

Reading Guide for
North in the World: Selected Poems of Rolf Jacobsen, A Bilingual Edition
Translated, edited, and introduced by Roger Greenwald

Publication Information

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INTRODUCTION

Rolf Jacobsen (1907-1994), Norway's first Modernist poet, is widely acknowledged as one of the great poets of Norway and of Scandinavia in the 20th century. He has also earned a wide popular audience, because ordinary readers can understand and enjoy the way he explores the complex counterpoint of nature and technology, progress and self-destruction, daily life and cosmic wonder. His importance as a writer has grown steadily; his work has been translated into over twenty languages. He achieved something very rare: he wrote poems that are accessible and rewarding to ordinary readers, but that yield greater and greater depth on repeated reading.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

North in the World presents a careful selection of Jacobsen's best poems: 120 poems drawn from all twelve of his books, plus one late poem that appeared in book form only after the poet's death.

The book's Introduction supplies necessary background and some pointers about the poems. All the poems appear with Norwegian and English texts on facing pages; endnotes explain allusions, proper names, and place names. Indexes to titles and first lines in both languages make it easy to find particular poems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In a career that spanned more than sixty years, Rolf Jacobsen published twelve books and six collections. He was a member of the Norwegian Academy of Language and Literature and was honored with the Norwegian Critics' Prize (1960); Norway's most prestigious literary award, the Aschehoug Prize (1986); and two awards bestowed by the Swedish Academy: the Dobloug Prize (1968), and the Grand Nordic Prize, popularly known as the "Little Nobel" (1989). Writing in *Stand Magazine*, David McDuff called Jacobsen "one of the West's greatest twentieth-century poets, who may be ranked on a par with Auden, Eliot and Montale."

Jacobsen grew up partly in Oslo and partly in the countryside; that experience gave him a double perspective that lasted his whole life. On the one hand, he was an urban person with a keen interest in modernity, technology, and progress; on the other hand, he had a Norwegian's appreciation of nature, sharpened by his knowledge of the contrasting city. Each perspective informed and tested the other. So he was not a naive or sentimental "nature poet," and he was not naive, either, about the damage that humans were doing to their planet and themselves. He was, one could say, one of the first poets anywhere to take an ecological view of the world.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR/TRANSLATION

Roger Greenwald grew up in New York City, attended The City College and the Poetry Project workshop at St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, and then took graduate degrees at the University of Toronto. He has won two CBC Literary Awards for his own writing, as well as numerous awards in the United States and Canada for his translations. He has published two books of poems, *Connecting Flight* and *Slow Mountain Train*, and several volumes of poetry in translation, most recently *Guarding the Air: Selected Poems of Gunnar Harding*, which won the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets. He is a Senior Fellow at Innis College in the University of Toronto.

North in the World is the winner of the American Translators Association's 2004 Lewis Galantière Award, given every two years for "a distinguished literary translation into English from any language other than German." One of the judges wrote: "This book has been a very happy discovery for me. The poems are knockouts. [The translations] function perfectly as English poems in their own right." Czeslaw Milosz wrote: "Discovering Jacobsen was a joy. I am grateful to his translator, Roger Greenwald." Jay Parini commented: "Roger Greenwald, himself an impressive poet, has done a rare job of translation, creating verbal objects in English that have the urgency, simplicity, and the necessary, unforgiving depths of great poetry."

OTHER WORK AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH BY THIS AUTHOR

The Boat on Land, a CD of Roger Greenwald reading his translations of poems by Rolf Jacobsen and Tarjei Vesaas (and two poems in Norwegian), is available here:

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/swedish/bway/scanwayflyer.html>

The Roads Have Come to an End Now: Selected and Last Poems of Rolf Jacobsen. Trans. Robert Bly, Roger Greenwald, and Robert Hedin. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001. ISBN 978-1556591655

[The poems in this book translated by Greenwald are included in *North in the World*. Most of the poems translated by Hedin are not in *North in the World*, and they present additional aspects of Jacobsen's thought and work. Most of the poems in this book translated by Bly

are among those translated by Greenwald in *North in the World*, so for readers interested in translation (whether or not they can read Norwegian), a comparison would be instructive.]

