You can catch glimpses of Kuan Yin all over Hawai‘i. In Honolulu alone, she towers over gift oranges at the Kuan Yin Temple on Vineyard Boulevard and observes from her wooden and stone statues at Palolo Kwannon Temple as elderly women dance. She scans the commercial district in Waikīkī from a mural on Kūhiō Avenue, and she jams Thai and Vietnamese shops. She centers the crowds at the Chinese Cultural Plaza, hobnobs with waving cats on restaurant shelves (*maneki neko*), graces home altars, and rides the bus in laminated plastic swinging from a knapsack.

**Kuan Yin in Religion**

In Buddhism, Kuan Yin is a bodhisattva, or enlightened soul, who could “graduate” from the round of births and deaths but chooses to keep incarnating, to help others. The Chinese name *Kuan Yin* or *Guanyin* means “the one who perceives the sound of suffering,” a rough translation of the Sanskrit name *Avalokitesvara*. Although Indian Buddhists depicted Avalokitesvara as male, his stories underwent a transformation as they passed into China. From the seventh to the ninth century, Chinese Buddhists may have combined the legends of the Indian compassionate bodhi-
sattva with those of Tara, a Tantric female figure, or with stories of the Taoist Queen Mother of the West. Her differently pronounced names include Goon Yum in Cantonese, Kannon in Japanese, Quan Im in Thai, and Quan Am in Vietnamese. With the exceptions of the male Kwanseum in Korea and Chenrezig in Tibet, Asia today predominantly represents Kuan Yin as a woman.

More than eighty canonical works in Buddhism mention Kuan Yin. By the year 828 C.E., 744,000 statues of Kuan Yin had mushroomed across China, and she remains one of the most popular religious figures there. In fact, after zealots destroyed many Buddhist artifacts during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and '70s, ordinary people undertook the finally permitted repairs by restoring Kuan Yin’s statue even before the Buddha’s in many areas.

Rituals for Kuan Yin follow a common pattern. In home rituals, worshipers place a picture or statue of Kuan Yin over an altar and periodically light incense, say scripture, or offer fruit. At temples or outdoor shrines, visitors bow, light joss sticks, leave fruits and flowers, or burn paper money for ancestors. To ask for help with particular problems, visitors consult numbered divination poems by shaking a pot holding a hundred numbered sticks until one or two sticks fall out; they privately interpret the relevant passage in a Kuan Yin divination book or seek the advice of an intermediary.

People pray to Kuan Yin about a wide range of topics, from the mundane to the philosophical, or from the self-serving to the community-minded, depending on whether the worshiper is asking, “What can she do for me?” or “What can I do to be more like her?” The Lotus Sutra cred-
its Kuan Yin with the ability to intervene actively in catastrophes, stilling tempests or plucking victims from bandits. As part of Kuan Yin’s association with Amitābha Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism, people may call on her to escort the soul after death to the Western Paradise.

A lovely passage in the *Lotus Sutra* explains how this bodhisattva can take any form:

> for living beings who are capable of being saved by a Buddha, the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin appears as a Buddha’s body to teach the Dharma. . . . For those who are capable of being saved by the disciple, the Bodhisattva appears as a disciple to teach the Dharma. . . . For those who are capable of being saved by a woman, a housewife . . . the Bodhisattva appears as a woman, housewife . . . For those who are capable of being saved by a Naga [earth spirit], Gandharva [musician spirit], antigod, birdlike being, semi-human being, great serpent and others, the Bodhisattva appears as these.5

Because she can adopt many guises, Kuan Yin becomes not so much an external, exclusive savior, but rather anything or anyone who comforts or teaches another.

In addition to assuming these forms, Kuan Yin waits as inner potential: “by the practice of meditation the lake of the heart becomes pure and calm . . . it is the reflection of a Bodhisattva which appears within it.”7

**Kuan Yin and Gender**

Incarnating in a housewife as readily as in a Buddha, Kuan Yin contrasts not only with Western male gods and patriarchs but also with Avalokitesvara, the Indian bodhisattva
whose stories evolved into Kuan Yin’s. Ancient Indian Buddhism regarded women as inferior; one old monk gave the opinion that a bodhisattva would take female form only in earlier, less enlightened incarnations. Chinese teachers, however, exhibited no such qualms about representing bodhisattvas as female.

