appreciate that though adversity and pity pertain to every human heart, the presence of loveliness and forgiveness also exists in the invincible human spirit. This is a superb book that demands to be held or cupped gently in the hand so not to spill its sumptuous beauty, light wit, and sharp-eyed acuity. Sheema Kalbasi elegantly captures the relationship between the troubled voices lamenting to the inner self and the enlightened voices delivering touching bursts of insight and joy. This stunning anthology of love and loss bears witness to a passionate and sorrowful longing, a pining that lurks like the wind, at times turbulent and smothering and in other moments soothingly obliging, as unexpected and stealthy as the warm breath or whisper of a lover or assailant on the neck, "panting at the night," capable of anything.

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## THE IRON SHOES: POEMS

Elizabeth Greene
Brighton, ON: Hidden Brook Press, 2007

### REVIEWED BY HOLLAY GHADERY

Elizabeth Greene's collection of poems, *The Iron Shoes*, evokes the integrity suggested by the title. From the first poem, her writing leads us into the space all the poems inhabit; a liminal world of waking and dreams, of love and loss, of "long/circuitous routes, arriving or not arriving," of the poignancy of varying shades of grey.

While Greene was a professor of contemporary Canadian women's literature at Queen's University for years, her writing avoids any overly didactic approach and doesn't try to arbitrarily reconcile or extract tentative meaning from murkier, more mysterious realms of our lives. Rather, her poems embrace absences with a moving combination of confidence, compassion, humour, and insight. Her poem, "Return of the Nobodies," manages to address overwrought issues like weightism, sexism and ageism through a compellingly (and perhaps surprisingly) tender series of narrative sections. The last part paints a humorous and touching picture of a group of middle-aged women skinny- dipping late at night. What emerges from this exploration is a release from shame to laughter:

> It's not far to the lake, a few blocks though friendly streets in summer-scented air.
> Arrived, Leslie strips and plunges, wine bottle in her hand.
> She does that. Once in Rwanda, she was stuck in traffic, right near a lake.
> She left the car, stripped and swam,
> and was back before the traffic moved.
> *It's freezing!* she says *It's gorgeous!*

After an internal flogging and to-and-fro over whether or not dropping one's essentials at the shore is a good idea, the speaker discovers unabashed freedom through an empowering external source —in this case, a friend. In fact, many of the poems draw on the inspiration of others. "Merlin" is a sad but beautiful reminder of the power others bring to our lives, especially when they're gone, leaving, "a hole where the smile of the street should be."

The touch of Greene's language, while delicate, is not by any means reductive. It does not want force or promote passivity. The passion of the writing is a dominant force throughout. "Bronwen's Lemon Balm" in particular speaks to the wild and free-spirited slant of her message. The poem, dedicated to Greene's friend—and Canadian feminist icon—Bronwen Wallace, details the breaking up, restructuring and regenerating of life—even and especially after life in the most haptic sense is over. When a friend dropping off a lemon balm that used to be in Bronwen's garden suggests the herb be contained, Greene opts to "Let it fight and twine/With oregano and mint/It took fourteen years/ to get here -/ Let it thrive." Those last few lines could in fact be the credo for the entire collection of poems.

Greene's fluid and free approach is reflected both in her language and her treatment of subject matter. In addition to the poem for Bronwen, her poems about her son are a testament to her ability to shape language with a light hand. This technique in turn gives the subjects of her poems a life of their own by releasing them from many of the constraints that are often a result of formal language. A series near the end of the collection explores a trip to Banff with her grown son, who we are told in the beginning of the book may or may not be autistic. It is evident that the abject fear expressed earlier on has somewhat dissipated—that her son has grown, has thrived, is "so sturdy in front of me," in spite of the consuming anxiety she felt years ago.

