piece, a consevated core over the one whose--Johnson has authored a dozy or work whose charm, amonon, and intelligence are air unmatcne among his contemporaries. An Artist of Abundance, in Robert Duncan's phrase, Johnson is devoted to puns, to rhyme, and to bricoleur-mystics like the Facteur Cheval and Simon Rodia, whose Palais Ideal and Watts Towers are models for the collage architecture of ARK. A poet of science, Johnson finds the visionary organism of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau confirmed by contemporary cosmology and physics. He thus may sing, in his own postmodern key, a spousal verse that celebrates the fit between the world and the mind that has evolved to behold and re-create it.

Johnson has been publishing since the mid-1960s, a period that was, in many ways, more receptive to his work than our more skeptical fin-de-siecle. His poems grow out of what Charles Altiere calls the immanentist postmodernism of the 60s, with its faith in natural orders waiting to be discovered and modeled in the poets equally natural act of writing; they have little in common with either the lyric of dominant epiphany that flourished in the Ford and Carter years or, at the opposite extreme, with the studied disjunction and (often) politicized avant-gardism of the so-called Language poets. Although his work subtly incorporates both autobiographical echoes and radical artifice, and although the later, metaphorically higher portions of ARK seem shadowed by the ravages of AIDS on his beloved San Francisco, as a rule Johnson's long poem consciously excludes history, both personal and political. If a war-torn poetry of witness claims the late-century moral and aesthetic high ground (think of poets as different as Michael Palmer and Carolyn Forch, both aspiring to the Historical Sublime) Johnson's epic looks at once to a more optimistic period in American poetics and toward an audience and critical climate as inspired and heartened by Complexity theory as it is shaken by aftershocks of atrocity. Playful, capacious, artful, eloquent, Johnson is the pre-eminent contemporary poet of the Beautiful.

Johnson was born in Ashland, Kansas, a town of two thousand set on the prairie, parched and driven by Depression-era dust-storms. His father, A.T. Johnson, was a carpenter, whose Lumber Yard was for the young poet a secret ground of changing piles and smells, with hid hollow cupolas, exits to tree-topped roofs, stored bins and nooks long lost, rooms of whirling saws, sharpened pencils: an early model for the architecture of ARK, in which his father sometimes figures as The Carpenter. The poets mother, Helen (Mayse) Johnson, was trained in dance in her youth: in ARK she appears at times as The Dancer, and the poet puns on her family name in the lovely self-portrait poem Of Circumstance, The Circum Stances: Mayse, my mothers / family name / & had it crest, Maize / / one would make it: a brown field sprouting / Indian corn, / / of red & yellow / kernels / that various, still / / variegated display of / / / ancestry. (By the end of the poem he supplements this crest with a second, that of the Indians who inhabited the land before whites came. Their crest was a human hand / / & in the palm of it, / an eye: a juxtaposition central to the poets later effort to join the / work of vision to the word / at hand, thus shape the work.)

Like most young children, Johnson began making up nonsense jingles at an early age, doting on what he later called the pure pleasure of rhythm and sound. His adult verse, with its earthy wordplay, unabashedly draws on this resource of infant joy. He studied piano, and remains deeply influenced by music, particularly the compositions of Gustav Mahler and Charles Ives. Probably the most seminal thing in my life, however, he recalls in an interview, was growing up and discovering the Oz books. I was about twelve or thirteen before I finally had to face the fact that there was no way to get to Oz. Much of Johnsons poetry can be profitably read in this biographical light, for it repeatedly returns to the effort to, as he himself puts it, make a special place--a garden of some kind--which was a surrogate for that imaginary land: an Oz where anything is possible and in which the imagination lives.