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

If you enjoyed *North in the World*, the following other Nordic writers available in English may appeal to you:

Tarjei Vesaas. *Through Naked Branches: Selected Poems of Tarjei Vesaas, Revised Bilingual Edition*. Translated, edited, and introduced by Roger Greenwald. Boston: Black Widow Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-9995803-4-9.

Gunnar Harding. *Guarding the Air: Selected Poems of Gunnar Harding*. Trans. and ed. Roger Greenwald. Boston: Black Widow Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-9856122-7-6.

Tomas Tranströmer. *Selected Poems 1954-1986*. Ed. Robert Hass. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1987. ISBN 0-88001-113-0.

Paal-Helge Haugen. *Meditations on Georges de La Tour* (poems). Trans. Roger Greenwald. Toronto: BookThug, 2013. ISBN 978-1927040638.

Niels Frank. *Picture World* (book-length poem in 24 parts). Trans. Roger Greenwald. Toronto: BookThug, 2011. ISBN 9781897388853.

LINKS TO REVIEWS IN ENGLISH

<http://www.rogergreenwald.org/niwrevus.html>

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PRESENTATION OF POEMS, WITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

See next page

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PRESENTATION OF POEMS, WITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

(Members of reading circles should read the poems and the guide before meeting.)

PRELIMINARIES

Please read the Introduction to *North in the World* and consult the book's endnotes about particular poems. This guide examines six poems in detail and poses questions about them. Five are from Jacobsen's first five books and are meant to provide entrée into his themes and ways of making poems. But the discussions refer to many other poems, including a number from his later books, and pose questions about some of those as well. In the discussions of three poems, there is an added section labeled "*Sound and translation.*" Readers do not need to know Norwegian to understand those sections, but I have labeled them so that anyone who wishes to skip them can do so.

I have written this guide in a way that conveys my enthusiasm for the poems, but I don't wish to play the Authority and tell you what your responses "should" be. I encourage you to read, re-read, and arrive at your own interpretations.

Poems to read:

"Travel" (11)	"End of the Road" (187)
"Rubber" (35)	"To Iris" (189)
"Day and Night" (57)	"Angelus" (197)
"Pavane" (65)	"Briefing" (199)
"The Moon and the Apple Tree" (99)	"Epilogue" (201)
"Avaldsnes" (211)	"Skylab" (205)
"Plate Glass" (15)	"Antenna-forest" (209)
"Metaphysics of the City" (17)	"Hallingskeid" (217)
"Industrial District" (19)	"Sand" (223)
"Railroad Country" (21)	"In Raspberry Season" (227)
"Gaslight" (45)	"From Above, from Below and from the Side" (229)
"Coke" (47)	"We Who Live near the Railway" (233)
"Cobalt" (49)	"The Media Poem" (245)
"Express Train" (53)	"To You" (259)
"In the Varald Forest" (59)	"On Falling Asleep in a Field" (261)
"Mournful Towers" (91)	"Hundvåko" (265)
"Stave Churches" (93)	"The Bells from Assisi" (271)
"Green Light" (107)	"Silvery Moon" (273)
"The Sculptor" (117)	"The Inland Line" (277)
"The Catacombs of San Callisto" (155)	"Did I Know You?" (295)
"Avignon, Vaucluse" (169)	
"Girlchild—" (181)	

POEMS AND QUESTIONS

From *Earth and Iron* (1933)

“Travel” (11)

This poem is typical of Jacobsen’s early evocations of the city (Oslo), except that it is almost entirely free of the sorts of metaphor and personification that are evident in many of his other poems, even poems from *Earth and Iron*. (The only personifying metaphor makes shopwindows into eyes.) At the same time, the poem contains many motifs that will run through much of Jacobsen’s work. The railroad makes an appearance here, and the longing for exotic foreign places, and travel that remains, for the moment, imaginary. (“Traveling with the encyclopedia” was a concept and a phrase well known to Norwegians in Jacobsen’s day. In this poem he at least gets as far as the station! It is hard to tell whether a touch of irony lurks in the title. What do you think?) The final phrase embodies Jacobsen’s dual awareness of nature and technology. Note its sensory aspects: indeed, the whole poem contains more evocations of sounds and smells than of things seen, and it closes with two stanzas on sound and a final one on smell.

