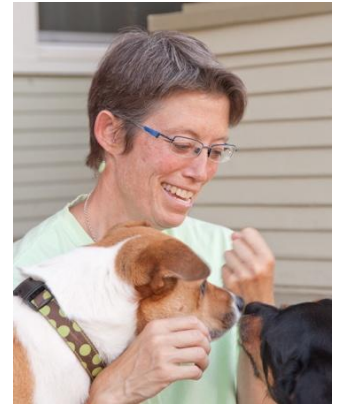


Prepare Yourself by Kate Gray

An introduction to Write Around Portland's
Fall 2011 anthology, *Blueprint to My Backbone*

Teaching at Clackamas Community College for twenty years, Kate Gray tends her students' stories. Her first full-length book of poems, *Another Sunset We Survive* was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award in 2007 and followed chapbooks, *Bone-Knowing* (2006), winner of the Gertrude Press Poetry Prize and *Where She Goes* (2000), winner of the Blue Light Chapbook Prize. Her unpublished novel, *Skin Drag*, is an attempt to look at bullying without blinking.



Fall is wind and fog, leaf fall and freezing streets, a time when cold can kill, and shelter can beat food and clothing for importance. But for some of us, fall was our salvation; it gave us hours away from watchfulness, freed us from the hyper-vigilance of living in a home that was more dangerous on the inside than on the outside. It brought us pink erasers and picture books, and we could fly to the "second star to the right, and straight on till morning." Even in Neverland some of us carried sorrow with our schoolbooks, concealed in bags on our backs, or in our bones. That sorrow, alongside the capacity for joy, sometimes came out in song or art or writing. Reading was a stillpoint in commotion.

It was Maya Angelou who saved my life. That sounds trite, but she did. In my high school theater the lights were dim, and a spotlight came on the curtain, stage right, and we heard her voice, that deep-river voice. She started from behind the curtain, "We wear the mask that grins and lies," and her hand came out and became the mask. "It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes." And the poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar was nothing I was prepared for. It was blanket and best friend, blood and whistle. It was a toboggan that brought Mari Evans, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Frances E.W. Harper crashing into my life, hurtling me across a very cold plain. I wasn't prepared to let go my loneliness, to slide into an understanding that laughter and song could win out over sorrow and fear, or at least, could be companions.

After reading everything Maya Angelou recited, I was no longer alone. After reading the work in this collection, prepare yourself to no longer be alone. Prepare to read the works of people who have found a stillpoint. The words they write are acts of generosity; they give their stories when stories may be all they have to give; those may be their unmasking. Prepare to recognize yourself as one of the people that Write Around Portland serves, a high school student whose "real never gave up on him," a lonely woman who came from a lonely woman, someone who tried over and over to tell herself, "Just don't kill yourself slowly" and kept killing herself slowly.

Whatever you do, whatever you have to give, prepare. Prepare to be safe.