Some of the iconography for Kuan Yin may derive from images of ancient goddesses. An oracle-bone text from the Shang dynasty, 1700–1100 B.C.E., contains the first written record of earlier goddesses, the Eastern and Western Mothers. The Tao Te Ching, from the fourth century B.C.E., also expresses reverence for a high goddess: “Nothing—the nameless / is the beginning; / While Heaven, the mother, / is the creatrix of all things. / All mysteries are Tao, and Heaven is their mother: / She is the gateway and the wombdoor.” Strikingly, this goddess manifests as a heavenly figure, not as the “passive, receptive earth mother penetrated by some sky father, as in so many ancient cultures.”

Kuan Yin’s possible ancestry in a powerful deity who created the universe has led some scholars to speculate that the jar this bodhisattva is depicted as carrying may originally have been a uterine symbol. Kuan Yin sometimes holds the jar almost upside down, with the opening at the bottom. In contrast to the male Yahweh of the Judeo-Christian tradition, fashioning the world all by himself, or the male Vishnu of Hinduism, blossoming out a new world from a lotus stem attached to his navel, a goddess would have gestated all life from her jarlike womb. The undulating lotus stem in some pictures of Kuan Yin could, then, be said to double for the creator-mother’s umbilical cord,
while her lotus flower would have represented, in ancient symbol systems, the female genitals.  

While some scholars see the source of Avalokitesvara’s transformation in ancient goddesses, others believe that, beginning in the tenth to twelfth century, representations of Kuan Yin as a woman compensated for the misogyny of contemporary Chinese religions, especially neo-Confucianism, but also organized Buddhism and Taoism. Chun-fang Yü argues that “the Ch’an [Zen] rhetoric of nonduality and the Taoist elevation of the feminine principle ... did not translate into actual institutional support for women.” A female Kuan Yin at least allowed women an importance in legends, miracle stories, and art that they did not possess in the dominant ideologies.  

Some of Kuan Yin’s representations seem to empower women, but her stories at times have been marshaled to keep daughters and wives in line with current social restrictions. Worshipers have sometimes pushed the ideal of her compassion into a model of self-sacrifice enjoined especially on women. The legend of Princess Miao Shan, for example, which teaches feminine selflessness, was combined with Kuan Yin’s tradition around 1100 C.E., when Miao Shan was called an earlier incarnation of this bodhisattva. The princess’s father commands her to marry, but she refuses in order to withdraw from the world for meditation. When she fails to comply with his demands, he treats her harshly; in some versions, he even kills her. After the brutal king falls sick, an advisor tells him that he can be cured only if a person without anger donates an eye and an arm to a healing brew. Miao Shan, informed
in her dungeon (or reincarnated after her murder), willingly gouges out both eyes and cuts off both arms for her ailing father. Variations of this legend are “performed, sung, painted, carved, recited and lived throughout China to this day.”14 Because her story glorifies self-sacrifice in women without requiring it of men, Miao Shan could be said to contribute to female subservience.

On the other hand, Miao Shan does defy her father’s orders. She hopes for his spiritual advancement, but she works toward that end in a way that seriously flouts the Confucian morality of obedience, hence providing an alternative role model for women. And although Miao Shan escapes the usual domestic routine only by choosing a Buddhist convent, invalidism, or death, Chinese women have used Miao Shan/Kuan Yin to authorize other options. For instance, in Taiwan from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, worship of Kuan Yin contributed to a “marriage resistance movement” among women who neither married nor became nuns. These silk workers gained financial independence by forming sisterhoods and living in houses in which one room was dedicated to Kuan Yin.15

Instead of categorically stating that a given Kuan Yin story oppresses or liberates women, it is more accurate to see her lore as a space in which women may negotiate whatever social situation they inherit. While the women of the Taiwanese marriage resistance movement did keep to a traditional Buddhist belief that menstruation, sex, and birth “pollute” women,16 the rebels still managed, through their devotion to Kuan Yin, to widen their choices beyond those of the traditional family. In a similar negotiation of power, Chinese “wu-women” or “soul-raisers” in Singapore
go into trances to give much-coveted advice; by attributing the channeled messages to Kuan Yin, rather than speaking in their own voices, the women exercise more authority than they might otherwise obtain.¹⁷

In fact, the range of images, powers, and functions ascribed to Kuan Yin throughout her long history goes far beyond self-sacrifice. While the legend of Miao Shan puts emphasis on a young woman who passively effaces herself, other art pictures Kuan Yin as an old woman or sea goddess who actively rescues travelers. Instead of prizing virginity, as in Miao Shan’s story, some lore describes Kuan Yin freely granting sex to anyone, if that role can lead to soul growth for her partners.¹⁸ If Miao Shan’s compassion pushes Kuan Yin toward an emotional side, a complementary image shows her as a thinker holding a sutra, as part of a tradition that personifies Prajñāpāramitā, or Perfection of Wisdom, as “a feminine deity.”¹⁹ From a variety of historical origins, Kuan Yin validates women all along a spectrum from sexually partnered to solitary, intellectual to compassionate.

