



A visual representation of "Contrast" by Tammy Ho

Contrast

Tammy Ho

He asked me to put the hairs
in a small yellow box. It was plastic,
with a catch at the front that clicked
when closed.

Every Sunday, I looked carefully
at my father's head
and plucked out the grey hairs
that hid sneakily

among the robust black ones.
He gave me twenty cents for each strand
until one day, a few years later,
the box was full

and there were still so many more to pluck.
Overcome with sadness, I said,
'Father, I don't want the money.'
He then began dyeing his hair

and in the bathroom sink every week
drips of black water
revealed that father was clawing
back his youth.

Fifteen years later, he
has stopped dyeing his hair,
worried that the chemicals
might harm his grandchildren

whom he often rests
on his shoulders,
proud now
to highlight the contrast.

"Contrast" first appeared in the Asia Literary Review:
<https://www.asialiteraryreview.com/contrast>.
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The artwork shows an elderly man looking into the mirror with his hand against it. The reflection shows a younger-looking man that is hinted to be the same person as the elderly man through the matching birthmark on the cheek. In the reflection, everything is painted in monotone, signifying that the elderly man is looking back to the past. Black dye drips off the face of the younger self and into the sink, referencing the line of the father dyeing his hair black. There is a haunted, sad look in his eyes, and a box of white hair next to him shows that he kept his plucked hair in a box.

The elderly man, contrastingly, has warm colours and sunlight lighting him up. Instead of a box of hair, he places a photo of what seems to be the man and his grandchildren in front of him. The elderly man (the father of the speaker) was once covering up his white hair with black dye and like the artwork portrays, his eyes do not hold joy. He was only covering up his insecurity of growing old. However, we can see that the father now, bathed in warm colours which symbolise happiness, is content with his white hair as he comes to regard it as a sign of longevity. The man in the reflection, with his fingers pressing up against the glass, seems to be desperately wanting the other side while the elderly man has his hand raised as a greeting and not as an act to go to the other side. He acknowledges his past insecurity, raising a hand to greet 'him', and he accepts that he is growing old and no longer covers up what reveals his old age. By accepting what was once his insecurity, he is happy that he gets to live so long to see his grandchildren.

Positive value(s) and attitude(s):

Care and honesty

Positive message(s):

The artwork displays honesty as the father is honest with himself and accepts his old age for what it is. He no longer dyes his hair for the health of his grandchildren, so acceptance is the first step of happiness.