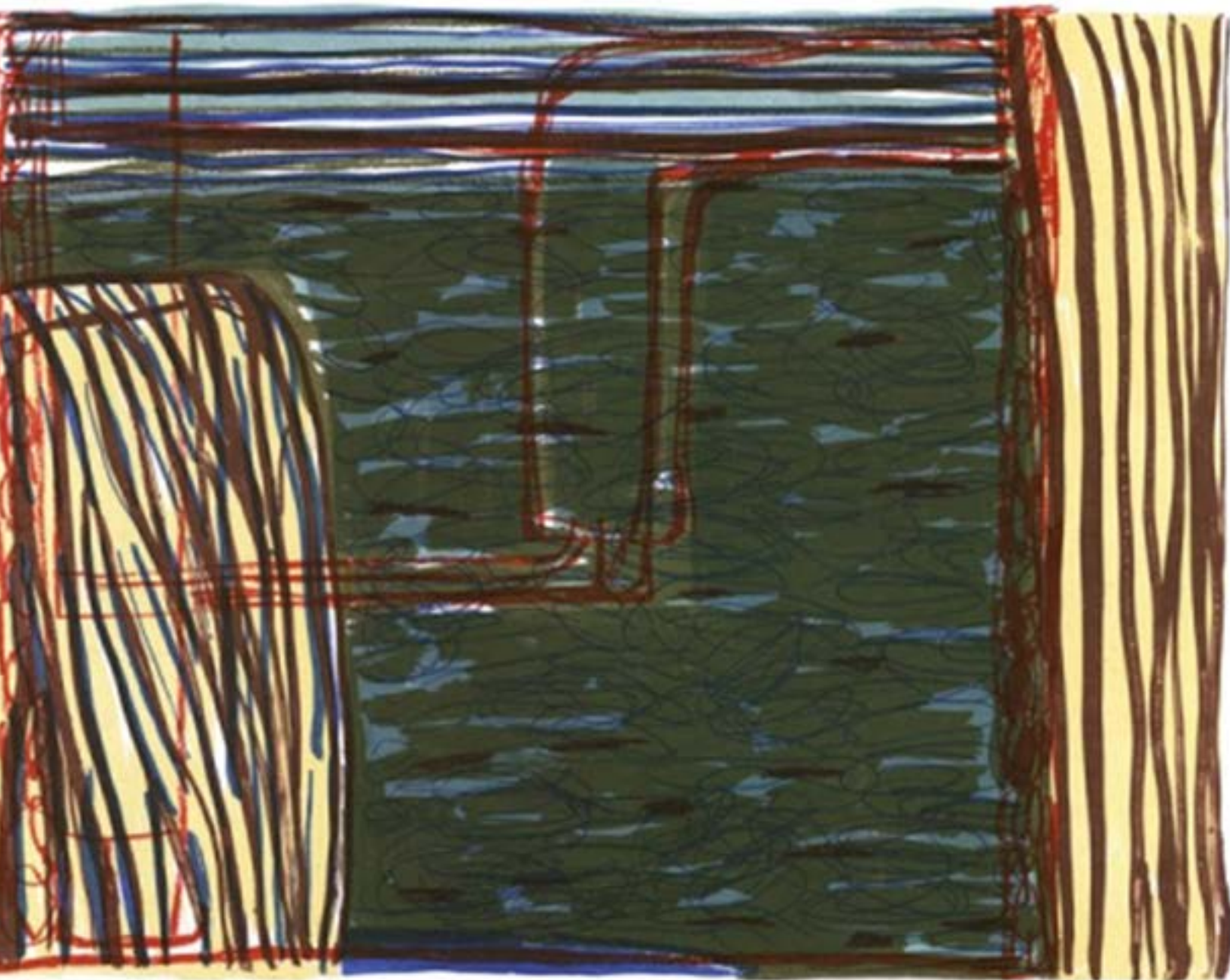


## JUDY MENSCH

*Across the Pool*, 2013  
Seven-color photolithograph, 11 x 14 1/8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## SUSAN FAUST

# Tribute to Yoshiko Uchida

Remembering a  
beloved Berkeley  
children's book author

In the three decades after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, no mainstream children's book addressed the subsequent Executive Order 9066. Then, in 1971, author Yoshiko Uchida broke the silence with *Journey to Topaz*. This fictionalized account describes what happened to a family like her own as President Roosevelt relocated those of Japanese descent from the West Coast to inland deserts. Loyal citizens and residents alike were seen as the enemy by virtue of race, incarcerated in desolate camps and deprived of their constitutional rights.

In the fifties and sixties, in my Bay Area schools, no one talked about what had taken place on the home front during World War II. We did not learn about how hysteria and racism resulted in such an egregious mistake. We did not learn about what our friends and neighbors had so recently endured. In *Journey to Topaz* and other books to follow, Uchida sheds light on this vitally illustrative but previously ignored chapter in our past.

From 1949 until her death in 1991, Uchida drew on personal experience to write folktales, novels, memoirs, articles, and poetry, mostly for children. Recurring themes thread through her work—being different, being humiliated for being different, the meaning of home, family love and loyalty, justice and injustice, opportunity and obstacles, culture, patriotism, and identity. From her particular perspective emerge insights that render her books more relevant than ever.

