

Denis Johnson:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Johnson, Denis, 1949-2017
Title:	Denis Johnson Papers
Dates:	1939-2009 (bulk 1995-2008)
Extent:	46 document boxes, 5 oversize boxes (osb) (19.32 linear feet)
Abstract:	The Denis Johnson Papers consist of the professional and personal papers of American writer Denis Johnson. The papers document Johnson's diverse writing career and range of creative output which includes poetry, short stories, novels, essays, journalism articles, screenplays, and scripts.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-05178
Language:	English, Arabic, French, and German
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 2010 (10-05-001-P)
Processed by:	Amy E. Armstrong, 2011
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Denis Hale Johnson was born in Munich, Germany, on July 1, 1949, to Vera and Alfred Johnson. His father was in the U.S. Information Service, and Johnson and his brother, Randy, spent their childhoods living in Japan, the Philippines, and the suburbs of Washington D.C. While Johnson was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, the *North American Review* published three of his poems in their November-December 1968 issue. His first book, a collection of poetry called *The Man among the Seals* (1969), was published to great acclaim when he was only nineteen. Johnson was briefly married during this period and had a son. He received a B.A. in English (1971), and went on to earn an M.F.A. in poetry and fiction (1974) from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

After graduating, Johnson taught for one year at Lake Forest College. He spent the next several years moving around and working a series of jobs in the Seattle area. He published his second poetry collection, *Inner Weather*, in 1976. In 1979, the Arizona Commission on the Arts and Humanities awarded him a fellowship, and he taught creative writing at the state prison in Florence, Arizona, from 1979 to 1981. This life-changing experience, in particular his work with two death-row inmates, impelled Johnson to finish *Angels*, a novel he had started years before.

In 1981, Johnson was awarded a fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he met his second wife, Lucinda, a sculptor and painter. While living in Cape Cod, he completed *Angels* (1983) and his next two novels, *Fiskadoro* (1985) and *The Stars at Noon* (1986). In 1986, he moved to Gualala, California, and in 1989 settled in the remote wilderness of northern Idaho. During this period he published a third poetry collection, *The Veil* (1987), and a fourth novel, *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (1991).

Johnson's stories and novel excerpts appeared in *Esquire*, *McSweeney's*, the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, and numerous literary journals. In 1992, he published *Jesus' Son*, a collection of semi-autobiographical, interconnected short stories about a drifting addict, set in the 1970s. The book was enthusiastically received by readers and critics, who appreciated Johnson's realistic and nightmarish portrayal of addiction. The stories were adapted into a screenplay of the same name, and the film was released in 1999. Johnson appears in a brief, but memorable cameo role as Terrance Weber, the hospital patient with a knife stabbed in his eye.

Similarly to his fiction, Johnson's essays explored curious people and desperate situations. As a correspondent for *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Salon* magazines, he traveled to war-ravaged Liberia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as to America's backcountry to report on, among other things, the Liberian civil war, a Christian biker rally, and a Texas execution. Eleven of his essays were re-edited and collected into a published volume, *Seek: Reports from the Edge of America and Beyond* (2001), which was nominated for the PEN/Martha Albrand Nonfiction Award.

In addition to his success as a novelist, poet, screenwriter, and essayist, Johnson was also an accomplished playwright. He was Playwright-In-Residence for San Francisco's Campo Santo Theater Company at Intersection for the Arts, which premiered each installment of his Cassandra family trilogy, *Hellhound On My Trail*, *Shoppers Carried by Escalators Into the Flames*, and *Soul of a Whore*. His other plays include *Des Moines* and *Psychos Never Dream*.

Johnson's works frequently appeared on "Best of" lists, and he received numerous grants, awards, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim, Whiting, and Lannan Foundations, and the American Institute for Arts and Letters. In 2007, he was awarded the National Book Award for *Tree of Smoke*, an epic novel about the Vietnam War that he worked on sporadically for over fourteen years. The novel features characters from previous Johnson novels, most notably *Angels'* Bill Houston.

Critics and readers regard Johnson's "stories of the fallen world" as honest, human, and compassionate portrayals of fictional and real characters that are isolated and searching on the fringes of society. Both his fiction and nonfiction works explore themes of forgiveness and redemption. Publications not mentioned above include: *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium Assembly* (poetry, 1995), *Already Dead: A California Gothic* (novel, 1997), *The Name of the World* (novella, 2000), *Nobody Move* (serialized in *Playboy* and published in 2009), and *Train Dreams* (novella, 2002).

