Wakako Yamauchi writes of the soul, the spirit hidden beneath the surface. Secret desires, unfulfilled longing and irrepressible humor flow through her stories, writings that depict the life of Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans. Through the medium of her storytelling, the reader enters the world of desert farmers, factory workers, gamblers, housewives, con artists and dreamers, the bitter and the ever-hopeful.

Wakako Yamauchi was born in Westmorland, in the farmlands of the California Imperial Valley. Her birth certificate states her date of birth as October 25, 1924, but, as was common in farming communities, there was a delay in recording her birth, and she was actually born a few days earlier. She was named Wakako Nakamura, the third of five children. Her parents, Yasaku Nakamura and Hamako Machida, were Issei, immigrants from Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan.

Since the California Alien Land Law prohibited Asian immigrants from owning land, Yamauchi’s parents were forced to move continually throughout her childhood, as the leases expired on the land they farmed. When Yamauchi was thirteen or fourteen years old, she began reading the English section of back issues of Kashu Mainichi during breaks from farm work—her father bought stacks of the newspaper to use as brush covers protecting the crops from frost. Yamauchi was fascinated by a regular column, signed anonymously as Napoleon Says. The column recounted daily life in a way that inspired Yamauchi. In one of a series of interviews at Yamauchi’s home in Gardena, California, in 2007 and 2008, she told me that the writing “validated our lives—the food we ate, the fights we had with our siblings,
the daily routine of the Japanese family.” Yamauchi could not tell the identity of the mysterious Napoleon, but she was impressed that someone could transform the ordinary events of her life into compelling writing.

Following the disastrous failure of their lettuce crop and the Imperial Valley earthquake, Yamauchi’s family left farming and moved to Oceanside, where they ran a boardinghouse for itinerant Japanese workers. Among the Japanese American community in Oceanside, Yamauchi learned the identity of the writer of Napoleon Says. Yamauchi confesses that she had been thinking, “Boy, I could go for this guy”—but instead she discovered that the author was Hisaye Yamamoto, a young Nisei woman only a few years older than she was.

In 1941, when Wakako Yamauchi was seventeen and a high school senior, war broke out between the United States and Japan. Yamauchi would not finish high school; instead she was interned along with 120,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated in ten concentration camps under Executive Order 9066. Yamauchi and her family were forced to leave their home in Oceanside for the Poston Relocation Center in the Arizona desert.

In Poston, Yamauchi began working as an artist for the camp newspaper, the Poston Chronicle. Hisaye Yamamoto, the enigmatic writer of Napoleon Says, was a staff writer, and it was during their work for the Chronicle that the two young women began their lifelong friendship.

Near the end of World War II, Yamauchi was released early from camp to work in a candy factory in Chicago. While in Chicago, she received word from her mother that her father was gravely ill. Yamauchi took the train back to Poston, only to discover upon arrival that her father had already died from bleeding ulcers. The internment camp was closing and Yamauchi, her mother, and her siblings were among the last group to leave—Yamauchi remembers her mother carrying her father’s ashes in a container on her lap during the train ride out of Poston.

Yamauchi followed her family to San Diego and then attended night school at Otis Art Center in Los Angeles. She met her husband, Chester Yamauchi, and they were married in 1948. Their daughter Joy was born in 1955. During the postwar years of family life and raising her daughter, Yamauchi began writing fiction. She recalls that as she wrote, her fiction steadily moved “closer to what I knew—reaching in there and searching for the truth.”
Henry Mori, editor of the bilingual Japanese-English newspaper the Los Angeles Rafu Shimpo, knew of Yamauchi’s artistic work for the Poston Chronicle during the Internment, and, in 1959, Mori invited her to illustrate the holiday edition of the Rafu Shimpo. Yamauchi’s husband Chester suggested that she negotiate a deal with Mori: she would illustrate if Mori would publish some of her stories. Mori agreed, and, beginning in 1960, Yamauchi published a story a year in the Rafu Shimpo.

