications of that otherwise inconspicuous fisherman

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<sup>1</sup> excerpt from “Starfish” by Eleanor Lerman from *Our Post Soviet History Unfolds*, Sarabande Books.

delivering without fanfare some (good) news at last. It could very well be that the message for me is there: somewhere beneath the surface, in the waters below, something is alive and growing. And in that small creature, which knows how to survive its without-ness, a sure sliver of hope for the rest of us—that we, too, have what we need to be made whole again.

### ✧ About the poet

**Eleanor Lerman** (born 1952) is a lifelong New Yorker and author of several collections of poetry and fiction, including four novels. Her first book of poems, *Armed Love*, was nominated for a National Book Award when the poet was just 21 years old. At 18, she left home to follow her writer's dream and found her first job—as an assistant at a Greenwich Village workshop that produced and shipped build-it-yourself harpsichord kits. Her colorful career includes several major awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation.



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