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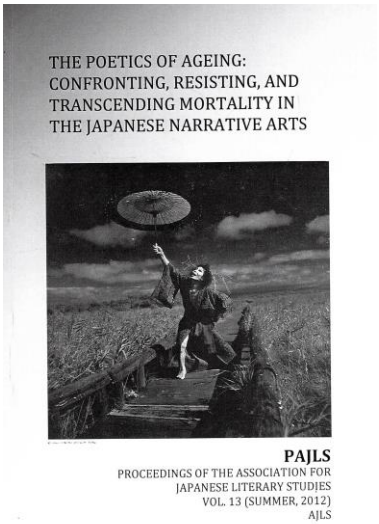

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Autonomy and Eldercare in Recent Works by Itō Hiromi

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> There are only four kinds of people in the world—those who are currently caregivers, those who have been caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.
>
> -Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, quoted in *Landscapes of Care*[1]

The importance of boundary-setting in caregiving is a prominent theme in several works by Itō Hiromi. Most well-known is Itō's poem "Killing Kanoko" (Kanoko goroshi, 1985) which portrays the frustration and fear experienced by a young mother who feels that her infant child is encroaching on her most basic personal boundaries. Itō's treatment of eldercare in *A Woman's Despair* (Onna no zetsubō, 2008) focuses on women resisting unreasonable expectations when they care for aging family members. These and other works by Itō[2] combat oppressive cultural expectations of total caregiving. Itō's focus and tone shift in her autobiographical books on eldercare and aging—*Thorn Pulling: New Chronicles of the Sugamo Jizō* (Togenuki: shin Sugamo jizō engi, 2007) and *Interpreting the Heart Sutra* (Yomitoki 'Hannyashingyō,' 2010). (I will refer to the two works from here on out as *Thorn Pulling* and as *The Heart Sutra* respectively.) These two works are sympathetic to dependents and sensitive to the patterns of the life cycle as a whole. Rather than

[1] Andrew Power, *Landscapes of Care: Comparative Perspectives on Family Caregiving* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 1.

[2] For example, see *Riverbank, Wild Grasses* (Kawara arekusa, 2005), *La niña* (Ra nīnya, 1999) and "Fate for Not Giving Milk" (Chichi yarazu no en, 2007), as well as the essay collection *Household Medicine* (Katei no igaku, 1995) which she co-wrote with her then husband Nishi Masahiko. Itō Hiromi, *Kawara arekusa* (Riverbank Wild Grasses) (Shichōsha, 2005); *Ra nīnya* (La Niña) Shinchōsha, 1999); "Chichi yarazu no en" ("Fate for Not Giving Milk"), in *Nihon no fushigi na hanashi* (Strange Tales from Japan) (Asahi shinbunsha, 2007); Nishi Masahiko and Itō Hiromi, *Katei no igaku* (Household Medicine) (Chikuma shobō, 1995).

focusing exclusively on difficult periods of caregiving, these two works acknowledge shifting roles and the inevitable periods of dependency in everybody's life.

This paper discusses the ways in which *Thorn Pulling* and *The Heart Sutra* diverge from *A Woman's Despair* and from the combative thrust of many of Itō's earlier works. The focus is primarily on *Thorn Pulling*, though I occasionally weave passages from *The Heart Sutra* into my analysis. This may seem odd, since *Thorn Pulling* is a book-length narrative poem while *The Heart Sutra* mixes sutras translated into contemporary Japanese with personal essays. However, both works are largely autobiographical and form something of a continuous narrative, with *The Heart Sutra* picking up where *Thorn Pulling* leaves off, and both feature a speaker or narrator named Hiromi.[3]

Resisting Total Caregiving

> What Akiko feared more than anything was that she would have to look after her father-in-law around the clock. If that happened, it was only a matter of time before she became a mental case herself.
>
> -Ariyoshi Sawako, *The Twilight Years* [4]

Ariyoshi Sawako has written poignantly about the extreme expectations placed on women caring for elderly family members in her bestselling book *The Twilight Years*, which describes its protagonist's struggle to bear full responsibility for care of her father-in-law as he declines into dementia. Ariyoshi's novel, published in 1972, brought attention to the plight of women forced to curtail their own careers and devote themselves to eldercare. Japan is one of the world's most rapidly aging societies. Between 1988 and 2007, the number of people over age sixty-five in Japan doubled; they now constitute almost a quarter of the total

[3] I should note that however much these works draw on Itō Hiromi's own life, they are imaginative works; I am not particularly interested in the degree to which they are or are not faithful to her life.

