

Paisley Rekdal shares Transcontinental Railroad stories



Award-winning poet Paisley Rekdal captivated a packed audience at Clark College's Winter Columbia Writers Series on January 30. Students, faculty, staff, and community members filled Gaiser Hall 213, eager to hear her share from her work *West: A Translation*—a compelling collection commissioned to honor the 150th anniversary of the transcontinental railroad. Blending poetry with multimedia storytelling, Rekdal's work offers a powerful reexamination of history, migration, and identity.

Rekdal spent five years working on the project. Her research led her deep into railroad archives, where she found an abundance of histories celebrating the wealthy landowners and financiers behind the project. But stories of those laborers who built and worked for the railroad—the Chinese laborers,

Black porters, and women who worked behind the scenes—were either absent or barely mentioned. Through her work, Rekdal seeks to restore their voices and reckon with the gaps in America's historical narrative.

Rekdal said, "I'm half Chinese. I was aware of the history of the transcontinental railroad. I wanted to put the laborers of the railroad on the forefront."

Countless Chinese who built the railroad with their sweat paid with their lives, but the railroad didn't keep track of the number. Their stories are lost. When the two ends of the railroad were joined by the driving of the last spike on May 19, 1869, the work of the Chinese laborers was completed. Seen as a threat to the jobs of white laborers, they were no longer welcome in the U.S. and were denied a path to citizenship.

Rekdal talked about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that not only marginalized Chinese people but rounded up and detained them in a government-built detention center on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, some for up to two years.

Rekdal said many of these incarcerated Chinese people carved poems on the walls of the detention center in their own language. In her book, she included one of these poems that elegized someone who had committed suicide while in detention at Angel Island. At the event, Rekdal shared other poems she wrote in response to the stories.

She said, "This whole project is based on footnotes, but I wanted it to be the primary story."

Today Angel Island is a state park that includes U.S. Immigration Station Detention Barracks Museum, an historic building preserved to show the original carvings that the detained immigrants left behind. Now we can learn about those lost stories.



Learn more:

West multimedia project by Paisley Rekdal

West: A Translation book by Paisley Rekdal is available in the Clark College Library

Angel Island State Park including U.S. Immigration Station Detention Barracks Museum, an historic building preserved to show the original carvings that the detained immigrants left behind from 1910-1940. Rooms are staged to reflect detention conditions.

Immigration Station at Angel Island State Park It was designed to process Chinese immigrants whose entry was restricted by the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882.

The Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882 was the first significant law restricting immigration into the United States.



About Paisley Rekdal

Paisley Rekdal is the author of four books of nonfiction, and seven books of poetry, most recently, *West: A Translation*,

which won the 2024 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and was longlisted for the National Book Award. Her work has received the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship, and various state arts council awards. The former Utah poet laureate, she teaches at the University of Utah where she directs the American West Center. Learn more about Paisley Rekdal [here](#).

Next Up

All Columbia Writers Series events are free and open to the public. For more information email: creativewriting@clark.edu

Spring Columbia Writers Series: Chelsea Bieker: May 29 at 10:00 a.m., PUB 258A-C

Chelsea Bieker is the author of three books, most recently the nationally bestselling novel, *Madwoman*, a Book of the Month club pick *The New York Times* calls “brilliant in its depiction of the long shadows cast by domestic violence.” Her first novel, *Godshot*, was longlisted for The Center for Fiction’s First Novel Prize and named a Barnes & Noble Pick of the Month. Her story collection, *Heartbroke* won the California Book Award and was a *New York Times* “Best California Book of 2022.” Her writing has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Marie Claire UK*, *People*, *The Cut*, *Wall Street Journal*, and others. She is the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Writers’ Award, as well as residencies from MacDowell and Tin House. Raised in Hawai’i and California, she lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and two children.

Fourth Annual Clark College Spring Writing Workshop: Saturday, May 31, PUB

The Clark College Writing Workshop is an annual creative

writing festival. It is comprised of author readings and writing workshops and invites Clark students and the Vancouver and surrounding communities to come together to celebrate writing and practice craft. Workshop facilitators include renowned writers as well as Clark faculty.

About the Columbia Writers Series



English professors and Columbia Writers Series coordinators Alexis Nelson and Dawn Knopf with author Paisley Rekdal.

The Columbia Writers Series has been a part of Clark College since 1988, bringing local, national and international authors to the college throughout the year. Writers who have visited Clark College through the series include Ursula Le Guin, Donald Justice, Sherman Alexie, Marvin Bell, William Stafford, Jamaica Kincaid, Gerald Stern, Carolyn Forché, Natalie Diaz, Karen Russell, Jess Walter, Dana Spiotta, Mitchell Jackson, and many others.

Learn **more** **at**
<https://www.clark.edu/campus-life/arts-events/cws/> or email

creativewriting@clark.edu

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley