## Forms of Blue

## Harrison Tao

HEN I FIRST SAW ARNOLD KRAMER'S PHOTOGRAPH OF ONE OF THE MAJDANEK GAS CHAMBERS, IT OVERWHELMED ME. I WAS STRUCK BY WHAT I TOOK TO BE THE FADING COLORING ON THE WALLS, particularly the entrance wall. The blues were stunning: dark, almost purple in some places, but fading into cloud-like shades in others. I could not imagine why the interior of a gas chamber was painted blue.

Then I learned that the gray-bluish pellets of the *Zyklon B* gas left a blue residue: those beautiful blues were formed by the deposit of uncounted poison-soaked breaths. The darker the blue, the more that part of the wall had received repeated direct contact.

Afterwards, every blue glimpsed brought forth not just a life lost, a voice muted, but a manner of death which was suddenly personal in its horror and agony. I wrote "Forms of Blue," a poem which became a dialogue and finally a performance piece, in which the audience views a slide projection of the photograph while hearing the words as disembodied voices. "Forms of Blue" is my way of bringing the victims alive again.

Although I am an "outsider" and a reader of history, the Holocaust has never been just "history." It is the direct and indirect experience of the families of people whom I love and who embraced me as a teenager. This photograph has profoundly enriched my life, first by disturbing it and then by being a vehicle through which I have been able to give back to a community that gave me so much that is invisible, yet part of who I am.

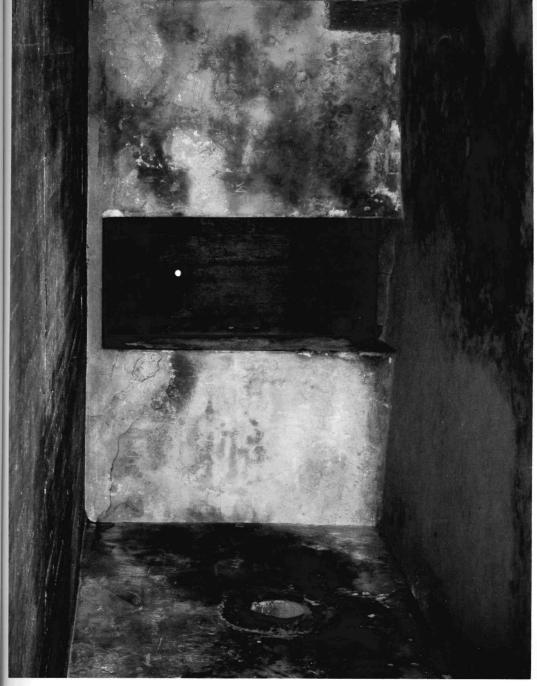
## About the photograph

The room is small, heavy, broken...really quite modest. The rusting steel doors have lost their strength. The only remaining traces of its special history are the strange coloring of the walls and the peephole through which the SS officer watched.

I am here to try to make some sense of what I have learned about that history. I had hoped that looking hard and carefully at stories, photographs, objects, and documentary film footage would somehow free me from the dread of it. But, of course, the harder one looks, the more incomprehsible and contradictory the story becomes. I thought that the only way to find light was to plunge into the darkness.

The weight of this story is more than any place can support. From the standpoint of the stones, I thought, murder is not any more extraordinary than birth.

Those traces however, the blue, the peephole, are poignant shadows. They express the mediation which human actions make on things. Meaning lies in those markings. How we fit together what we see and what we know represents a world of our own making. Harrison Tao's work is such an act pointing to memory, pain, and hope. — Arnold Kramer



Majdanek Gas Chamber

Photo:
Arnold Kramer,
United States
Holocaust Memorial
Museum

## Forms of Blue

(Narrator)

The room is empty now, the bricks not dispersed baking bread, lining garden paths, echoing psalms.

They have remained, an honor guard stained with screams neither fire nor rain can purge: bricks innocent before conscription into these walls are now tattooed with a breathless Blue that transforms all blues.