In addition to the creative writing programs already listed, Johnson taught at Columbia University, the Writer's Voice program (New York City), the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, and on several occasions at the University of Texas Michener Center for Writers.

Johnson died on May 24, 2017.

Sources:

In addition to material found within the Denis Johnson Papers, the following sources were used:

"Denis Johnson." *Contemporary Authors Online*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 30 June 2011).

"Denis Johnson." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 30 June 2011).

"Denis Johnson." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 30 June 2011).

Scope and Contents

The Denis Johnson Papers consist of manuscript drafts, notes, notebooks, research material, screenplays, scripts, poems, publication proofs, clippings, scrapbook material, correspondence, printed material, photographs, posters, and childhood papers belonging to the American writer Denis Johnson. The professional and personal papers document Johnson's diverse writing career and range of creative output which includes poetry, short stories, novels, essays, journalism articles, screenplays, and scripts. The papers are organized into two series: I. Literary Activities, circa 1970s-2009, undated; and II. Personal and Professional Files, 1939-2009, undated.

Series I. Literary Activities makes up the bulk of the papers and includes materials associated with Johnson's writings. It is arranged into four subseries: A. Novels and Collections, circa 1975-2009, undated; B. Short Stories and Essays, circa 1970s-2008, undated; C. Poetry, circa 1980s-2008, undated; and D. Film and Theater Projects, circa 1980s-2009. Materials in each of these subseries are arranged in alphabetical order by title, and within each title, the material generally follows the chronological order of literary production, from research and notes to publication drafts. When applicable, related material such as book dust jackets, reviews, publicity material, and/or adaptations follow the drafts.

Johnson created extensive notes, drafts, and outlines for most of his works. He apparently wrote on whatever was at hand, and his notes appear as full-page, typed sheets, as well as writings on the back of checks and receipts, paper coasters, a paper plate, a paper towel, and envelopes. Johnson often inserted the handwritten material in with his typed notes and draft fragments, making it sometimes difficult to discern if the intended order remains intact. Much of the material is in chronological order, but page numbers are not always sequential, and the notes and drafts sometimes stop and start, even in mid paragraph. Furthermore, the notes and draft fragments are heavily revised and indicate a constant re-working of the material. As a result, no attempt was made to arrange these materials within folders, and they remain foldered as they arrived at the Ransom Center, with all original folder titles created by Johnson indicated by single quotes in the container list.

Subseries A. Novels and Collections represents most of Johnson's novels and collections; however, some important works are not represented, including Johnson's first poetry collections, *The Man among the Seals*, *Inner Weather*, and *The Veil*, and his first three novels, *Angels*, *Fiskadoro*, and *The Stars at Noon*. Johnson has said that earlier in his career, he often did not keep working drafts because he found it necessary to "shed them" in order for his writing to evolve.

Johnson often worked on multiple pieces simultaneously, as in the case of three novellas, *The Name of the World*, *Door in a Blank Wall*, and *Train Dreams*. Johnson planned to publish these together in a single volume titled *Name of the World*. As a result, some drafts and notes are filed with material from the other works. Ultimately, Johnson published *Name of the World* and *Train Dreams* separately (first in the *Paris Review* and in Europe, then later in the U.S.), and aspects of *Door in a Blank Wall* appear with material from *Tree of Smoke*.

Johnson frequently referred to previous ideas or notes as he worked and sometimes re-filed them with subsequent projects. For example, Johnson's work *Seek*, a collection of essays previously published in *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and other popular magazines, includes materials from his two articles "Civil War in Hell" (1990) and "Small Boys' Unit" (2000). Because Johnson used his original notes, research, and cassette tapes to write these essays, as well as a screenplay about Liberia, and then later referenced this combined material during the editing of *Seek*, the material was filed with drafts of *Seek*.

The first segment of *Seek* is arranged in alphabetical order by published essay title or by Johnson's original folder title. Following the essays are pages used specifically for the publication of the final *Seek* manuscript, such as drafts for the piece called "Three Desserts" (which is a combination of three separate essays) and proofs of the completed manuscript. Correspondence indicates that Johnson added and deleted essays during the editing process, and some of these discarded essays remain filed with this work. Series I., Subseries B. Short Stories and Essays contains additional files related to the original Liberian magazine essay, and Series II. Personal and Professional Files contains materials related to the screenplay.