Leaving Kansas for college, Johnson received a B.A. in 1960 from Columbia University. While there, he met the poet and publisher Jonathan Williams, on whom he was later to write an entry for the Dictionary of Literary Biography. The two were companions for the next eleven years. Williams introduced him not only to the work of Zukofsky, Duncan, Creeley, and Olson, but to the poems themselves; in New York they also met and talked shop with the Abstract Expressionist painters, and with the many composers and photographers who made the Cedar Tavern the Boeuf Sur Le Toit ou Deux Magots of its day. Johnson hiked the length of the Appalachian trail with Williams, and their walking tour of England, recollected in tranquility, informs his writing of the English seasonal poem, The Book of the Green Man. (Along with a boyhood chafing at dry Kansas flatness, these hikes account for the poets passion for pastoral.) In the 1970s Johnson was a Writer in Residence at the University of Kentucky, and he held the Roethke Chair for Poetry at the University of Washington before settling in San Francisco. Aside from temporary travels, he has made his home in the Bay Area ever since; and 1994 he was Poet in Residence at the University of California at Berkeley.

From the start, Johnson has written in a variety of poetic modes. He has a longstanding interest in collage and concrete poetry, often using these architectural techniques of composition to revivify such older genres as pastoral and Romantic spousal verse. If he is a poet of nature, however, it is of a natural world illuminated at once by scientific inquiry and by Transcendental vision--as in Thoreau, the two are not opposed--and Johnsons nature also includes the second nature of language and culture, which he treats as a rich from which now new poems may grow. He thus often shapes his poems out of found materials: quotations from American and British naturalists, from scientists, from older poets, all allowed to speak for themselves as objects in the text, as Norman Finkelstein observes, even as the shaping subject speaks through them. He draws our attention to the page before us and the world around us, engaging readers in what Davenport calls the simple but difficult business of seeing the world with eyes cleansed of stupidity and indifference. An effort that links him to Pound--who told Johnson, in their one meeting, I have only pointed out a few things might else have been forgotten--and to Charles Olson, to whom Johnson dedicated his first book, A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees (1964).

A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees takes its title from a buried etymological pun: stich, it so happens, means both. Like many of Olson's poems--the Maximus Poems, The Kingfishers, and so on--these pieces are stitched out of borrowed material, including scraps from Samuel Palmer, William Bartram, Emerson, Thoreau, and Olson, and a collage poem from Six Months in Kansas, by a Lady, published 1856. A number of Johnsons pieces have a packed, projective, Olsonian movement: Columbus, as the first Western eyes, called it / panic grass--Maize, of a quaking ancestry, i.e., the / / attempt, always, at classification (Indian Corn); That what we know of the world is Physiognomy, face. As / Haida square a bear to its corners, / joint profiles /--edge to edge--join its head, trunk & limbs / with eyes... (Landcape with Bears, for Charles Olson). But even in this first collection Johnsons distinctive voice and interests are clear. Against the landscape with bears of the Olson poem I have just quoted, where wildness is all, the poem Shake, Quoth the Dove House sets the art of poetry in an evergreen topiary grotto:

A row of trees / borders the road / a grotto of / / / variegated display of / / / ancestry. (By the end of the poem he supplements this crest with a second, that of the Indians who inhabited the land before whites came. Their crest was a human hand / / & in the palm of it, / an eye: a juxtaposition central to the poets later effort to join the / work of vision to the word / at hand, thus shape the word.)

In 1966 the Arkley Press of San Francisco published a beautiful palm-sized limited edition of Assorted Jungles: Rousseau, an ekphrastic suite later reprinted in Valley of the Many-Colorred Grasses. Centered on the page, printed in an art-nouveau typeface, the poems are written in a tempting, Stevensonian dictum. Johnson pieces his language out in slow motion, with each word or phrase as discrete and neatly bordered as one of the painters leaves: an attempt, as he explains elsewhere, to use words in the naive and exotic way Rousseau painted his jungles. The dream is Java & / impenetrable, / / its pomegranates clearly / / / ancestry. (By the end of the poem he supplements this crest with a second, that of the Indians who inhabited the land before whites came. Their crest was a human hand / / & in the palm of it, / an eye: a juxtaposition central to the poets later effort to join the / work of vision to the word / at hand, thus shape the work.)