One more thing is worth noting: the speaker is solitary. He does not interact with anyone else, and in fact other people rarely appear in Jacobsen’s poems. Even the “I” is more withdrawn in most of his poems than it is in “Travel.” I suggest keeping this in mind while reading other poems to see how this stance affects what the poems include and what they exclude.

For evocations of the city, compare “Plate Glass” (15: What visual phenomenon does “the swell of the panes” refer to, and how does it relate to the whole extended metaphor?); “Metaphysics of the City” (17: Were you surprised by the ending? Consider the title and the poem’s steady upward movement); “Industrial District” (19: What might the dinosaurs and petrified swamps correspond to in the cityscape? The last line gets a laugh, but does it also have a serious subtext?); and “Coke” (47: How is the second stanza different from the first?). After city as nature, Jacobsen gives us nature as city in “Gaslight” (45).

For the railroads, see “Railroad Country” (21), “Express Train” (53), “Hallingskeid” (217), “We Who Live near the Railway” (233), and “The Inland Line” (277).

From *Swarm* (1935)

“Rubber” (35)

Here again nature meets technology. In this case, as in several other poems by Jacobsen, the poet plays with effects of scale and point of view. The last line presents a striking shift in both. But it is worth looking back and seeing if that affects the earlier part of the poem.

What does the relation of the ant to the imprinted *G* say about the relation of the car to the forest?

For effects of scale, compare “In the Varald Forest” (59: especially the ending) and “From Above, from Below and from the Side” (229; note the striking last line, and keep a lookout for similarly effective closing statements in other poems).

Sound and translation. The last line of “Rubber” in Norwegian has a very different feel from the rest of the poem. The poem until then offers matter-of-fact descriptions and statements. “Furunåler er tunge / Pine needles are heavy.” The rhythms are close to those of prose. But suddenly the last line stretches out, and at the same time it slows down.

På reisen frem over det store, skybelyste Sahara.
 Literal: On the journey forward across the large/great cloud-lit Sahara.

This long line is slow because there is a slight pause after the introductory phrase (“På reisen frem”) as well as at the comma; and most notably, because there are four very long vowels in the last three words (I must use only approximate English vowels here):
 deh stoooh-reh, sheee-beh-luuus-teh Sah-haaa-rah.

In translating this line, I felt it was important to keep *Sahara* at the end, because that is how Jacobsen springs the shift in scale and point of view on us at the last possible moment. I also wanted to keep the slowness of the line and create some sort of equivalent music of sound patterns in the hope of giving the English line some of the magic of the Norwegian one. Jacobsen’s alliteration on *s*-sounds (*reisen, store, Sahara*) is echoed by *across* and *Sahara*. The initial consonant sounds of *great* and *cloud* are in the same family, so add a bit of near-alliteration. But the most important – and potentially controversial – choice is *cloud-illuminated*. This is subject to the objection that it is a Latinate and overly fancy word, whereas Jacobsen’s Norwegian word is compounded of Germanic elements. But in my view, unless a word is very fancy indeed (“aureate”), Latinate words feel quite natural in English, because we have so many of them (both directly from Latin and via French). My highest priority was to make a poetic line that had something like the feel of the Norwegian. And *cloud-illuminated* has two rather long vowels, like Jacobsen’s word; has the same rhythmic pattern; has the pair of *l*’s; and contains an echo of *Outward* in *cloud* (the same vowel, and the *d* echoes both the inconspicuous *d* in *Outward* and the more prominent *t*, which is in the same family).