By the end of the collection one can actually feel the weight of her fears lift. The "iron shoes"—an image Greene evokes in the collection's title piece to describe an exigent relationship with her mother—have been removed. Though she does not attempt to insinuate that she is dauntless, the serene and natural language and imagery in the last section of the collection indicates that her anxieties have at least lessened. More than likely, it is precisely this uncommon quality that imbues her poems with grace and wisdom. She

writes towards freedom, for herself, for those around her.

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## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND GENDER IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE: READING WOMEN'S LIVES, 1600-1680

Sharon Cadman Seelig
Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006

### REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH S. COHEN

Although its title sweeps too broadly, this slim volume, jargon-free and wearing its theory lightly, offers feminist scholars and teachers an accessible and graceful entrée into life-writings by seventeenth-century women in English. Self-representations composed in a world very different from our own, these texts are both compelling and challenging, for the literary scholar as well as for the general modern reader. In her introduction Sharon Cadman Seelig considers, clearly and succinctly, issues both of writing and of reception. There follow six chapters that each study life-writing texts by a single woman: Margaret Hoby's religious diaries; Anne Clifford's lifelong self-records; Lucy Hutchinson's writing herself into her husband's biography; Ann Fanshawe's family history; Anne Halkett's autobiography; and, best known of the lot, Margaret Cavendish's flamboyant fictions. Although scarcely typical of their era, these women, well-born and well-educated, shared a time and a social space. Yet their texts differ markedly from each other in form, length, rhetoric, and content, including religious and political affiliations. Brought together by Seelig, however, their writings offer unusual cross-cultural access to distant varieties of women's experience. Her book provides insight for sister scholars and invites non-specialists on a journey into unfamiliar terrain.

For those engaged with contemporary life-writing let me sketch its deeper context in the late medieval and early modern centuries before 1800. Only a few women, like the English brewster Margery Kempe (died 1439) and the Spanish Saint Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) composed early "autobiographies," modelled in part on St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Other European women, in multiplying numbers from the sixteenth century, wrote (or dictated) self into other genres, including letters, diaries, family histories, memoirs, travel journals, polemics, and judicial testimonies. The fine Other Voice series from the University of Chicago Press offers in translation works of this kind by continental women: for example, the Italian humanist Laura Cereta (d. 1499), the German Protestant reformer Katharina Schutz Zell (d. 1562), and the French duchess, Hortense Mancini (d. 1699). But life-writings composed in English after 1600 have claimed most attention from anglophone scholars. These varied early modern texts, valuable for teaching, first became widely available excerpted in anthologies, notably *Her Own Life* (1989). Later, *English Women's Voices*, 1500-1700 (1992) and *Life-Writings by British Women*, 1660-1815 (2000) provided further selections. Although some of these materials still remain only in manuscript or in rare early printings, as the field has matured, others have been published in full, modern editions. Even so, we need scholars like Seelig or the Other Voice editors to help us mine these fascinating, but also somewhat alien treasures.

Seelig's approach to seventeenth-century life-writings explicitly pairs the historical grounding of their composition with the modern experience of their reading. For each of her six subjects she first sets out the particularities of the texts and their author's circumstance. She then develops a compact interpretation that both highlights telling details and assembles them into a cumulative, but never schematic overview. As literary scholar, Seelig attends especially to indeterminacies of genre and fluidities of rhetoric. She also carefully situates these women's expression of self within the hierarchical conventions of seventeenth-century religious and social relations that differ sharply from modern feminist and egalitarian ideals. Those inclined to woman-focussed essentialism, take heed.

Seelig is committed to recognizing and mediating difference between the seventeenth century and the twenty-first and among her subjects themselves. Their diversity, however, yields pattern, more literary than historical. While we meet the women according to a rough chronology of generations, there is more overlap than historically meaningful sequence. More centrally, Seelig's order reflects her perception of a generic and rhetorical progression from least to most like the conventions of literary autobiography. She eschews judgment about the virtues of achieving such likeness. Nor does she presume that the more modern presentation of self-consciousness betokens the writer's superior insight. In the end Seelig would have us better understand each woman for herself in her time.

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