Between A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees and Johnsons next full-length collection, The Book of the Green Man, the poet wrote several shorter books, published in limited small press editions. Sports & Divertissements offers a translation and elaboration of the comic, surreal performance notes of the French composer Erik Satie, whose works Johnson had played as a boy and whose words Johnson spaced and placed in order to make a music on the page. Artist John Furnival supplied drawings to the poems, and the two collaborated on Johnsons subsequent concrete poem Io and the Ox-Eye Daisy, for which Furnival did the lettering. Both books were published in Scotland by Ian Hamilton Finlay, the Scots concrete poet and formal gardener, with whom Johnson stayed for two weeks during a trip to Scotland. Another book of concrete poems, Gorse / Goose / Rose, is dedicated to Finlay: its a series of Scotch Shapes / & landscapes written day by day during Johnsons stay. Johnson wrote the poems as an exercise in writing a narrative concrete poem. (Johnson was never pleased with how the book was printed, and it was not widely distributed.) In 1968 the Auerhahn Press of San Francisco published a beautiful palm-sized limited edition of Assorted Jungles: Rousseau, an ekphrastic suite later reprinted in Valley of the Many-Colorred Grasses. Centered on the page, printed in an art-nouveau typeface, the poems are written in a tempting, Stevensonian dictum. Johnson pieces his language out in slow motion, with each word or phrase as discrete and neatly bordered as one of the painters leaves: an attempt, as he explains elsewhere, to use words in the naive and exotic way Rousseau painted his jungles. The dream is Java & / impenetrable, / / its pomegranates clearly / / / ancestry. (By the end of the poem he supplements this crest with a second, that of the Indians who inhabited the land before whites came. Their crest was a human hand / / & in the palm of it, / an eye: a juxtaposition central to the poets later effort to join the / work of vision to the word / at hand, thus shape the work.)

In this painterly incarnation of the Green Man--an adult Oz, where anything is possible, and the imagination lives--the limits of verisimilitude yield to the lusshness of possibility, and Huge orange / oranges / / & pendulous imagining / of banana / proliferate / a veritable / Tanganyika.
On his walking tour of England, the Lake Country, Johnson found a landscape that, while less exotic and more pastoral, answered his imaginative needs just as powerfully as the one he saw in Rousseau. In 1967 W. W. Norton published the book-length poem that grew out of those English travels and meditations: The Book of the Green Man. Derived from the writings of British naturalists--Francis Kliver and Gilbert White, among others--as much as from the poets explorations, the book is a still-short Kansans effort to work endless changes (in Wordsworths phrase) on the age-old British seasonal poem: an attempt to transplant his American imagination into English soil, and into the rich silt of biography that covers it. (The gesture is as old as Washington Irving learning "The Art of Book-Making" in the British Museum, but Johnson takes his cue more directly from Thoreau, who noted that Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils.) In this book the poets impetus to compose Of the seasons, seamless, a garland bears fruit in a fragral aesthetic where sounds are reused, recomposed, rewoven, line by line; more broadly, the poets new poems are in the same half of the poems insulate / warble / & set into A maze of / sound, to catch / the labyrinthine wind, / in words-- / syllable, following / on syllable... (Notice that both the wind and the poem are described as maze-like. This felt symmetry between the world and the poets words recalls the Transcendentalists, and will prove the keel of ARK.)

The book begins in winter, in Grasmere Churchyard. Wordsworth is its guiding spirit--or, more accurately, both Wordsworths are: the visionary William, who could not see / daffodls / only / huge forms, Presences / earth / working / like a sea, and the more practical Dorothy, who saw the landscape in its sweet and rough particulars of lichen, moss, and water. (Future scholars will no doubt tease out the relationship between this Dorothy and her fictive Kansas cousin in Johnsons pantheon.) As it goes on, The Book of the Green Man includes both dream visions, sublime in their leaps of scale, and more strictly empirical, observational passages; and the poet insists on the connections between these realms, which mirror the bonds between an earth, sentient with moles / & owls / radiant eyes--and those that leap from earth, to mistletoe, ivy & lichen, to owls- / wing, to thunder, to lightning, to earth--& back. By spring we meet the Green Man in propia persona: the nature genius who came to Sir Richard Cavendish as the Green-Knight, and who appears in writings of any kind here as well. (The I of these poems is a bit of a green man himself. As he hikes along the river Wye he quotes Whitman to claim that he incorporates fruits, grains, esculent roots, his eyes containing substance // of the sun, / [his] ears built of beaks & feathers.) Summer is a season of clear and scientific scrutiny, full of dissections and anatomies; autumn, too, holds fast to specificities, rich with descriptions not only of nature (a poem that follows the suns arc by numbered degrees, describing the landscape as it rises and sets), but of several man-made follies and Grottoes. We read of William Stukeley, who made his own Stonehenge of an old orchard, and of Pope, whose description of one garden (a laurustine bear in blossom, and so on) was quoted earlier in Shake, Quoth the Dove House. By the end of the poem the landscape of Shoreham is revealed as Albion, a Paradys / Ethely; but its also Johnsons most fully realized Kansas-as-Oz so far: a country / where there is no / night / but of moons / & with heads of fish / in the turow, / & on each, ear, beneath a husk / of twilight / were as many suns as / kernels, / & fields were far / as the eye / could reach...