Tree of Smoke, which won the National Book Award in 2007, is represented by the largest volume of material in the collection. Johnson worked on this novel for almost fifteen years, and the research and notes show his frequent starts and stops. These notes, outlines, and draft fragments date from 1993 to the book's publication in 2007. Included are research files containing notes, travel photos, and ephemera from trips to the Philippines and Malaysia, as well as previous writings used for reference, and internet research about Vietnam, military operations, and other topics. Also present are chapter draft fragments and note files, organized by story timeline and labeled using Johnson's original folder titles. The bulk of the manuscript material for the book is comprised of loose drafts of undated and unnumbered pages. These fragments were very much working notes and drafts and contain Johnson's frequent handwritten edits throughout. The pages were, for the most part, left in their original order as it is difficult to discern a clear arrangement.

Following the loose manuscript material for *Tree of Smoke* are six binder notebooks, many with embellished covers, corresponding to the chapter years in the book. These appear to be the final versions of the working drafts of the novel. For preservation purposes, the contents were removed from the binders, and in cases where the binder was decorated, the pages and corresponding binder were filed together. In addition, Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* materials include one complete, near-final typescript, one typescript with typesetting marks, two sets of page proofs, and an advanced reader's copy of the novel that includes a sample of the audiobook.

Subseries B. Short Stories and Essays contains Johnson's shorter fiction and non-fiction works and is arranged in alphabetical order by work title or Johnson's original folder title. The *Seek* material in Subseries A. Novels and Collections also includes magazine essay drafts.

Subseries C. Poetry contains working and final drafts of Johnson's poems. Of particular interest is the 'Slide Show' file, which contains material Johnson wrote for Sam Messer's art show in 1982. Johnson and Messer were frequent collaborators at different points in their careers, and Series II. Personal and Professional Files also includes Messer-related material. Of additional note in Subseries C. are drafts for Johnson's poem "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly." Subseries A. includes material related to Johnson's published poetry collections.

Subseries D. Film and Theater Projects contains correspondence, reviews, publicity material, and scripts for some of Johnson's screenplays and theater productions. Johnson did not retain many of his screenplays, but his papers do include materials for his adaptation of his own novel *Angels*. Most of the material in this subseries pertains to public readings and the theatrical productions of *Hellhound on My Trail*, *Shoppers Carried By Escalators into the Flames*, and *Soul of a Whore*; however, only *Soul of a Whore* is documented with a play script.

Series II. Personal and Professional Files contains papers and documents related to Johnson's childhood, family life, and writing career. Awards, book jackets, contracts, correspondence, ephemera, identification cards and passports, photographs, printed material, publicity clippings, reading and workshop materials, report cards, research files, scrapbook material, and travel files are found in this series.

Of particular interest is the scrapbook material, apparently assembled into notebooks by Johnson's mother, Vera. The first notebook contains Johnson's birth certificate, school report cards, and letters to his parents while in college. These letters are very personal and candid, with Johnson describing daily happenings, his home life with his wife and baby, and the progress of his writing. The other notebooks contain clippings and printed material that document Johnson's writing career, his awards, and readings. Due to preservation considerations, these materials were removed from their original binders and rehoused, but their original order was maintained.

Overall, there is relatively little correspondence in Johnson's papers. What is present includes letters from publishers, professional associates, other writers, and writing program requests. The material is arranged chronologically, with a separate segment of 'Prison Correspondence' from two death row inmates, Charlie Doss and Robert Smith, whom Johnson taught while working at an Arizona state prison. A few of these letters include some of these inmates' writings. Scrapbook notebooks in this series contain letters Johnson sent to his parents during the 1970s and 1980s.

In addition to the photos in the scrapbooks and album, there is a small amount of loose candid and publicity photographs of Johnson. Many of these are reproduced prints of Johnson while in college.

Publications and journal issues containing Johnson's short stories, essays, and poems are also located in this series. One copy of each title was retained.

Related Material

The Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records at the Ransom Center contain additional material related to Denis Johnson.