[4] Ariyoshi Sawako, *The Twilight Years*, trans. Mildred Tahara (Kodansha International, 1984), 161-62.

population. Historian Jeff Kingston notes that while traditional values emphasize family-based care, the proportion of elderly people living with a child fell from 70 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2006 due to shifts in women's employment and in residential patterns.[5] While Kingston comments that 44 percent is still high compared to Western countries, these numbers reflect a shift away from the care arrangement described in *The Twilight Years*, in which Akiko cares for her aging father-in-law in the home. Nevertheless, even women who live far away from their parents feel pressure to contribute substantially to their care, as Itō Hiromi comments in a discussion of her own situation.[6]

In Itō's book *A Woman's Despair*, an advice columnist encourages her readers to resist the pressure to be their elderly parents' primary caregivers. Shiromi, the narrator of the book, is an advice columnist who insists on the importance of boundary setting. The backbone of Shiromi's advice over the course of the book is the mantra "I am me, people are people," by which she means that her readers should do the things they wish to do and care for themselves; they should neither worry too much about the judgment of those around them nor sacrifice anything they truly want.[7] The focus of the last chapter of the book, "Last Comes Eldercare," is caring for one's parents or in-laws (and sometimes, if timing is unlucky, for children at the same time). Shiromi comments that during periods of family crisis, including the adolescence of one's children and the period of caring for aging parents, one must put the mantra of putting one's own needs first to the side.

Even so, she still emphasizes the importance of boundaries. In response to a reader who asks plaintively whether she should quit a job she loves in order to care for her parents (as her husband suggests), Shiromi answers firmly that one must not give up work one wants to do for the sake of eldercare and offers

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[5] Jeff Kingston, *Contemporary Japan: History, Politics and Social Change Since the 1980s* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 41, 53.

[6] Itō Hiromi, "Itsuka shinu, sore made ikiru" ("Someday One Dies, Until then One Lives"), *Bungei shunjū* 5:1 (2011): 26.

[7] Itō Hiromi, *Onna no zetsubō* (*A Woman's Despair*) (Kōbunsha, 2008), 263.

the reader practical suggestions for negotiating the situation.[8] She speaks of parents having an impulse to control, to "devour their children," an impulse they urgently feel even in old age when they no longer have strength. Children must resist: the "essence of eldercare" is to declare "I am me. Mom, you are you. Go off on your own path." She extends this to "Mom, I want you to face death on your own," modified by, "Well, I'll go with you as far as I can," a modification that makes the declaration much less stark.[9] Shiromi also notes that she herself fully intends on dying alone, and that she sees such an end as part and parcel of having lived her life on her own terms. She clearly does not intend the statement to be heartless. Nevertheless, it shows the degree to which her focus is on adult children maintaining their own identities and not having their lives entirely taken over by the task of eldercare.

If a major focus of Shiromi's advice in *A Woman's Despair* is on resisting societal pressure to allow caregiving to become all consuming, a message consistent with earlier works by Itō's on childrearing, the focus shifts in *Thorn Pulling* and *The Heart Sutra*, which were written after Itō's own parents became ill, to wanting to ease their suffering and to recognizing cycles of caregiving and dependency in the life cycle.

Caregiving as Part of the Life Cycle

Thorn Pulling is told from the perspective of a woman at mid-life named Hiromi, the only child of ailing parents in Kyūshū, mother of three children in California, and wife to a much-older husband who is dealing with a health crisis. The speaker, who struggled as a young adult to achieve independence from her parents, has assumed the role of competent adult caregiver. She now must anticipate the next transition: her parents growing ill and dying. The speaker is vividly aware of the struggles of her daughters and parents as they all lean on her, and she is exhausted as a result of supporting them. The juncture she is at provides her

[8] Ibid., 265.
[9] Ibid., 271.

with a vantage point for thinking about the life cycle as a whole and the difficulties of various life phases.[10]