From *Express Train* (1951)

“Day and Night” (57)

This beautiful and powerful poem holds several surprises. The first two stanzas open with a change of perspective from our usual one. If we find ourselves in one location, the shift

from day to night and back again seems like a change that keeps coming to us. And that is indeed what Jacobsen's personified Day and Night do: they come to us. But in the first two lines of each of the first two stanzas, Jacobsen gives us instead the viewpoint of the sunlight that is always shining on one side of the earth, even as various locations move through it, and likewise the viewpoint of the earth's shadow, a persistent darkness through which various locations move. (Perhaps this insight arrived through the poet's occupation as a newspaper editor, and moreover one who often took the night shift: he had to be well aware that while Norway slept, newsworthy events might be occurring in India.)

And then comes the third stanza, in which entirely different sorts of thing are declared to be both endless and cyclical, like day and night. What can he mean about delight and pain here? Or about death and life? Do the words *asleep* and *awake* take on any different meanings here from those that *waking* and *sleeping* have in the first two stanzas?

Finally, what on earth does the last stanza mean? The closing sentence is unexpected. What does it imply about the relation of the "you" to the stars and the wind? And how does it connect to the perspectives in the first three stanzas?

Is there a common element that connects the "cigarette's blue soul" that flutters upward at the end of "Metaphysics of the City" (17), the sudden largeness of the Sahara at the end of "Rubber" (35), the final stanza of "Day and Night," and the ending of "In the Varald Forest" (59)?

From *Secret Life* (1954)

"Pavane" (65)

This poem is among those by Jacobsen that are most highly admired. That the poet himself accorded it special status is clear from his having placed it first in his breakthrough book of 1954, where he set it in italic, as if it stood as an epigraph to the whole book. It may not be in Norwegian school anthologies, which tend to favor poems with immediately recognizable subjects and "messages" about those subjects, but to fellow poets or poetry lovers, it stands out. It combines historical and artistic themes with Jacobsen's immediate natural surroundings, and it does so in a poem of striking images and sound patterns. Moreover, this is one of Jacobsen's rare formal poems: it is written in iambic pentameter, with a special feature I will come to in a moment.

(As you may know, this common metrical pattern has five iambs, or poetic feet, each of which consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one: *da-DUM*. So the pattern is marked - ' - ' - ' - ' - ' . But many variations are possible, for example: leaving out an initial unstressed syllable in a line; reversing one foot: ' - ; writing a foot with both syllables stressed: ' ' ; or adding an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line. And of course pauses – some slight, some strong – come in different places in different lines. The result is that the rhythm of a line as we read it aloud is not the same as the metrical pattern. If it were, a poem would soon become very mechanical and monotonous.)

Jacobsen saw a performance by a Spanish dance troupe on tour in Oslo. It isn't known whether the dance that made a strong impression on him reminded him of the sea in windy weather or the later sight of a wintry sea (or perhaps Lake Mjøsa) recalled the dance, but the comparison is certainly a fruitful one, carried out in detail and with precision.

The pavane is a dance from the 16th and 17th centuries in which the long costumes of the dancers trailed behind them (see the endnote in the book). This trailing-behind seems to be suggested in the poem by an unusual rhythmic feature: every line ends with an unstressed syllable. Moreover, the poem ends with a clause (in the last line and a half) that suggests the closing flourish of a pavane, a quicker movement called a galliard. This starts after the dash in the next-to-last line, where the Norwegian has two stressed syllables in a row (*slik dānsēr*); my translation doesn't have two stresses in a row, but it does reverse the foot so there is a stressed syllable right after the dash, which is what supplies a fresh energetic start for the last clause in the poem: *thát's hōw thē séa*. Read the whole poem aloud to hear how this works.

The sound patterns in this poem are especially dense; you may be able to observe this in the Norwegian text just by seeing how many words begin with *d*, or with *p* and *b* (which are in the same family). You can hear a recording of Rolf Jacobsen reading "*Pavanen*" and one of me reading my translation of it at <http://www.rogergreenwald.org/pavane.html>.

For another poem with an unusual feature at the end of most of its lines, see "On Falling Asleep in a Field" (261). And for another poem on historical themes (but not without implications for the present), a poem that makes masterful use of rhythms, repetition, and alliteration, see "Mournful Towers" (91).