Separated Material

Copies of Johnson's novels and other bound volumes were transferred to the Ransom Center Library. The prosthetic eye and prop knife Johnson wore in the film *Jesus' Son*, as well as dreidels and Buddha statuettes from the New York opening of this film, were transferred to the Ransom Center Personal Effects Collection. Computer disks, CD-ROMs, and components from an Apple computer were transferred to the Ransom Center Electronic Records Collection. A note with these disks indicates that they contain the only copies of Johnson's pre-1992 drafts. Unpublished, non-commercial audio CDs and cassette tapes were transferred to the Ransom Center Sound Recordings Collection. Unpublished, non-commercial moving image VHS tapes and DVDs were transferred to the Ransom Center Film Collection.

Index Terms

Subjects

Authors, American--20th century.
Dramatists, American--20th century.
Literature--20th century.
Motion Pictures, American.
Novelists, American--20th century.
Poets, American--20th century.

Document Types

Clippings.
Correspondence.
Electronic records.
Ephemera.
Essays.
Manuscripts.
Novels.
Photographs.
Poems.

Publications.

Scrapbooks.

Scripts.

Serials (publications).

Short stories.

Sound recordings.

Series I. Literary Activities, circa 1970s-2009, undated**Subseries A. Novels and Collections, circa 1975-2009, undated**

Already Dead: A California Gothic (novel, 1997)

Loose notes, outlines, and draft fragments

Outline, chronology, 1992-1994	Container 1.1
September 1994-November 1995	Container 1.2-5
December 1995-November 1996	Container 1.6, 49
Notes and poems, January 1996, undated	Container 1.7
Chapters 8-13, May-October 1995	Container 1.8-9
Chapters 8-13, April 1995-October 1996	Container 2.1
Chapters 8-13, February-October 1996	Container 2.2
Chapters 9-14, January-February 1996	Container 2.3
Chapters 12-15, May 1995-January 1996, also 'Dreams' note, 1992	Container 2.4-6
Empty folders labeled Chapter 11 and Chapter 13, contain notes written on folder's exterior, undated	Container 2.7

Labeled notes

'Andrew's Letter, Part II,' May 1994	Container 3.1
'Letter II Utility,' November 1994	Container 3.2
'[Already Dead] 7,' 1987-1988, August 1995	Container 3.3
'Chapter 12,' December 1995	Container 3.4
'Epilogue,' January 1996	Container 3.5
'[C]uts,' undated	Container 3.6

Manuscript typescript drafts

September 1994-July 1995	Container 3.7-9
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June 1995-January 1996	Container 3.10-12, 4.1
Chapters 1-13, 8, 10-11, January-February 1996	Container 4.2-5
7 February 1996	Container 4.6-7
'First final draft,' 7 February 1996 (3 copies)	Container 5.1-8, 6.1-4
Uncorrected bound proof, 1997	Container 6.5
Sample title pages, January 1997	Container 6.6, 48
Reviews and clippings, 2000-2001	Container 6.7
Door in a Blank Wall (novella), notes, working draft fragments, 1993-1998	Container 6.8
The Incognito Lounge (poetry collection, 1982)	
Uncorrected proof, 1982	Container 6.9
'Carnegie-Mellon Press,' correspondence and contract, 1992-1994	Container 6.10
Jesus' Son (short story collection, 1992)	
'Beverly Manor,' drafts of Beverly Home, notes, undated	Container 7.1
'Emergency,' draft fragments, corrected typescript, New Yorker proofs, 1991	Container 7.2
'Happy Hour' [variously titled Electric Child on Bad Fun; I Am Not a Slave], drafts, 1991-1992	Container 7.3
Previously published versions of stories (photocopies), 1988-1991	Container 7.4
'Short Stories Book,' story typescripts, undated	Container 7.5-6
Final manuscript	
Setting copy, undated	Container 7.7
Master galley proofs, June 1992	Container 7.8
Galley proofs, June 1992	Container 7.9