The poem makes abundantly clear the difficulty of the speaker's own life phase, in which she must care for multiple family members in crisis situations. Her parents, children and husband lean heavily on her, and she feels that her life is crushingly busy. She is especially preoccupied with her aging parents in Japan, though there are also moments when her daughters desperately need her. Her parents moved to Kyūshū to be near her, their only child, but she then moved to California, leaving them with no community to lean on, and no one but her to help them with essential tasks. She flies to Kyūshū with her youngest daughter, takes her wheelchair-bound mother to hospital after hospital, rushes home every day to meet her daughter, and misses her husband's coronary bypass surgery because her parents need her. The stress, anxiety and exhaustion of the situation prompt her to lash out at her husband and contemplate divorce.

The aggression towards her husband notwithstanding, the speaker frames her difficulties matter-of-factly, as suffering (*ku*) to be endured, an inevitable part of life. In contrast to Itō's earlier works "Killing Kanoko" and *Riverbank, Wild Grasses* (*Kawara arekusa*, 2005), in which the speakers express fear and rage toward the dependent child encroaching on their carefully established boundaries, the speaker of *Thorn Pulling* does not express anger toward her dependent parents or children. She recognizes that they too are suffering. Instead, she calls on the "thorn-pulling" *jizō* (bodhisattva) of Sugamo to ease the whole family's suffering. In the following passage, the speaker vividly describes her own difficulties as caregiver. The disgusting task of cleaning her mother in the toilet leads to fervent prayer on behalf of her mother as well as herself, that both of their suffering might be relieved.

> I wipe her bottom. Soft poop is coming out but my mother doesn't notice. I can't seem to wipe it all off, so I thrust my hand into the hot water in

[10] Itō Hiromi, *Togenuki: shin Sugamo jizō engi* (Thorn Pulling: New Chronicles of the Sugamo *Jizō*) (Kōdansha, 2007).

> the automated toilet and splash, washing off the bottom wet with diarrhea. [...] Each time my mother poops, I thrust my hands into the water to wash her, so—no matter how much I wash it away—my hands stink of poop. As I thrust my hands into the water of the automated toilet to wash them, my prayer is to remove this smell. / At times like this, [we turn to] that *jizō*. The *jizō* there amid all the bustle [...].[11]

The passage segues into an extended prayer that her mother's paralyzed nerves will heal and that the stench on her own palms will be washed away.[12]

As part of the prayer, the speaker imagines herself at the bustling temple in the Tokyo neighborhood of Sugamo that she visited with her mother as a child, the temple of the famous "thorn-pulling" *jizō*. She pictures herself going through familiar rituals: breathing in incense, pouring water over stone, and asking that their thorns—the difficulties causing them each distress—be removed. Such details link her to her mother and grandmother, both of whom turned to the same *jizō* and participated in the same rituals during difficult times. One extended section of the poem recounts the difficulties the speaker's grandmother faced raising several children and supporting both her children and her invalid, philandering husband. The grandmother, the first in the family to discover the *jizō*, waits in a long line to wash the statue and to pray on behalf of herself and children. Years later, her daughter, the speaker's mother, tells the speaker from her hospital bed that she dreamed that a chest wound was healed after an encounter with the *jizō*.

Turning to the *jizō* now herself links the speaker to past generations of women in her family. The poem casts her specific current troubles as just one part of a larger tapestry. Her voice and experiences blend with her mother's and grandmother's. Itō sees *Thorn Pulling* as a fusion of women's voices in which the speaker in fact speaks for many people in similar situations, and in which

[11] Ibid., 24-25.
[12] Ibid., 26-27.

her experiences overlap and intertwine with those of others she knows.[13] The poem emphasizes that suffering is universal and explores the recurring, cyclical nature of various specific sources of suffering.

