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## Forms of Blue

*Harrison Tao*

**W**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 incomprehensible 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?*



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 palette  
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.*