

ZARIA FORMAN

Waipi'o Valley, Hawaii, No. 3, 2015
Soft pastel on paper, 56 x 85 in



COURTESY WINSTON WÄCHTER FINE ART

SHANNON LEONE FOWLER

Sea Glass

A Marine Biologist's
journey with the ocean
through love and loss

When I was twenty-eight, I lost both my life loves in a single instant. My fiancé, Sean, used to tease me for saying once that the only things that “filled me up” in life were him and the ocean. But I’d fallen in love with the ocean first, decided I wanted to be a marine biologist when I was eight years old. Everything changed late one sunny afternoon on a beach in Thailand. Sean was holding me in the warm waist-deep water and we were kissing. The box jellyfish grazed my thigh first, and then wrapped itself around Sean’s legs below me. Fourteen years later, I’ve never been able to shake the feeling that the jellyfish was meant for me.

I’d learned to love the ocean as a child, spending summers on the beach in San Diego with my grandparents. My grandpa Bob was a physical oceanographer at the Scripps Institute. He taught me how to escape a rip current, to shuffle my feet in the sand to avoid stingrays, to always pick up any garbage or plastic, and, in clear skies, to look for a green flash the moment before the sun set into the water. My grandma Joy was a strong swimmer, preferring the open sea to a swimming pool, and bodysurfing well into her seventies—her white swim cap tucked down, her arms straight out in front of her like a superhero.

At low tide, I’d walk along the shore, rescuing any stranded animals I found and placing them gently back into the sea—fuzzy purple sand dollars, knobby orange ochre sea stars. My grandpa and I used sticks or stalks of giant kelp to carefully roll the blobbed bodies of purple-striped jellyfish back into the water.

For Christmas the year I was eight, I asked to adopt a penguin—a donation made in my name to the Steinhart Aquarium to sponsor a young female Humboldt named Ursula. I still have a few of Ursula’s soft, curled gray under feathers in a cardboard box in my parents’ attic, together with tiny whorled shells, worn stones, and bits of sea glass.

I never stopped picking up litter washed onto the sand. Waited an entire afternoon for the perfect opportunity to save a seagull with one foot caught in a plastic bag. Helped cut a sea lion pup tangled in fishing line free. And spent one New Year’s Eve at Heron Island on the Great Barrier Reef scooping green sea turtle hatchlings out of a hotel swimming pool. The hatchlings had confused the bright