The Kuan Yin tradition has been enlisted to upgrade the status of women in modern China through The King of Masks, directed by Wu Tian Ming.²⁰ In this 1996 film, set in Sichuan in the early twentieth century, an elderly man wishes to teach his skill in masked street performance to an inheritor. Because he has no surviving son, he decides to adopt—buy—a boy from a warehouse full of children sold by kidnappers or poverty-stricken family members. The king of masks initially is euphoric over his bright new “grandson,” Doggie, but he soon discovers that Doggie is inferior goods: a girl. The master is so furious that he makes her call him “boss” instead of “grandpa,” treats her
as a servant, and refuses to bequeath her the art of magic masks.

Director Wu builds plot sequences around two art forms representing Kuan Yin—statues and performances—to relay to the old man, and perhaps to the modern film audience, a more egalitarian view of the sexes. The king of masks keeps a small Kuan Yin statue on the boat where he lives. One day the little girl demands, “What do boys have that I don’t?” “Just a little teapot spout.” “Does the goddess have a teapot spout?” “What goddess?” Fetching the statue, Doggie explodes, “Look, she’s got breasts. Why do you worship her?” Here the film directly confronts “boss” with the contradiction in his religious and social beliefs; he looks troubled but makes no change in his behavior.

The film shows traditional performances about Kuan Yin that initially seem to perpetuate feminine subservience, but again the director teaches gender equality, this time through a growth of understanding in Master Liang, a male actor who plays Kuan Yin. In street processions, Liang impersonates the bodhisattva, as young women desperately try to touch her lotus throne to obtain the blessing of sons. Sons still provide women’s one route to social validation, in which Kuan Yin seems to be complicit. We also see Liang playing a Sichuan opera version of Kuan Yin’s Miao Shan legend. This theatrical Kuan Yin cuts a supporting rope and leaps to her death to help her father, an evil king. The performance inculcates in Doggie the old lesson of self-sacrifice, and she soon tries it out herself when the “king” in her life is falsely arrested for kidnapping. To get attention for her grandfather’s plight, Doggie climbs
onto the theater roof, imitating the scene in which Kuan Yin is precariously suspended from the rope.

Yet even as Doggie is preparing to copy sacrifice from the opera, the growth of the actor who plays Kuan Yin counters this example of feminine self-effacement. Liang’s own social status has always been ambiguous; he is sought after like a rock star, cosseted in furs, and courted by generals, but simultaneously looked down on because of his association with women’s roles. Realistically assessing his low position, Master Liang is used to reacting with modest if bitter deference; in fact, when Doggie first requests his help in releasing her grandfather from prison, Liang says he will ask an admiring general but quickly acquiesces when rebuffed. However, when Liang sees Doggie imitating him by cutting the rope, something in him changes. Still dressed as a woman for his stage role, he runs (in slow motion) to catch Doggie, then he forcefully reproaches the general. After grudgingly praising Liang’s “courage and character,” the general liberates the old man from jail, a result of the bold efforts of the film’s two embodiments of Kuan Yin. In gratitude, the mask-king finally teaches Doggie his skills.

Although it may seem as if the master of masks softens his fury only because the girl has proved willing to destroy herself for hurtful men, director Wu undermines feminine subservience through the courage before power finally exhibited by Liang/Kuan Yin. He/she progresses from deference to protest; when he speaks out against injustice, he addresses both the street king’s arrest and society’s scorn against women or gender transgressors. The film ends by showing the quick-change feats performed by the old man...
and Doggie, initiated at last into the art of masks. The camera switches rapidly between the two artists, male and female, so that gender itself appears as just another artificial role, donned and doffed as societies dictate.

**Kuan Yin in Art**

As part of the gender shift from Avalokitesvara to Kuan Yin, some statues and paintings show a human form that could be either male or female. Japanese art insisted on a male bodhisattva for a longer time than did Chinese, sometimes depicting Kannon with an ostentatious mustache. In all countries, Kuan Yins of the last hundred years are usually clearly female. In 1997, to dedicate a new cemetery in Malaysia, a young woman of prom-queen qualifications wore a dazzling white gown and rode an elaborate lotus float to play out an ephemeral “Goddess of Mercy.”