(Principals-Two voices)

We were clay

I am clay.

God shaped us into Man-kind.

Man shaped me to his will.

God breathed life into us.

Man gave me function.

Man-child and woman-child

We sang, we loved, we created.

(Principals in unison)

In work, warmth, and worship We praised God together.
Yet a darkness of spirit came.
Where went the music?
Where flew the angels?

What madness overtook Creation?

(Principals-Two voices)

In Majdanek, tricked into this room, *I was the room*.

this windowless, barren room,

Yes

herded through the door stumbling

to hold a loved hand, to lose a loved hand,

Yes

the only light

halos

over the entering heads,

Yes

bewildered, the nakedness too sudden to shame

Yes

so quickly pressed to stand feet on feet, backs against breasts, breasts against backs, spooned together without desire, rasping together hairs scratching, noses avoiding noses,

Yes

we shouted names that collided in the shrinking air, necks stretching for more than an echo.

heads turned toward the one door into Heaven one door into Hell, our arms raised, not to plead, to surrender, to bid an unseen farewell, but to make space for more Those were the orders until we could not move, until two hundred moved as one waiting for a Bath and Disinfection

The sign is there still.

And then a miracle:
the voices of the small ones
who ate straw in the trains,
who suckled everything and nothing,
those voices, muted by uniforms and mothers,
returned:
as they were tossed
onto our outstretched hands
their voices returned,
in their weightless floating, wanted
and unwanted on our fingertips,
their voices returned to shred the air
to multiply our despair...

Their cries had no equal.

Then a silence, too short for a curse, when the door shut to an eye, a *dybbuk*'s eye

eclipsing the last light,

He was an officer
sealing-in a darkness
not of the Beginning,
not of the Hope before the Beginning,
but from beyond the End

Yes

a drowning darkness erupting with all the names of God, all the cries of childhood...

Yes

and into that Babel dark a brief ring of almost-light on the ceiling overhead, a light

It was the chute opening pelting faces, tapping shoulders with a cascade of dry hail,

It poured from cans
ten heartbeats of dusty light
that released a second silence,
too short for a prayer,
a rippling murmur muting each in turn
with their first scent
of bitter almonds...

Take a breath, it's safe now.

...For a thousand heartbeats elbows to faces, hands to throats, nails against flesh against bricks, and sounds that were not words the gasping to breathe

and not breathe,

each alone

and not alone surging

to press the cool walls, to press *through* the cool walls...

I was made too well

...a thousand heartbeats until the last heart

beat, until the puddles of stillness spread to a single peace, entwined with strangers and beloved, repelling strangers and beloved, anonymous and forgotten...

There were no witnesses.

I am your witness.

Here, I have remained because you came.
I had no choice.

Four hundred days my doors opened and closed on you as you brought in the world; as you left the world.

Day by day you transformed my gray, roomful by roomful your poisoned breaths painted and re-painted clouds, brought me the blues of distant waters, of the bridges that cross those waters, of the Summer dresses by those waters,

With your one-color pallette you left the wings of birds, of the ink for words, the blues of majesty, and honor, and hope: you deposited them here, layer by layer, shade by shade, all the blues in the world.

For all Time I am your witness. Until your ashes return to steps, I am your witness:

When you flattened against me, when your sweat primed me, when you scratched and gouged me, when your hands fisted never to reopen, when they reached and found no hand, when they pounded me leaving skin, when your last breaths tattooed me with these hues, it sealed our covenant:

You gave me life, I am its witness.

Coda (narrator)

The dead do not eat the bread smell the flowers, raise their voices. Yet they live, released from this room, in every glimpse of blue, the open eye cannot avoid.



Harrison Tao is Chinese by birth, Brazilian by childhood and passions, and American by circumstances and necessity. He has published poetry and is hoping to begin a play set in Leningrad during World War II, and finish an autobiographical novel.