The Book of the Green Man was widely and favorably reviewed. At once symbolic and magical, Charles Philbrick wrote in The Saturday Review, the book is a species of literary travelogue. (He goes on to note that unlike Robert Lowell Near the Ocean, the disappointment of the season, Johnsons work embodies an epiphany and results in a triumph.) Later critics have explored its use of quotation and bricolage--an aesthetic of the migratory phrase, as Steve McCaffery puts it--and have dwelled on what Finkelkells calls the poets complexly mediated and startlingly immediate...engagement with the Romantic, visionary, and pastoral traditions in English poetry. Like the green world of rural England, Finkelkells writes, and like the myth of the Green Man itself, poetry partakes in a potent, celebratory natural impulse; it regenerates itself out of precursor texts that have likewise been initiated into such knowledge. Although in technique the book looks back to Olson and Zukofsky, it also deserves to be read in a broader context of postmodern poetry of nature, in the company of Ammons and Snyder. Johnson is as ecological a poet, in many ways, as either, but he offers a third, distinctive poetic: one neither Buddhist (the Eastern idea of emptiness and the void I find unattractive. Blake didnt believe in it.) nor resolutely secular.

Two years later, when Norton published Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses--a book that includes most of A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees and the Rousseau poems, along with an extensive collection of ambitious work from 1966-67, all with an afterward by Davenport--it, too, was praised in a range of publications. (A major book, Margaret Randall called it in Poetry, for example, humble and brilliant at the same time.) The second half of the book, which contains the new poems, is framed by two epigraphs: one from Blake, one from Thoreau, signalling the Different Musics the poet heard harmonized in The Book of the Green Man, and which he draws on here as well, along with other tutelary figures, notably Whitman and Charles Ives. In the poem The Different Musics, one thus finds a Thoreauvian attention to the found poetry of etymology and to the unending richness of detail in any patch of nature closely examined, but on the level of form the poem enacts an Ivesian composition in two simultaneous voices, coming together in a chorus and flourish at the end.

Several poems from Valley have drawn recent scholarly attention, especially the Letters to Walt Whitman and the double-columned The Unfoldings. Ed Folsom calls the Letters, which open with seed-lines from Whitman and then blossom into Johnsons own words--though these root down into and draw upon other Whitmanian passages--one of the most sustained and suggestive of all the poetic encounters with Whitman. In them Johnson carries on one of Whittmans deepest concerns, Folsoms note: how the poet can indicate to men and women the path between reality and their souls. (In Letter 9 he posess the question through a favorite, recurring motif. Whitman promises Landscapes projected masculine, / full-sized and golden. Are these landscapes to be imagined, Johnson wonders, or are they, rather, an actual / Kansas--the central, earthy, prosperous core of us, needing only to be seen anew, following the poets gesture and exultant gaze?) Davenport has recently argued that the Letters respond to another element in Whitman as well: his curiosity about and enthusiasm for science, which seemed to the older poet to describe a harmonic and orderly universe where, as Davenport puts it, passionetise friendship is an example of its harmony. Johnson embodies this harmonic vision in "The Unfoldings," too.

The astronauts and writers quoted in the two poems two columns echo and confirm each others testimony, while the love that draws a Thoreau or a Kepler or a Leonardo to the things of this world--the love that draws Johnson as well--takes shape as the love that moves the sun and other stars. Presumably it also moves the two galaxies whose statick collision, heard by radio astronomers and broadcast on the BBC, gave Johnson the climax of the book.