Distinct art conventions have represented Kuan Yin for over fourteen hundred years. Either seated or standing, she is shown through a series of characteristic environments, identifying objects, and media. A familiar Kuan Yin rests with her right knee drawn up, right foot on the seat, and right arm extended over the knee. This posture, called “royal ease,” conveys harmony of mind and body, both stillness and the strength to act. In a variation of the pose, Kuan Yin sits flat on the ground with her left leg folded flat, while she again draws up her right knee and drapes her right arm over it. In a further variation, she sits on a bench but bends her right leg so that her ankle rests on the opposite knee, both hands clasped on the ankle.

“Kuan Yin of the South Sea” also sits at ease, this time in
a grotto near waves. A young pilgrim boy, Sudhana, sometimes appears to the side, worshiping her on Mount Potalaka. Later pictures show both a boy and a girl, sometimes identified as Lung-nü, Dragon Princess. In other paintings, the bodhisattva sits alone near a small pool, a bare foot pushed boldly into the water.

One of the most common of the seated art postures belongs to a type called “white-robed Kuan Yin,” depicted in ink drawings or statues. These ceramic figures cram modern shops. Western Madonnas probably influenced the graceful drapery and modesty of this version, whose stark white is said to symbolize “the mind of enlightenment.” By contrast, earlier seated Kuan Yins in wood often bear the traces of polychrome, including bright reds and greens.

Standing Kuan Yins divide into several types. “Kuan Yin of the South Sea,” in addition to sitting in a grotto, also stands on a lotus, on the back of a water dragon, or directly on the waves. A rarer “fish-basket Kuan Yin” appears as a rustic fisherwoman. One such painting, by Chao Mengfu (1254–1322), shows “a large plain woman with bags under her eyes, a strong common woman with character. Her appearance is extraordinary only because she has the long ear lobes symbolizing the perfect wisdom of the Buddha.” A standing, “child-giving Kuan Yin” holds a tilted jar with its arching stream connected to a sphere below her feet, where a small child floats as if in a uterus.

A “thousand-armed” standing Kuan Yin intervenes in the messy problems of the world. Sculpted or drawn with many implements in multiple hands, this bodhisattva usually looks male—though Siam Imports in Honolulu has a distinctly female thousand-armed Kuan Yin with well-
defined breasts. In contrast to this staunch, aggressive figure, “Raigō Kuan Yin” bends forward deferentially, offering a single small lotus on which to carry a soul newly released from its earthly body to an afterlife with Amitābha Buddha in Pure Land.

Typical environments for Kuan Yin, besides sea, pool, or grotto, include a waterfall or full moon. Some viewers interpret the moon that surrounds her like a halo as a sign of “the empty and illusory nature of phenomena.” However, the moon could also be related to Buddhist scripture that says if a meditator can still “the lake of the heart,” then Kuan Yin’s image will appear. Just as the one moon reflects in innumerable lakes and even in small puddles, the bodhisattvahood possible in all people pervades and potentially manifests in many different hearts, usually muddied by ego.

In artistic representations, Kuan Yin often holds a small jar or vase, one of her various identifying accoutrements. Perhaps originally a uterine symbol, the jar is later said to pour compassion or balm, the revivifying waters of life. Kuan Yin also commonly carries a willow branch, long associated with secular “feminine beauty”; the willow whisk as a religious symbol “brushes away evil of greed, attachments, ignorance.” In later works, the willow sprig shows up in the jar, though at one time they were separate symbols. Less frequently, Kuan Yin holds a jewel or lotus. A characteristic headdress or protuberance over her brow contains a tiny image of Amitābha Buddha. Usually this image is clearly defined, but sometimes artists leave the mound blank or draped, hinting at the indefinable Buddha-force that she reveres or projects from herself.
Although men probably wrote the canonical scriptures about Kuan Yin, women have contributed to her representations in art. In the late sixteenth century, Tu-ling Nei-shih modeled her Kuan Yin on a description of the bodhisattva in the Ming dynasty novel Journey to the West: “Dark hair piled smoothly in a coiled-dragon bun, / And elegant sashes lightly fluttering as phoenix quills.” Another woman from the Ming dynasty, Hsing Ts’u-ching, painted a series of Kuan Yins, adapting the conventions of Kuan Yin riding a dragon or watching the moon’s reflection in the water. The Honolulu Academy of Arts exhibited a work by a Japanese woman, Tani Kankan (1770–99), who painted Kannon every day of the last four years of her life, perhaps a response to her own incurable illness. Did she hope that Kannon would heal her? Did she pray to imitate the equanimity of the bodhisattva, whether in health or in sickness? The exhibited ink drawing showed, in a few strong strokes, a dignified, seated Kannon in a simple white robe—and a dash of baubles at her throat.