Born in 1921, Uchida grew up in Berkeley, California, the second daughter of Japanese immigrants. Her Issei parents believed in the American Dream for their Nisei children and provided an encyclopedia, piano lessons, concerts, museum visits, church activities, and travel, even to Japan. The family rented a three-bedroom stucco bungalow in a once all-white neighborhood. At age ten, Uchida began to write, initially inspired by the death of her beloved dog. More stories followed, all the protagonists being Caucasian, as in the books then available to her. At the outset, it never “occurred to me to write about a Japanese American child,” she later reflected.

Prodigious writers themselves, Uchida's mother regularly produced thirty-one syllable tanka poetry, and her father enthusiastically carried on a large correspondence. After all, he was a businessman with Mitsui & Co. in San Francisco and a community leader in Berkeley and

“And I was  
homesick for  
Berkeley. I couldn’t  
bear being locked  
up one more day.”

Oakland. A constant stream of visitors from Japan enjoyed the family’s warm hospitality. Consequently, Uchida’s father came under immediate suspicion on December 7, 1941. The FBI arrested him that very day, and he was soon sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Montana. He was allowed to join his family a year later at the Bay Area detention center in Tanforan, before they were transferred as a family to the Utah detention center in Topaz.

In 1938, at age sixteen, Uchida had entered UC Berkeley where, excluded “from the world of the white students,” she enjoyed Japanese American social clubs. She majored in English, history, and philosophy, barely completing her studies before forced relocation. She received her BA degree by mail at Tanforan Assembly Center in 1942. There, across the Bay from home, her family lived in a horse stall for five months before transfer to Topaz in far-off Utah.

The war years brought dislocation and despair. Despite participating fully in communal camp life, Uchida recalls the bleakness of Topaz: “I lost my voice from the dust. I was tired of having people around me constantly. And I was homesick for Berkeley. I couldn’t bear being locked up one more day.” Times were different. There were “no freedom marches or demonstrations of protest,” no concern about civil rights. Cooperation with the authorities, Uchida further recalls, was the main tactic, as if that was the “only way to prove our loyalty.”

The war years did open a new door. In 1943, Uchida was awarded a scholarship to Smith College in Massachusetts, and, in 1944, she received a master’s degree in education. She took a teaching job outside of Philadelphia but

left for secretarial positions in New York. They afforded her time to write. She submitted work to publishers and collected rejection slips. Then, in a class at Columbia University, Uchida was encouraged to submit a manuscript to a children’s publisher. It was accepted, and the legendary Margaret McElderry became her editor. In 1949, *The Dancing Kettle and Other Japanese Folk Tales* came out to critical acclaim. In 1951, a second book, *New Friends for Susan*, became her first original book with Japanese characters.

Shortly thereafter, with a Ford Foundation Fellowship, Uchida studied in Japan and discovered folk art. She also discovered herself. As a young girl, she was not at home in her parents’ native land. As a young woman, she was finally ready to embrace her Japanese heritage and complicated dual identity. Going forward, her books would feature Japan or Japanese American characters. Uchida’s goal was “to pass on this sense of pride and self-esteem to the third generation Japanese Americans—the Sansei—and to give them the kinds of books I’d never had as a child. . . . And I hoped all young Americans would read these books as well.” Her purpose was set.

Based on real events, *Samurai of Gold Hill* tells about early Japanese settlers in the Sierra foothills. The Rinko trilogy, beginning with *A Jar of Dreams*, tells about the immigrant experience during the Great Depression in Oakland. *Journey to Topaz*, *Journey Home*, *The Bracelet*, and *Desert Exile* focus on the war years and internment. Back in 1990, Uchida explained her motivation for writing about “what happened in our democracy.” She wanted to make sure that “such a tragedy will never happen to any group of people in America again.”

In her pensive and plainspoken poem “Empty Lot,” Uchida ponders an existential question: “I wonder who / will remember me / when I am gone, / when I am gone?” A poignant question indeed. Uchida had no children of her own but instead grateful readers, two generations and counting. For them, her engrossing books bring history from the shadows, make prejudice palpable, nurture empathy, validate cultural pride, celebrate growth (both personal and political), and honor strong character and right actions.

To borrow a powerful metaphor developed by Professor Rudine Sims Bishop of Ohio State University, for

Japanese American kids, Uchida provides a longed-for mirror. They can see something of themselves in her books. For everyone else, she provides a much-needed window. The rest of us can see into the lives of others. The result: Better understanding all around. Today, with the demand for diverse children’s books growing justifiably louder, it is well to remember that back in the twentieth century, Yoshiko Uchida was a true pioneer.

Quotes come from the following works:

Uchida, Yoshiko. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982.

Uchida, Yoshiko. *The Invisible Thread*. New York: Julian Messner, 1991.

**Susan Faust** writes a monthly column of children’s book reviews in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Active in the Association of Library Service to Children, she has served on numerous national book award committees, including for the Batchelder Award, Caldecott Medal, Newbery Medal, and Sibert Informational Book Medal, plus the Notable Children’s Books Committee. She was the lower school librarian at Katherine Delmar Burke School in San Francisco for thirty-three years.

**YOSHIKO UCHIDA**

## Empty Lot

I walked down  
the street and  
saw the wrecker’s truck.

Like a missing tooth  
the building was gone.

It just wasn’t  
there,  
It wasn’t  
there.  
All that was left  
was an empty lot.

What was there  
before it was gone:  
a shop  
a bank  
a bakery?

I couldn’t remember  
what used to be there.  
And it was a building  
of bricks and stones.

If a building of  
bricks and mortar and stones  
can be there one day  
and then be gone,

Then what of me,  
just flesh and bones?

I wonder who  
will remember me  
when I am gone,  
when I am gone?