Sound and Translation

Read "Mournful Towers" (91) aloud slowly and see how many syllables you can give full stress while still sounding natural. (For example; in line 1, can you stress "had" and/or "built," especially if you pause slightly after these verbs?) If you have access to someone who can read the Norwegian aloud or you can obtain a CD with a reading of it, you will be able to notice the astonishing number of repetitions of the rhythmic pattern ' - - ':

Slavene had-
veldige hend-
sorgfulle tårn
hjerter av bly
skuldre som fjell-
sorgfulle tårn

hender som sten-
berger av taus-
står i Burgund
Askegrå mur-
panner av sten
[tung]sindige øy-

steder på jord-
svaler går ut
sløyfer i luft-
lydløse svep-

From *Summer in the Grass* (1956)

“The Moon and the Apple Tree” (99)

This is a rich poem that packs a great deal into a short space. In case you wonder why the English title has “the Apple Tree” and the first line has “the wild apple” although the Norwegian has the same word twice, the answer is that “apalen” means “the wild apple tree” (a cultivated apple tree is “et epletre”), and I wanted to get the type of apple tree into the translation without the awkwardness of using the whole phrase “wild apple tree” (which would have *sounded translated* – that is, like it came from a dictionary) in either the title or the first line.

You can see that the poem proceeds through a series of comparisons: the pale moon is like one of the flowers on the tree – but it is not *like* a flower (a simile) but rather appears *as* (in the guise of) a flower (a metaphor). And then it becomes the summer that has passed, and “the flowers’ white sister,” an image that takes us back to the moon and perhaps to the face in it.

The language of the Norwegian text in stanza 2, lines 4 and 5 has a biblical flavor. I used “shine upon us” for that reason (cf. Numbers 6:25 in the King James version). And “the fire to come” (the Norwegian says, literally, “when the fire comes”) probably alludes to flood and fire in the Old Testament (cf. Genesis 9:13-16 and 19:24).

What does the logical linking word “For” at the start of the last four lines suggest about the moon’s message?

In those gorgeous closing lines, Jacobsen leaps to another comparison, and as in other poems we’ve read, it involves a shift in scale, in that it goes back to the smallest item from the start of the poem (a flower) and leaps to something even larger than the moon, the Earth. And then an even larger scale opens up in the poem: the tree of stars, on which we see the Earth suspended like a lovely flower.

For other poems in which Jacobsen presents the image of the Earth in space, see “Green Light” (107), “Epilogue” (201), and “Skylab” (205).

Sound and translation. The closing two lines of “The Moon and the Apple Tree” have a rhythm and a sound pattern that underscore the beauty of the image. You can see that both *blek* and *blad* start with *bl*. The *l* is picked up by *lysende* in the last line; the *e* in *lysende* has the same *eh*-sound as the *e* in *med*; the *ah*-sound of *av* (which is unstressed) recurs in the last word, *hav* (which is stressed and long). And most important, the long open *ah*-sound of *hav* repeats the same sound in *blad*. The rhythmic patterns of “blek og med blad” and “lysende hav” are the same: '- - '. That is the very pattern that recurred so many times in the Norwegian of “Mournful Towers.” But in that poem it produced very heavy stresses, dictated in part by the content of the poem and perhaps also in part by the consonants that often closed the pattern. Here, on the other hand, the consonants are so light as almost to vanish, and the sense of wonder suggests that we lengthen the open *ah*-sounds. (Once

again, as with *cloud-illuminated* in “Rubber,” I have had recourse to a Latinate word, “luminous,” for the sake of sound and rhythm.)

Note that *blad* can mean “leaf/leaves” as well as “petal/petals”; in fact, “leaf” is the more common meaning and is the first definition that one is likely to find in a dictionary. Nothing could illustrate better the necessity of understanding an image and getting a translation to convey it clearly than the loss that occurs in this poem if a translator chooses “leaves” instead of “petals.”

From *Breathing Exercise* (1975)

“Avaldsnes” (211)

With “Avaldsnes” we come to a poem in which Jacobsen’s religious interests surface less obliquely than in poems featured or referred to earlier in this guide. (He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1951 and had a keen interest in medieval monasteries.)

