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The Half Life

Karen Shenfeld

If you pick up Rogers Greenwald's latest collection of poetry and peruse its opening pages, you'll come across the term, "half-life," nine times. The Half-Life is the title of the book and forms part of the title of its introductory poem. It appears inside that first poem, too, and in the book's long, meditative penultimate piece. Derived from the field of physics, "half-life" is defined by the Collins English Dictionary as "the time taken for half of the atoms in a radioactive material to undergo decay." Greenwald references the term to speak to us about the nature of sorrow. "The Half-Life of Sorrow," he says—with the poem's title doubling as its opening line—"is about five years." A few lines further on, he concludes:

The Half-Life
Roger Greenwald
Tiger Bark Press, 2020

> The half-life isn't hard
> to understand.
> It means the sorrow
> will be half gone in five years,
> what's left will then take five again
> to diminish by half.
> So it will never stop flashing
> in your life, though your life
> will stop it eventually.

Sorrow indeed underlies many of the poems in *The Half-Life*, as do feelings of loss, longing, and alienation.

T.S. Eliot begins his famous love song with that flamboyant evocation of " a patient etherized upon a table"; in "Sliding Doors," which opens book's first section, Greenwald leads us through a hospital's automatic doors.

> Her body rolls into your dream that opens for it
> like the hospital's automatic doors
> where you were getting some air—but an alarm went
> off they're all running could you
> move please, go sit in that room.
> "Nice that they run."

Here, and in other pieces, Greenwald eschews the signposts of language. He leaves out commas, periods, question marks, capital letters, and quotation marks. He consciously crafts a poetry of the unconscious that mimics the workings of memories and dreams—in which objects may be symbolic and events happen out of rational order, collide, reoccur, contradict, appear connected or disconnected to our lived lives.

To steal lines from several of his works, Greenwald's poetry arises from "a space / where allegory and psyche embrace."; where the poet "drift[s] back // to song singing sung of resting in the half- // light or dark…"; where he sits "half hearing / music" that he "can't really catch the feelings or intentions of"; or crosses a plateau, each foot of which dwarfs his age "with a half-life whose mirrored image in the black lake / is an endless mating of clouds…" ; Reading The Half-Life half locked down in my house, distanced from family and friends, my nights coloured by pandemic mares, the book had, for me, an additional, unintended resonance.

What is the wellspring of the poet's sorrow, a sorrow that, like a sword, runs through his "halved life / that won't heal"? Greenwald is direct: It's love — the bidden or unbidden recollections of a lost love, a love that was thwarted before it ever came to fruition. "My children don't believe in me", Greenwald declares in "Open Water," "because I lost their mother / before she could be their mother". In dreaming and remembering this love (or possibly several loves) the poet is, by turns, mournful, wistful, matter-of-fact, and, at times, sardonic and angry He ends his poem, "Giving," with:

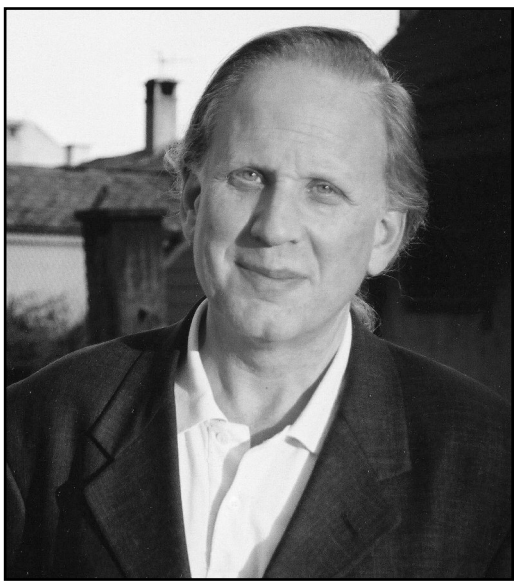
> She gave me a life
> and took it back.
> I gave her a life;
> she took it with her.
> Thanks, she said.

Not all of the poems of *The Half-Life* are, however, melancholic. "Body Dreams," for example, is culminated by an ecstatic verse with erotically charged imagery inspired by the lyrics of rhythm and blues:

> We hold our bodies; mine shakes.
> It shakes and shakes till my seed
> is making dry music like a gourd's.
> Seed and language, mine and hers,
> deepest flesh I have. No end to
> shake and sing while the blood goes.

A few pages later on, the lines in the poem, "1 A-M One Me," hurry across the page, mirroring the whispered words of a lover approaching climax: "your body that is through and through your words, body of words / that is body, body of body that is words that are breathing you." Music also offers the poet consolation, and he references traditional folk songs, Neil Young, an Indian raga, Mozart, and Bach.

The Half-Life is divided into three sections: the first dream-filled "Body Dreams"; "Home on the Range," containing poems rooted in Toronto; and "Open Water," which gathers together travel-related poems, mainly set in Scandinavia. The section divisions offer clues to the poet's biography: American-born Roger Greenwald moved to Toronto in the late 1960s, where he obtained a Ph.D from, then taught at the University of Toronto, I first encountered him, there, in the late 1970s, leading a poetry workshop for students and non-students alike at Innis College. A young, not-yet-famous Anne Michaels was also inspiringly in attendance.



Roger Greenwald
Photo by Alf Magne Heskja

Since that time, he has published two previous books of poetry and has twice won the CBC Literary Award (once for poetry and once for travel writing) and the Gwendolyn MacEwen Poetry Award. He has also won numerous international awards for his many translations of Swedish and Norwegian poetry and fiction. Several poems in The Half-Life allude to Greenwald's work as a translator. In "Actions and Answers," the poet, trying to remember the details of a dream, struggles to know what language he is reading, even though he has understood the meaning of the words.

I appreciated *The Half-Life* for its authenticity of voice and depth of emotion. Quoting a friend named Sarita in "Relief," the first poem in the book's final section, Greenwald writes,

> Later she says, Stop I can't
> stand it. I can't
> stand that anyone doubted
> whether to be with you.

Reading those lines, I wanted to call the poet up to wish him well, to tell him that he'll surely find love again to mitigate the sorrow.

Karen Shenfeld's most recent book of poetry is *To Measure the World*. She is currently writing a screenplay that has been optioned by the director, Bruce McDonald.