

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

festivities for the light of the moon and then couldn't find their way to the sea—their tiny bodies smaller than the palm of my hand, all delicate beating flippers and lost black eyes.

For twenty years, I worked and planned and dreamed and studied to be a marine biologist. All of this, I did for love. And in some irrational corner of my young and privileged heart, I expected the ocean to love me in return.

In 2002, I was halfway through a PhD researching the development of diving in the threatened Australian sea lion. I was twenty-eight and Sean was only twenty-five. He was from Melbourne, though we'd met almost four years earlier when we were both backpacking through Barcelona. Sean was funny and flirtatious, generous to a fault, and as impulsive as I was. Our relationship was easy and secure, and Sean was full of plans for our future—which neighborhood in Melbourne we should find our first flat together in, what we'd name our children, how we'd spoil our grandkids. Each morning, the first thing he would say to me when we woke was either "Can I steal a morning kiss?" or "I love you."

Sean had just finished a short-term contract teaching marketing for the Communist Party in China. I'd gone there to visit him, and we'd traveled together through the heat of the summer. He proposed over sweet, sticky pork buns in Shanghai, and we decided on a quick trip to Thailand, a chance to relax together on a beach in paradise. And that's where we were, at Haad Rin Nok beach on the island of Ko Pha Ngan, when Sean was stung. It happened in a moment: Sean dropped me in the water and rushed to the beach. He died, only minutes later, collapsed onto the wet sand.

Box jellyfish are the most venomous creature on the planet. Almost totally transparent, a single jelly has sixty tentacles, each up to ten feet long, and every inch containing 2.5 million nematocysts, or stinging cells. Most jellies are known for passively drifting, accidentally bumping into any prey in their path. But box jellyfish are active predators, strong swimmers with surprisingly complex vision. This one had bumped me first, and then Sean had dropped me when it stung him. It would have been such an ironic death for a marine biologist. So, as unscientific as I knew it was, it felt as if I were the one who'd been hunted, but Sean was the one who was killed.

Immediately on Ko Pha Ngan, I was told over and over—by the doctor, the police, the hotel manager—that Sean was the first to die in decades, that the locals had never heard of jellyfish deaths there. Earlier that afternoon, I'd been reassuring Sean about sharks, telling him he was more likely to be struck by lightning.

For something I had loved so deeply for so long, I could only feel a lover's betrayal. I hated the ocean. I resented it for everything it had taken from me. The life I had planned was gone. I couldn't even run along the coast or dive below the waves. Just looking at the sea made me panicky, frightened, nauseated. I spent the next long, cold months inland trying to figure out what to do with my life, thinking about walking away from marine biology. Although I did go back to finish my PhD, my heart could never be in it in the same way.

I didn't touch the ocean again until the first-year anniversary of Sean's death. I took a short break from studying Australian sea lions and traveled by myself to Noosa, on the Sunshine Coast. I'd planned on surfing, but there weren't any waves. The winter sky was huge, and the water was calm. I waded into the sea until it came up over my waist, and then I held my breath. Underwater, I kept my eyes shut and my feet on the sand. I came back up again—salt in my eyes, cold across my chest—and he was still dead. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but my heart was as flat as the sea that day.

For years, I felt the need to return to the ocean on the anniversary of his death. But it was to be with Sean, not to be with the sea. I needed to raise my glass looking out across the water that took him, needed to write messages to him in the wet sand.

This last anniversary, fourteen years since he died, I found myself at the coast yet again, in Santa Cruz, California. Married and separated, now a single mom living in London, I take my three young children to spend summers on the beach in Santa Cruz with their grandparents. My kids haven't fallen in love with the ocean yet—the beach is too sandy, the waves too big and unpredictable. Still, we visit the Monterey Bay Aquarium and my old lab at Long Marine. I take my eldest son to late-night movies at the boardwalk and kayaking around the pier over giant kelp forests. I point out barking California sea lions, swooping brown pelicans, and sleeping sea otters wrapped in

seaweed. He points out the trailing orange tentacles of a Pacific sea nettle. There will always be jellyfish. But there always were jellyfish. They've been around for at least five hundred million years.

My relationship with the ocean now is complicated. I lost the ocean in a heartbeat, and it took me many years to find my way back. Seasons spent on board ships in Antarctica, the Arctic, Caribbean, and San Juan Islands. Months studying Weddell seals and killer whales. Hours and hours and hours watching the water. During those years, I saw wandering albatross court their lifelong partner; five-thousand-pound northern elephant seals mate with females a third their size; Australian sea lions give birth to wet wriggling pups; and leopard seals skin and eat penguin chicks just for fun.

I do love the ocean again. But it's different. I'm different. Now, it's a more mature love, more realistic. Not an idealistic young lover's flush, but the kind of love when you've known someone long enough to see the darkness.

I'm staring out to sea as I type this, to the Atlantic Ocean and the sandy beach at Boscombe near Bournemouth in the UK. Tomorrow should be Sean's fortieth birthday, October 26, 2016. Last night, I had dinner alone at Urban Reef—oysters and risotto and wine. The white lights above me shaped like life rings. And by some kind of crazy coincidence, David Gray playing on the stereo, singing the same song we'd played at Sean's funeral fourteen years earlier, "*Say goodbye, say goodbye, say goodbye.*"

The waves of the Atlantic here are smaller and grayer than the Pacific waves I grew up with. The sun sets out of sight. But the water isn't quite as cold as I expected, and the enormity and the relentlessness of the sea feel reassuring.

Shannon Leone Fowler is a writer, marine biologist, and single mother of three young children. Since completing her doctorate on Australian sea lions, she's taught marine ecology in the Bahamas and Galápagos, led a university course on killer whales in the San Juan Islands, spent seasons as the marine mammal biologist on board ships in both the Arctic and Antarctic, taught graduate students field techniques while studying Weddell seals on the Ross Ice Shelf, and worked as a science writer at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C. Originally from California, she currently lives in London. *Traveling with Ghosts* is her first book.