If caregiving is such a source of suffering, the speaker of *Thorn Pulling* recognizes that it is cyclical in nature: everybody takes a turn as a dependent, and many are responsible for providing care at some point in their lives. The speaker of *Thorn Pulling* is aware of direct parallels between the care she provides her daughter and the care her own mother provided her: as she responds to her college-aged daughter Yokiko's cries for help, she remembers having been in Yokiko's position and turning to her own parents. Yokiko reminds her of herself at the same age. When the speaker responds to her sobbing phone calls and drives to her campus to meet her, Yokiko is painfully thin, worn out, despairing, "exhausted because she finds it difficult to live."[14] Yokiko's difficulties remind the speaker of the suffering of her own youth, when she too felt that it was painful just to live, and turned to her parents again and again during her tumultuous twenties. She muses that her own mother, exasperated, must have wondered why her child had to suffer so, after having been raised with care.[15]

In both *Thorn Pulling* and *The Heart Sutra*, there are passages in which the speaker or narrator remembers her mother showing her scars on her breasts and telling her that they were bite marks from the speaker's babyhood. For example, in the *The Heart Sutra*, the narrator reminisces about the importance of a mother's breasts as she searches for her mother's breastbone during the ceremony following her mother's cremation.

> The breasts that time and again I held in my mouth, nursed from, even bit. To the side of the nipple on one of my mother's breasts was a scar.

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[13] Itō Hiromi and Tsushima Yūko, "Shi to shōsetsu no chigai, to iu setsujitsu na mondai" ("The Compelling Issue of How Fiction and Poetry Differ), *Gunzō* 62:7 (2007): 305-306.
[14] Itō, *Togenuki*, 210.
[15] Ibid., 203, 220.

> This is where you bit me, I was told over and over as a child. Can a breast become like that just from an infant's bite? The scar was inflamed and bulging and had become like another nipple. Much blood must have spilled and there must have been hatred, fear, cries.[16]

This passage, as well as the remarks about breast-biting in *Thorn Pulling*, acknowledges the burden that the narrator herself was on her mother during her own infancy. The details recall an extended passage in Itō's well-known poem "Killing Kanoko" on infants biting their mothers. But whereas "Killing Kanoko" focuses on the moments of hatred and fear inspired by an infant's bites, the speaker imagining a multitude of menacing babies "clacking their teeth" as they waited to attack their mothers,[17] here the perspective is that of an adult daughter who recently has been caring for her aged mother, imagining the pain she inflicted on her mother as an infant when their roles as caregiver and dependent were reversed. In acknowledging the blood her mother spilled on her behalf, she recognizes the endurance and suffering that went into her own upbringing.

Although the speakers in both *Thorn Pulling* and *The Heart Sutra* are in periods in which they are channeling most of their energies to caring for their parents and children, the dichotomy between dependent and caregiver is not absolute in either work. Her dependents do some caregiving of their own, if we define caregiving broadly. Thus from her hospital bed, the speaker's feeble mother listens intently to her daughter's worries about her children and husband, and gives much-appreciated advice to the hospital nurses on their home lives. Similarly, one of the speaker's daughters gives her advice as she vents about her husband and contemplates divorce.[18] The speaker expresses appreciation for these acts; in *The Heart Sutra*, she even

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[16] Itō Hiromi, *Yomitoki 'Hannyashingyō'* (*Interpreting the Heart Sutra*) (Asahi shinbun shuppan, 2010), 172.
[17] Itō Hiromi, "Kanoko goroshi" (Killing Kanoko), in *Teritorii ron 2* (On territory 2) (Shichōsha, 1985).
[18] Itō, *Togenuki*, 77.

comments that her mother "saves her" by listening earnestly to her troubles.[19]

Nostalgia for One's Role as Dependent

The passage from dependent child to independent, autonomous adult—particularly when one's parents are loathe to yield authority—can be a time of rebellious struggle. In *A Woman's Despair*, the narrator, Shiromi, uses the phrase "parent-killing" to discuss claiming autonomous personhood by setting boundaries with one's parents and rejecting their authority. As I mentioned previously, Shiromi believes that parents feel an intense impulse to control their children and that the impulse does not subside in old age. Therefore, in this day and age in which people live so long, it is necessary to (metaphorically) kill one's parents more than once, in middle age as well as during rebellious youth. However, while the first time around, during young adulthood, the parent-killing is "bloody"—a word that implies dramatic struggle—Shiromi maintains that the second time around it need not be so aggressive. Rather, she claims that the very recognition that the parents who once carried one on their shoulders are now fragile and wrinkly suffices as a form of parent-killing, suggesting that parents naturally cede authority as they themselves become weak and in need of care.[20] Simply recognizing their vulnerability thus bolsters the adult child's sense of having vanquished a controlling authority figure and taken control of her own life.