In statues or paintings from any culture, Kuan Yin can most readily be identified by the characteristic draped elevation over her head, the lotus under her feet, a typical posture like “royal ease” with a knee drawn up, or a common object, such as the small jar.

Kuan Yin in Hawai’i

Kuan Yin touches many people who live in Hawai’i. While teaching a graduate course in literature at the University of Hawai’i, I asked if any of the students knew this bodhisattva. One local woman, raised in Japanese Buddhism,
had grown up with Kannon. A master’s candidate from Thailand reached under her very American T-shirt to pull out a pendant of Quan Im, always with her. A student who had left her homeland of Vietnam at age four with her father, an American-trained pilot during the Vietnam War, recalled that her mother gave her a picture of Quan Am at their last parting.

Kuan Yin came to Hawai‘i with the first plantation workers. The Tong Wo Society Building, built in 1886 in Kohala, Big Island, contains a battered picture of Kuan Yin. In Waipahu, O‘ahu, the Chinese Society Building, originally built in 1909 and now reconstructed as part of Hawai‘i’s Plantation Village, houses a Taoist and Buddhist shrine on the second floor. Mainly devoted to Guang Ti, god of war and wealth, the shrine contains a seated Kuan Yin near the women’s alcove. Recognizable by the raised area over her head and the lotus seat, she is unusual in that she holds a sutra and looks quizzically out of a knowing, aged face. Although originally from a defunct temple on Fort Street, Kuan Yin appropriately occupies a space at the plantation, whose workers would have visited a watercolor print of her at the Kwan Dai Temple in Waipahu. Moreover, each Chinese plantation worker would have kept a rice-paper print of Goon Yum (her Cantonese name) over a home altar. Such prints picture her alone, or with a boy and a girl as attendants, or as one of three Buddhas. Families continued to worship Goon Yum at home altars at least through the third generation.

Today the main Chinese temple dedicated to Kuan Yin is on Vineyard Boulevard in Honolulu. A huge statue, holding a vase in one hand and a willow branch in the other,
looms over a profusion of oranges, pomelos, purple orchid sprays, and incense. Yin Ling, a registered nurse in Hawai’i, told me about her experience at this temple. A native of mainland China, she explained that the Cultural Revolution had interrupted her high school education and postponed college. When the political frenzy exhausted itself, she managed to start university training, which she finished in Honolulu. But she failed the licensing test in her new country—not because she didn’t know the answers about medical procedures, but because she didn’t understand enough English. Reflecting that the Cultural Revolution had both halted foreign language study and necessitated that her mother’s devotion to Goon Yum be expressed only in secret, Yin Ling went to the Vineyard Boulevard temple out of discouragement, curiosity, and a desire to connect with her past.

Under the bodhisattva’s statue, she shook the divining sticks, and the number on the dislodged stick corresponded to the line “You’ve been trying to dig gold by hand from a mountain.” Despite her hard work, Yin Ling was still unable to mine the gold of the nursing education she had mastered. Feeling known and encouraged, she renewed her “digging” with new tools. After further study in English, she retook the nursing test and passed.

The Tendai sect first brought the Japanese Kannon to Hawai’i. The gate to the Palolo Kwannon Temple opens next to a stone basin, inviting the visitor to slough off mean thoughts. A narrow, intensively cultivated garden dots red flowers among napkin-size leaves. The tall, granite Kannon, buxom and tree-trunk-thighed, stands outside grasping a thick lotus stem, and she shares with the birds the
gruel put out for her every day. Inside the temple, Reverend Eshin (Irene) Matsumoto officiates. She says that her late husband, whom she succeeded as priest, claimed that bodhisattvas “transcend gender,” although he himself used the pronoun “he” for Kannon, instead of saying “it,” the Buddha-force. Reverend Matsumoto, in her warm, wry, and unassuming manner, quietly says “she.”