The first two lines simply announce the resemblance that will govern the rest of the poem. The forthrightness of these opening lines and of the plain narrative statement in the next two (“We came to Avaldsnes one evening...”) creates a calm, solid, very assured voice.

The speaker says that the tree the church reminds him of is one that no longer stands. Do you think the old stone church is a ruin? And does it matter whether the *literal* church in the poem is a ruin?

For Yggdrasil, see the endnote in the book. What could Jacobsen be referring to in the phrase “perhaps a tougher tree”? And if the tree corresponds to a church (as a building or as an institution), what could the birdsong correspond to?

“Avaldsnes” is one of several poems that Jacobsen ends with questions. (He also begins several poems with questions, but that isn’t so unusual.) Sometimes the closing questions seem genuinely wondering; sometimes they seem rhetorical. See how you would interpret them in “The Sculptor” (117); “In the Varald Forest” (59); “Cobalt” (49); “End of the Road” (187); “Antenna-forest” (209); “Hallingskeid” (217: note the absence of question marks, and try reading aloud in a way that reflects that punctuation); “The Media Poem” (245); “Hundvåko” (265); and “Did I Know You?” (295).

For other poems with at least implied religious elements, see “The Sculptor” (117); “In the Varald Forest” (59); “The Catacombs of San Callisto” (155: note the tree image); “Stave Churches” (93); “Angelus” (197); “Briefing” (199); “In Raspberry Season” (227); “From Above, from Below and from the Side” (229); and “The Bells from Assisi” (271).

General discussion and questions

A poet can do no better than to pursue his or her own interests and develop methods that serve them well. On the one hand, it falls to us to value whatever the poet has managed to give us, rather than to insist that he should have given us poems of a different type that we

happen to prefer. On the other hand, in some cases we may feel that a poet's body of work has depth but lacks breadth, or vice-versa.

One measure of depth is whether poems yield additional meanings on re-reading. Have Jacobsen's poems done that for you? If so, discuss how. Read "Sand" (223) and see if you detect a sly sense of humor at work in the second stanza. (Jacobsen often slips his wit into poems without signaling it.)

Jacobsen's stance is different from that of the highly personal or confessional lyric that has been most prevalent in English-language poetry since World War II. I noted that in "Travel" (11) the speaker is solitary. I think that can be inferred in "Silvery Moon" (273) as well. It's a good question whether the painter who comes along in that poem is supposed to be real or is revealed to be a personification of the moon, so that he is in effect the poet's imaginary friend. It seems likely that in "To Iris" (189), Jacobsen has used the name of the iris of the eye to conjure up a fictitious woman named Iris. Where the word "we" appears in Jacobsen's poems, it refers most of the time to all humans, or to all Norwegians, or to some other social group. That is, it rarely implies the presence of a particular person or people in addition to the speaker. ("Avaldsnes" [211] is an exception.)

One can say that for the most part, Jacobsen keeps himself out of his poems, except as the observer and commentator. He says little about his personal life, his psychology, or his feelings. What are the advantages to this approach? Are there any disadvantages?

With the rare exception of his wife, Petra, other people rarely show up or speak in the poems. The "you" at the end of "Metaphysics of the City" (17) is probably a hypothetical other, any inhabitant of the city. Because "Avignon, Vaucluse" (169) is a travel poem, it is fair to guess that the "you" in it is Petra. "Girlchild—" (181) is widely understood to be addressed to her, and "To You" (259) clearly is. But these are rare exceptions in Jacobsen's body of work until we come to the moving suite of poems about the marriage and Petra's death in Jacobsen's last book, *Night Watch* (1985).

Does this absence of other people in the poems add up to an impression that the poet was a loner? And is that a shortcoming?

It has been said that a poet who is struck by poetic "lightning" a half dozen times in the course of a lifetime should feel lucky. So when one encounters a body of work that includes twenty or fifty or even more poems that display depth of insight and feeling; striking language; masterful use of rhythm, sound, line, and image; and a magically "right" fit of all these elements, one can only admire and be awed by the achievement. Do you feel that Jacobsen's poems satisfy those very demanding criteria?

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