As the 1960s came to an end, Johnson published several more concrete poems, again mostly in limited editions. Theyre witty, spare, lyrical efforts to let the reader see, not through, but with the letters, the poet explains, lightly reversing Blake's admonition, in "The Everlasting Gospel," that "This lifes five windows of the soul / Distorts the Heavens from pole to pole... / And leads you to believe a lie / When you see, with not thro', the eye." Indeed, the poet wryly notes, one could spend a lifetime reading the full texts of all the 26 letters of the alphabet, unfolding their implications: Tree: the t leaves. An r branches. the es have annual rings..." In Reading 1--a single poem published on a single folded page--the word book is printed in solid black lettering, with an r printed below it, just between the b and first o. A proofreaders insertion mark, hand-written, signals where the r should fit in: where Blake saw saws in babbling brooks, Johnson reads in the other direction, while the wavy blue pen of his writing restores the fluidity that print masks or denies. (After a moment you see brooks, instinctively, at which point Blakes original dictum comes back into play.) In Songs of the Earth Johnson shapes a series of listenings, as poems must listen and sing simultaneously, inspired by Mahlers Das Lied von der Erde and by Jonathan Williams Mahler, a suite of long poems inspired by and answering to Mahlers symphonies. Johnsons Songs range from the visually simple--at the center of a page, framed by that visible silence, wood / winds--to more complex arrays, in which (for example) a spacious square of capital letters spelling WANE encloses a lowercase square of honey, which rises into italicized capitals a little lower on the page. In Eyes & Objects, a longer collection published in 1976, Johnson tried his hand at poems where every sound is mirrored by some other sound, producing what are, in effect, concrete poems carved out of aural space. A catalogue for an exhibition which was itself the exhibition, Johnson calls this book; its a fascinating text, curious in its play of ideas and delicate in music.
ARK is divided into three books of thirty-three sections: The Foundations (made up of Beams), The Spires, and The Ramparts (whose cantos are called Arches). Over these, as a metaphorical dome, rests ARK 100: a rewriting of Paradise Lost by exicition. There is a temporal sequence to the poems as well, since The Foundations begin at sunrise and end at noon, The Spires go to sundown, and The Ramparts overlook a midnight of the soul even as they show the ARK transformed into a metaphysical starship (all arrowed a rainbow midair, / ad astra per aspera / countdown for Lift Off, ARK 99 concludes). ARK 100, the poet has promised, will return us to dawn, looking at once backward in tense and forward in trajectory, with The world all before. The first portion of ARK to appear in book form, however, was a much earlier section of this overarching dome, published in 1977 as RADI O.

Inspired by British artist Tom Phillips, who painted and refraged pages from the third-rate Victorian novel A Human Document to turn it into his mysterious treated text A Humant, and provoked by composer Lukas Foss, whose Baroque Variations reading of a piece by Handel with pieces cut out (I composed the holes, Foss explains), Johnson began his revision of Paradise Lost rather casually. He soon found, however, that he had entered a grand Romantic tradition of wresting and retooling Miltonic epic; found, indeed, that he had begun a specifically Blakean infernal reading of the prior text, composed by etching away surfaces to display the infinite which was hid. The first page of RADI O—and the book is composed in pages, each one a visual text—thus revises Miltons famous invocation Of mans first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world into O tree into the World, Man the chosen Rose out of Chaos: song, Johnson has not simply vented the dense Miltonic sentence, following the lead of Pound and Poe. He has erased the divine sentence that stands behind Milton’s opening. Disobedience and death have vanished, along with the fact that the Tree was forbidden and the greater nature of the Man (Christ) that Milton invokes. Here Man / the chosen / Rose out of Chaos, not by the Tree, a creator, but as the rose appears in Pounds steel dust, according the universes blessed / order, complexity, beauty—and its impulse to create something that will echo that complexity in song. Johnsons cosmos is organized on what physics calls the anthropic principle: that is, it assumes a role for the observing human intelligence in the shaping of the creation that shapes our universe. After a long time of light, there began to be eyes, and light began looking at itself, Johnson writes in Beam 4 of ARK: The Foundations; in Beam 7 we learn that Matter delights in music, and became Bach.