In the early 1970s, Hisaye Yamamoto contacted Yamauchi to tell her that a group of young writers—Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong—were organizing an anthology of Asian American writings. Yamamoto urged Yamauchi to submit her writings, and she sent several stories. Shawn Wong sent her an acceptance letter, writing that the anthology would publish Yamauchi’s story “And the Soul Shall Dance.” The anthology was the groundbreaking Aiieeee! (Howard University Press, 1974). In his authoritative introduction to Yamauchi’s first collection of stories and plays, Songs My Mother Taught Me (Feminist Press, 1994), poet Garrett Hongo sets forth the pioneering importance of Aiieeee!

The anthology introduced two generations of Asian American writers and inspired another generation to write as well, creating a renaissance of interest in writers, either out of print or writing in obscurity, who had reached maturity in the forties and fifties. These writers included Filipino Americans Carlos Bulosan and Bienvenidos Santos, Chinese Americans Louis Chu and Diana Chang, and Nisei writers John Okada, Hisaye Yamamoto, Toshio Mori and Wakako Yamauchi (a grouping that constituted, retrospectively, a kind of generational literary cohort).

Mako, the artistic director of East West Players, an Asian American theater in Los Angeles, read “And the Soul Shall Dance” in Aiieeee! and urged Yamauchi to write a play based on her short story. Mako told Yamauchi that it did not matter if the play was a hit or a miss—only that she keep the feeling that she had conveyed in her story. Mako’s encouragement gave Yamauchi the confidence to begin writing her play, and she wrote six drafts before completing And the Soul Shall Dance. East West Players
produced her play to packed houses in Los Angeles in 1977, and KCET in Los Angeles then produced Yamauchi’s play for PBS, airing it nationally in 1977 and 1978.

Yamauchi would continue to write several critically acclaimed plays, among them *The Music Lessons*, *The Memento*, and *12-1-A*. Her plays were performed on stages from New York and New Haven to Los Angeles and Honolulu, garnering several prestigious awards. In 2001, Mako and Yoichi Aoki translated *And the Soul Shall Dance* into Japanese and produced the play in Japan. Invited to Tokyo and Kyoto for the performances of her play, Yamauchi reflected that her writing had come full circle—that the longing and unspoken courage of the Issei and their descendants had finally been allowed to return home.

Wakako Yamauchi wrote the stories collected in *Rosebud* when she was in her seventies and early eighties. Nothing fancy, she said—she wanted no artifice or embellishment, nothing superficial. She was concerned only with the clarity of her language and “telling the story, getting as close to the truth as I can.” These stories, written in Yamauchi’s later years, focus on conveying an interior truth that is deeply personal and often hidden from external perception. The historical constraints on Yamauchi’s life—the Alien Land Law, segregation, the Internment and its aftermath—restricted the external freedom of much of her early life, yet through her writing Yamauchi transcends the limits imposed by the time and place into which she was born.

Yamauchi considered naming this collection *Taj Mahal*, after her play and the sublime monument built to love, for “we all need love,” she explained as she discussed the collection’s title: “Isn’t that what life is about?” In the end, though, Yamauchi chose *Rosebud*, after the enigmatic word uttered by the dying protagonist of *Citizen Kane*, the classic movie based primarily on the figure of William Randolph Hearst, the powerful newspaper magnate. Hearst fanned hysteria against Japanese Americans through sensationalist journalism, paving the way for Executive Order 9066 and the Internment. In her story “Rosebud,” Yamauchi recounts how Hearst “was building San Simeon, filling his castle with treasures of the world”—further illustrating the power Hearst wielded, the abuse of which effectively ended Yamauchi’s formal education and stripped her and her family of their personal liberty and property. Yamauchi writes, though, that for all the
power and wealth that he controlled, Hearst could not have the one thing he so desired, something that he had perhaps lost even before he knew of its importance—discovering too late that whatever Rosebud represented, it could not be controlled with power or “bought for all the gold in the world.” With clarity and restraint, Yamauchi allows us, her readers, to feel the interior preciousness of the soul’s longing. Bittersweet, elusive, and true, what the soul most cherishes is something that cannot be bought or manipulated. It can only be felt, and here in Yamauchi’s writings, it is revealed through the light of her words.

*Lillian Howan*