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.

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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