

**The Yellow Crayon,
A Kindergarten Fable**

Niki Tulk

The desk crushes her knees;
it is a vice,
it keeps her
small.

She places her piece
of cream paper
carefully in front of her,
where her hand
strokes it once, twice.

Now children intones a female voice,
(solid like a metal tube)
“Here comes the *fun part*. Free Choice Drawing.”

At last, after a whole aching
day of having to publicly beg
permission to go to the bathroom,
the excruciating *may I/can I* dance
(oh the hot face and hands)
and still she does not
know the difference, only
the way she feels
small,
like her legs
under the hard desk,
small
like a stone,
or a dead bird
on the side of the road.

“You can choose *any* crayon.”

*Any crayon? Is this can I?
May I? Really? Any colour?*

“Weren’t you listening?”
(Oh the cold of the metal tube)
“Try listening the *first time*
and you won’t need
to waste everybody’s time
by *asking again!*”

The youngest ones have to wait;
bigger children first,
then oh so finally the small ones, she
trembles at the crayon box—
the desperate rainbow—
which one?
The color chooses her;
it always does.
Yellow.

 Yellow,
 warm afternoon sunshine through dry leaves, bright honey toast,
 how she grabs this token of life
 outside—
and *walk don't run*
back to the cramped desk.

The small girl draws big shapes;
the lines curve, dreams release,
she swims in the lines, soars
through the colour, the crushed
small girl starts to
sing—

until the bigger children laugh.
“Do you always sing while you draw?” sniggers
one girl, new
like her, but not
new now, not
now that all the rest
have joined in.
The teacher stops one boy taking
two colours:
“*Just one I said!*”
Another boy throws
his crayons—
he is two years older
and brave.

The small girl's song
now a whisper
across the yellow
lines on her cream paper.
“Now let's look over here.”
The voice, flanked
by the tall thin teacher, leans
over the yellow shapes,
dragon breath;
it burns.

“You have used *yellow crayon!*”

The class is silent.

“This *girl* has used *yellow* crayon. On *yellow* paper.”

The teacher pivots
on one sharp-tooth heel,
her eyes sweep everyone
into her loud, cruel laugh:
Come gather, help me eat this child.

What’s wrong? the child whispers.

“Speak up. I can’t hear you.”

You said any color.

“Yes. But not that one.”

The girl’s song disappears, the lines
close over her hand.

“When you draw with yellow crayon
on yellow paper
nobody can see it!
Now go and choose
another colour
and get *another* piece
of paper
and *start again.*”

And the girl?
She grew up to be a teacher who,
whenever she asked children
to choose any colour,
did everything she could

to mean it.



Niki worked for many years as an English and Drama teacher in Australia; she has a M.F.A (Creative Writing) from the New School, and a Masters of Education in Children’s Literature from the University of Georgia, Athens, where she also ran theatre workshops for at-risk teens. She is on part-time faculty at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City, where she teaches writing to undergraduate artists and runs professional development training for New School faculty. Niki works as a freelance theatre director in the NYC area, as well as monthly book reviewer for *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian and New Zealand Literature*. Her debut novel, *Shadows and Wings* was published in April 2013; she has poetry and fiction published in *The Saranac Review* Tenth Anniversary Edition, *Rock River Review*, *The Sheepshead Review*, *Antipodes*, and *The Feminist Wire*. She can be contacted at nikitulk@gmail.com