At an evening ceremony in Palolo in honor of the bodhisattva, elderly women in kimonos dance with fans to the sound of chanting, bells, and metal mallets. Another ceremony commemorates the thirty-three sites of Kannon in Japan. Celebrants place their feet on a series of black-charactered, white packets of sand, collected from the Japanese sites and flanked by bright prints of the bodhisattva, specially unwrapped for the occasion. These paintings variously depict Kannon as female, male, and even horse-headed.

Also in Palolo stands the Korean Mu-Ryang-Sa, “Broken Ridge Buddhist Temple.” Begun in 1980, the beautiful, brilliantly colored temple exceeded city height limitations, and the builders had to cut off the top of the main hall. The temple-keepers then renamed the temple “Broken Ridge” after a metaphor of the Buddha, who said that in the long line of his incarnations, a “house of illusion” had caught him:

The ridge-pole that supports the rafters represents ignorance, the root cause of all passions. The shattering of the ridge-pole of ignorance by wisdom results in the demolition of illusion and the attainment of liberation or nirvana. As with the enlightenment of the Buddha, may the shattering of our own ridge-pole be seen as a purification of the temple.  

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The main hall at Mu-Ryang-Sa contains three golden Buddhas; to the left of the central Shakyamuni sits Kwanseum Bosal (Kuan Yin Bodhisattva), represented as male. Outside this hall stands a gentle, stone Kwanseum holding a water jar and lotus. A nun who spoke to me through an interpreter called this Kwanseum “neither male nor female.”

The Vietnamese Thiền Viên Chân Không in ʻĀina Haina honors a towering, white Quan Am in a narrow, vertical garden, her vase pouring from the top terrace, a red-berried tree crowding the middle steps, and carp powerfully darting in the pool below. Inside the temple is a memorial room with one wall covered by photographs of deceased loved ones, old and young. A shelf bears a few lit candles, while the opposite wall holds books and a row of varied Quan Ams. Especially prominent is a framed print of Quan Am standing on the back of a four-horned dragon, slicing through green-blue waves. This image comforted the boat people escaping from Vietnam during the continuing hardships after the American war. According to the Venerable Thich Thong Hai, these immigrants often credit Quan Am with their survival.

I first encountered Kuan Yin in Hawai‘i in 1977. She teaches me a model of kindness and humor in an immediate community, as well as an ideal of activism against social injustice in a bigger community. My poems, which assume that Kuan Yin has lived through many incarnations, place her in the muck and muddle of everyday life, as do the photographs by Joseph Singer. While this book by no means represents all the Kuan Yins in Hawai‘i, we try to suggest their range, vitality, and integration with ordinary people.
Whenever I have been privileged to read my Kuan Yin poems aloud at Bamboo Ridge gatherings in Hawai‘i, listeners have responded with their own experiences of this bodhisattva. Once I recited a poem called “This Isn’t a Picture I’m Holding,” written after I saw a news article announcing the release from prison of a rapist who had cut off his victim’s arms; a small photo beside the article pictured the woman at the courtroom. The poem imagines Kuan Yin as the amputated woman, then tries to insist, frantically, that the arms must surely continue outside the borders of the news photo. After the poetry reading, a young woman lingered to say that she grew up in a house whose altar held a statue of Kuan Yin—with detachable arms. Nobody would believe I had written the poem before hearing her comment. This odd mesh of memories linked us with the woman in the news article, with each other, and with Kuan Yin.

Notes

8. Ibid., 31.
19. Ibid., 170, 176.
20. Wu Tian Ming, director, The King of Masks (starring Chu Yuk and Chao Yim Yin), presented by Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd., distributed by Samuel Goldwyn Films, 1996.
22. Yü, Kuan-yin, 389.
27. Handout, Kuan Yin Temple, Honolulu; Reed, “Gender Symbolism,” 163–64.
Wake

Her one-hundred-ninety-second incarnation
was spent
in the dark.
The sages
were stunned.
They could not understand
why she slipped to her darkroom
to soak paper
in trays.

Whereas they had watched moons
taking shape in their cups
(which they held
to the sky),
she waited out phases,
gestation of silver
in smooth baths.

The whales
breached the surface.
The bodhisattva
leaned from the bow
and aimed her tensed camera
(held sure
to her eye).
She captured,
that lifetime,
one-hundred-ninety-two
flukes,
disappearing.

No two flukes
of the humpbacks
are exactly
alike, flashing
as unmatched
as thumbprints of humans
(six billion, thrashing,
at this click of the shutter).

The posthumous,
one-woman show
of her works
hung a roomful of flukes,
like views
of one fan.