If the narrative of parent-killing captures an intense desire for autonomy, Itō's focus shifts in *Thorn Pulling*. No longer is the overwhelming focus on desire for autonomy and the need to establish independence from parents, nor is recognition of a parent's new frailty cast as "parent-killing." Rather, such recognition leads the speaker of the poem to feel forlorn. She expresses tremendous ambivalence at being the responsible adult herself now and sorrow at the prospect of actually needing to let her parents go.

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[19] Itō, *'Hannyashingyō',* 68.
[20] Itō, *Onna no zetsubō*, 268.

One passage shows the speaker's visceral reaction to her mother's decline:

> When I gave my mother a rice ball I'd bought at the hospital shop, she scissored it with her ring finger and pinky and began moving her mouth to it. Stop eating in such a vulgar way, I was scolded many times when I was little—*but that very thing, aren't you doing it yourself?* I found a retort springing unbidden to my lips in response to a rebuke I hadn't even received. [...] I don't mind the mother who poops without being aware of it, the mother who needs her bottom washed, but I just couldn't bring myself to watch the mother who scissored her rice ball and brought her mouth to it to eat it [...].[21]

This passage suggests that the speaker still wishes to see her mother as an authority figure at some gut level and is indignant with her for violating her own rules. The mother has stepped into the child's role, eating in a grotesque manner as the daughter once did; the speaker is deeply uncomfortable with this turn. The discomfort may stem from the order of the world she has known since childhood collapsing when her mother, a primary authority figure in her life, acts like a child, and a child who does not know any better at that. It may also be related to a new awareness of competent adulthood as merely a transient stage. We see the adult speaker, coming up with retorts to long ago admonishments, reacting to her mother's diminished ability from a child's position, the position she is still most comfortable inhabiting in her relationship with her mother.

The speaker at one point asks what the point of her hard-fought independence from her parents (financial and psychological) was, wryly answering her own question by saying that children separate from their parents so that they can go have sex. She dwells on her loneliness and that of her parents. She imagines her father, "the hero of [her] childhood," who now

[21] Itō Hiromi, *Togenuki: shin Sugamo jizō engi* (Thorn pulling: New chronicles of the Sugamo *jizō*): 24-25.

spends his days with the dog since his wife is in the hospital, telling people that neither his bride nor his daughter live at home anymore.[22] There is a suggestion that in her former eagerness to separate from her parents and become independent, she did not truly understand how isolated they would all feel one day, or that she would be facing the prospect of losing them.

In another passage, the speaker—who has just found the case for her glasses chewed up by their dogs—starts crying while her husband and youngest daughter stare blankly at her. Until this moment, she has been in the mode of acting as the dependable adult, answering urgent pleas from her other daughters who are away from home and trying to give helpful advice over the phone to her bored and depressed father.[23] While it is the glasses case that triggers her tears, having started crying, she acknowledges that in spite of her adult bravado she has been afraid. She reflects on the vulnerability and wistfulness she feels at no longer having parents she can lean on:

> Long ago, I was a small girl. / When I was frightened, I cried. / I thought I'd like to have my father or mother or husband or prince come rescue me. / So many many times I thought I'd like them to rescue me. / My father, my mother, my husband, the prince. / But now, there's *no-o-obody* here. / My father is old and close to death. / My mother is close to death, bedridden. / I can't depend on my husband or my prince anymore. / These days, my breasts are droopy, swinging side to side from their very roots; / I plant my feet, clench my teeth, / show that I'm not the least bit frightened. / I stand facing / Suffering, suffering, suffering / suffering and more suffering— / but ohhhh, the fact is, I am incredibly scared.[24]

[22] Ibid., 185.
[23] Ibid., 202-20.
[24] Ibid., 223-24.

