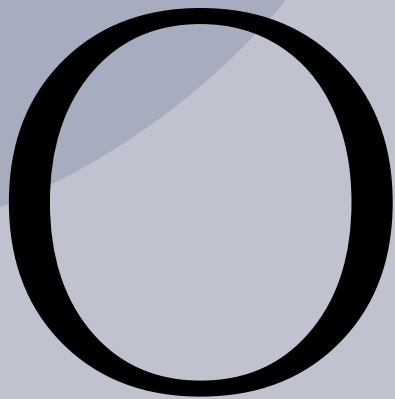


# A New Driftwood Press Poetry Collection



by Niki Tulk

This stunning collection of poems from writer & performance artist Niki Tulk explores the aftermath of sexual assault. Tulk unearths myths and folklore, revealing profound truths about the stories we craft around violence, womanhood, and justice.



## PUBLISHING DETAILS

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Niki Tulk is an ex-pat Australian and experimental theatre-maker, improviser, writer, poet and author of *Performing the Wound: Practicing a Feminist Theatre of Becoming* (Routledge, 2022). She currently lives with her family and rescue dog in the White Mountains, New Hampshire. For more details, visit [www.nikitulk.com](http://www.nikitulk.com)



# Dear Reader,

Ophelia takes her final walk across a cold, windswept meadow. She is singing to herself, fragments of songs she has known but now stumble out of her. Her hands, her hair are garbled with weeds. Someone watches her climb a tree that bends dangerously low over a river. Someone watches her fall. Someone watches her drown.

I obsessed over Ophelia. That she stays in the collective imagination—at least, of those who know the cultural reference—always suspended between two banks, two states of being, and she is never freed. I found myself grieving this girl as if she were real, and frustrated because a male playwright wrote her into that frozen space and she will never get out of it, and I thought *isn't that always the way*. Girls get written into these places of harm by patriarchy where our suffering and even our death, the death of ourselves, becomes romanticized. And there is nothing romantic about a young woman betrayed and driven into a mental spiral so that she is divided from herself. And there she floats still, in bathtubs, rivers, looking sexy and dead. What is it about harmed young women that patriarchy finds so sexy, so desirable? I went from obsessed and grieving to angry. I made a solo show and then dived into an installation about books bound in female human skin. I traveled to Harvard and spent two hours holding such a book in my hand, weeping silently in the special collections while George Washington stared smugly down from an oversized portrait on the wall. A man who stole other people's teeth; they were also in the collection, according to the man who signed me in.

From skin to poetry and as I untangled Ophelia from her weeds, I unraveled deep and scary places where other Ophelias who weren't made up were suspended in ravines somewhere in my own life and who I had to do something about. I grabbed their song fragments, I pulled weeds from their teeth and pounded their hearts to make them breathe—just a bit, please just one breath.

Instead of air there were owls. Instead of bile and water there were what happens to one girl every nine minutes in the US, froth in the mouth and me raging at it using words to carve out places on the huge blank space that is when I try to remember things, to say them out loud, because I can't yet say them. I can only write them. With feathers. With talons. And placing one hand at a time in Ophelia's muddy footprints and plotting murder to the one who just watched. Which was me.

So here it is:  
A love story.

—Niki Tulk

## ADVANCED PRAISE

"O is an ambitious, imaginative, mind-bending, heart-breaking, and world-creating collection that establishes Tulk as an original voice in feminist literature. I cannot wait to see what she does next."

—Michelle Bonczek Evory, author of *The Ghosts of Lost Animals*

"This is an urgent book, capturing what it means to experience, withstand, and witness sexual violence, and how survivors must rebuild their worlds and reinvent the language to do so. Tulk's *O*. does just that work; it is a beautiful book about our darkest human experiences."

—Lynn Melnick, author of *Refusenik*

"In myth, poem, found-text, fragment, and a final interview about the unsolvable problem of writing trauma, Tulk ingeniously spins a hypercube of desire, rage, sorrow, and most of all love as she opens to the unavoidable anguish and necessary power of mothering daughters in and against the perpetual violence of the patriarchy otherwise known as our lives."

—Julie Carr, author of *Objects from a Borrowed Confession*

## POEM EXCERPT

There are no pansies in Denmark.

You clenched fish scales, brine, a stone  
soaked dark with sea-tide, pressed  
red clover

Denmark's national flower  
to the Queen's skin, your brother's hand  
*Trillium pretense*. Red clover  
contains estrogen-like compounds.  
You gave them estrogen. In handfuls.  
(Just because? or in case? in spite?)

But more, purple northern marsh orchid  
*Dactylorhiza purpurella*  
Sprouting in dune slacks  
where wild strawberries grow. Maybe

you crushed some in your hand, fingers  
sweet now, red, plucked at nothing  
nothing.

You did not forget *Taraxacum*  
*asperatilobum*. Dandelion.  
Greek: *taraxos* (abnormal health condition)

*akos* (remedy)

*taraxo* (I have caused)

*achos* (pain)