The four books of Paradise Lost that make up RADI O can be read as a covert or implicit narrative: both as a running commentary on Milton and as a story of creation and the human fall into a sleepy forgetfulness, which the visionary poet will teach us to wake up from and ascend to our true stature. (The echoes of Emerson and Thoreau are quite deliberate.) The poem includes sublime passages where Archangels appear—note the pun on ARK—and, others, more plangent, where Miltons mourning for his blindness is transformed into a lament over the flickering of poetical insight Emerson laments throughout Nature. To find / the more / clear song, Johnsons page unfolds, Shine inward, and there plant eyes that I may see and tell Of things invisible once thick as stars. The radiant image the only Garden On the bare outside of this World At the close of Book IV of RADI O Johnson returns to this defense of the visionary-cum-utopian perception of everyday life, challenging his readers to test his poetry’s claims on the night or sunlit sky, as much as against his Miltonic original. For proof look up, this book ends, And read / Where thou art.

For many years Guy Davenport elegant, perspectival Afterward remained the only substantial critical work on RADI O. Unlike Johnsons previous books, it was not widely reviewed; even in the Johnson / Davenport issue of V magazine, an essential source for Johnson scholarship, the poem is not treated in the detailed accorded his earlier volumes. (No one, for example, has explored in any detail Johnsons possible debt to Zukofskys A-14, which includes another writing-through of Paradise Lost.) In part this may be due to the unusual nature of the project itself, which has seemed even to some sympathetic readers as quixotic, even maddening. In part, however, it is also due to a shift in sensibility in the American poetry community: a turn away from the immanentist postmodernism of the 1980s towards either the narrower lyric of domestic epiphany or to the politicized avant-gardism of what would soon be called the Language poets. These poems share debts to Zukofsky, but they are, as a rule, quite skeptical of visions, especially when those visions are of organic wholeness, a blissful fit between signifier and signified, language and the world. It is no accident that Ron Silliman, for example, found RADI O to be a less interesting use of prior text than work by Jackson MacLow, William Burroughs, or Kathy Acker. MacLow, the aleatoric poet—Johnson is apocalyptic—and Burroughs and Acker, those fashioners of bitter, twisted fictions of the lost, lack Johnsons Blakean apocalyptic vision, as well as his Arianel desire to recreate Paradise, and groves / Elysian (Wordswort) in a “verbal earthly paradise” (Auden). Its going to take a lot of piss and sweat to balance out these angels (and angels) of light and darkness, Silliman warns, revealingly. Such writers also lack Johnsons sense that the physical sciences, especially physics and biology, confirm his optimistic vision: an sense that underwrites ARK: The Foundations.

ARK: The Foundations began at sunrise and end at noon, looking at once backward in tense and forward in trajectory, with The world all before. Johnsons physical universe and...able four books The Foundations was published for four years afterward, the books share an impulse to rethink Romanticism tour-de-force that the physical universe...able Johnson began his revision of...the chosen / Rose out of Chaos, not by the Tree, a creator, but as the rose appears in Pounds steel dust, according the universes blessed / order, complexity, beauty—and its impulse to create something that will echo that complexity in song. Johnsons cosmos is organized on what physics calls the anthropic principle: that is, it assumes a role for the observing human intelligence in the shaping of the creation that shapes our universe. After a long time of light, there began to be eyes, and light began looking at itself, Johnson writes in Beam 4 of ARK: The Foundations; in Beam 7 we learn that Matter delights in music, and became Bach.
Unlike ARK: The Foundations, which was acclaimed The Threepenny Review and Parnassus, among others journals, ARK 50 received only a few reviews. Without a narrative hook or thematic fanfare (like the remarkable transcendental physics of the earlier volume) the book rewards close and playful attention, but doesn't force or command it; and it seemed out of key with the political poetics championed by a wide variety of poets and critics, experimental and otherwise, in 1984. Since the publication of ARK 50 Johnson has finished ARK, and most of The Ramparts (each one an Arch, as each part of the Foundation is a Beam) have been published in literary journals. Like a few of the Beams, and like a number of the later Spires, almost all the Arches are written in a highly compressed verse whose syntax is either implicit or absent altogether. Grouped in trios of Arches, each written in mosaic tercets, the Ramparts thus glint as much as they flow.

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