A narrative that admits to having repeatedly wanted to be rescued by one's parents diverges from the rebellious "parent-killing" narrative of *A Woman's Despair*. While introduced as reminiscence about her long ago childhood, it seems that the speaker's desire for rescue has continued into adulthood. The list of rescuers includes "husband," telescoping the desire for rescue on the part of the speaker as a child and as an adult. The inclusion of "prince" in the list suggests a sort of self-mocking awareness that the desire for rescue is unrealistic, like something out of a European fairytale (Itō was, in fact, well-acquainted with the stories of the Brothers Grimm).[25] One thread in the poem as a whole is about the speaker's frustration with her husband. The remark about no longer being able to depend on her husband—as well as the details about her parents ailing—reflect situations described in the poem. Feeling that she is on her own may lead the speaker to cultivating a facade of fearlessness. In "planting [her] feet, clenching [her] teeth," she seems to be standing her ground in battle with an adversary. Yet what she faces is suffering, an intrinsic part of life, not something one can defeat. In the poem as a whole she is indeed acutely aware of suffering intensifying at the end of life due to physical decline. At this moment of playing the part of the fearless, competent adult that others depend on, the speaker is aware of her own body having begun to change, her breasts "droopy, swinging side to side from their very roots."

If in this passage the speaker admits to herself her continued wish to have figures in her life to whom she can call out for help when she is frightened, in an earlier passage, a nurse tells her that her own mother has been calling out, "Mom, mom!" at night and asking how her situation became so difficult.[26] The speaker wonders whether she is calling out for her own mother, or thinking of herself as mother. Her mother's confusion and anxiety about her pain and immobility suggest that she is looking for guidance, reaching out to a remembered adult—that even as a bedridden old woman, she still has the impulse to call out to a parent for help. This passage suggests that even at life's end,

[25] Nishi Masahiko and Itō Hiromi, *Katei no igaku* (*Household Medicine*).
[26] Itō, *Togenuki*, 36.

nobody truly wishes to fully give up the role of child, of being able to express fear and be comforted.

Metaphorical parent-killing was about stepping into the role of autonomous adult and escaping the controlling influence of one's parents. But these passages in *Thorn Pulling* suggest that in actually occupying the adult role and no longer having parents to reliably turn to, one dwells not on the constraints that the parents imposed but rather the support and reassurance they provided. There is a note of nostalgia connected to remembering having been a dependent and having strong figures to turn to.

Concluding Remarks

The parent-child relationships portrayed in *Thorn Pulling* and *The Heart Sutra* are less combative than in the "parent-killing thread" of *A Woman's Despair* or earlier works by Itō's such as "Killing Kanoko" and *La Niña*. The power struggle between parents and child subsides as the older generation shifts from being authority figures to vulnerable dependents. There is also less emphasis in these works on the importance of keeping caregiving from becoming all consuming. In *Thorn Pulling*, the adult child decides to retract her own caregiving boundaries for a time because her parents have suddenly become much needier.

Thorn Pulling and *The Heart Sutra* examine both sides of the caregiver/dependent relationship to a greater degree than Itō's earlier works. They consider the ways that these roles shift throughout the life cycle and the difficulty of negotiating the resulting changes in the dynamics of parent-child relationships. Because of the emphasis on the life cycle as a whole, the dichotomy between caregiver and dependent is not as sharp as it is in Itō's early works about childrearing. A competent adult may sometimes long to lean on her parents as she did in days past, while dying parents may long for control and self-care as their opportunities to live autonomous lives become increasingly limited.

Thorn Pulling and *The Heart Sutra* cast care for family members as a natural part of the life cycle, just as being dependent on care is inevitably part of that cycle. In *Thorn Pulling* and *The Heart Sutra*, the adult child remembers nostalgically her feeling of security in being able to turn to her parents during difficult times.

She herself does her best to provide her parents with comfort and support in their last years. These two works depict family members as especially able to provide loving care.

That said, while the adult child in these two works provides her ailing parents with care and support, she is not singlehandedly responsible for their care and in fact is not even their primary caregiver. The mother ends up receiving long term care in the hospital while the father receives daily visits from a home assistant. The adult child need not share the fear of Akiko in Ariyoshi's *The Twilight Years* of being responsible for caregiving round-the-clock. Even if the adult child speaker of *Thorn Pulling* feels overwhelmed by her need to attend to both her children and her ailing parents, she never faces the unrelenting burden of being sole caregiver that is depicted in *The Twilight Years.*

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