Page proofs, August 1992	Container 7.10
Correspondence, also includes deal sheet, 1991-1994	Container 8.1
Dust jackets and promotional sticker, 1992	Container 8.2
Reviews and clippings, also includes Newsweek (8 February 1993) and The Atlantic (June 1993), 1993	Container 8.3, 47
Photograph of Johnson, 'F.H. circa 1975,' circa 1975	Container 8.4
Film adaptation (1999)	
Photographs of Johnson in make-up, 1999	Container 8.5
Pressbooks, undated	Container 8.6
Reviews and clippings, also includes the New Yorker (19 & 26 June 2000), Time Out New York (8-15 June 2000), Black Book (Summer 2000), 1999-2000	Container 8.7-9, 47-49
Prosthetic eye and prop knife Johnson wore in cameo appearance in film, 1999 (*transferred to Personal Effects Collection)	Container *
Dreidels and Buddha statues from New York opening of film, 1999 (*transferred to Personal Effects Collection)	
Jesus' Son promotional trailer, 29 June 1999 and 9 July 1999 (*VHS tapes transferred to Film Collection)	
The Name of the World (novella, 2000)	
'Drafts,' 1995-1997 (*3.5 inch floppy disks transferred to Electronic Records Collection)	Container 8.10, 9.1-2*
Notes, working draft fragments, 1997-1998	Container 9.3-7, 10.1
Section drafts	
'Notes,' March 1999	Container 10.2
'Leftovers,' July-October 1998	
'1 Winter,' June 1998	
'2 Late Winter,' June 1998	

'3 The Grove,' June 1998	
'4 Dinners-J.J and Teak,' October 1998	
'5 Bus Ride,' November 1998	Container 10.3
'6 Riverside,' November 1998	
'7 Coffee Klatsch,' July 1998	
'8 Mennonites Singing,' December 1998	
'9 Studio (Part 1),' January 1999	
'9a Two Stories (Studio),' March 1999	
'10 Time Flies,' January 1999	
Final Manuscript	
'Final,' February-March 1999	Container 10.4
February-March 1999 with edits by Robert Jones, 1 September 1999	Container 10.5
'Edited Final,' 25 September 1999	Container 10.6
Page proofs with edits, January 2000	Container 10.7
Reviews and clippings, 2000-2001, also email, Newsweek (31 July 2000), the New Yorker (14 August 2000)	Container 10.8, 47
Promotional material, table advertisement and posters, 2000-2001	Container 48-49
Nobody Move (novel, 2009; originally serialized in Playboy)	
Notes, outlines, and draft fragments	
November 1997-September 2003	Container 10.9
November 1997-April 2008	Container 11.1-4
'Nobody 1-9,' 1999, 2003-2004	Container 11.5
November 2005-January 2008	Container 11.6
October 2007, January-July 2008	Container 11.7, 12.1-5

May-July 2008	Container 12.6
Draft fragment, Part Two, 16 July 2008	Container 12.7
Complete draft, April-July 2008	Container 12.8
Playboy serialization	
Part One, first proof and letter, 29 April 2008	Container 12.9
Part Two, page proofs; Part Three, galley proofs, undated	Container 12.10
Part Three and Four, page proofs, June-July 2008	Container 48
Playboy magazine, issues July-October 2008	Container 13.1-2
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux ('FSG') manuscript	
Draft and edits of complete manuscript, August-September 2008	Container 13.3
Copyedited draft (26 August 2008) with 'green corrections,' 22 December 2008, also notes	Container 13.4
Second pass galley proofs, December 2008	Container 13.5
Book jackets and art, undated	Container 13.6
'Reviews,' 2009	Container 13.7, 47
Resuscitation of a Hanged Man (novel, 1991)	
Typescript, undated	Container 13.8-9, 14.1
Galley proofs, 1990	Container 14.2-3
Corrected galley proofs, selected pages, undated	Container 14.4
Signature pages for limited edition printing, 1990	Container 14.5
Book jackets and art, 1991-1992	Container 14.6, 48
Publicity material, 1991	Container 14.7
Reviews, 1991	Container 14.8, 47

Seek: Reports from the Edges of America & Beyond (essay collection, 2001)

An Anarchist's Guide to Somalia (originally published in Open City #4, 1996)

Research, articles, maps, letter, 1993-1995 **Container**
14.9-10

'Somalia,' notes and drafts, 1995 **Container** 15.1-2

Bikers for Jesus (originally published as Change Your Life FOREVER: God's Warriors in the 3rd Millennium, in Salon, March 1995)

'Copeland Ministries' research, printed material, notes, 1995 **Container**
15.3

'Rally Notes' research, notes, photocopied pages from books, 1995 **Container**
15.4

'Rally Draft 1,' drafts and letter, 1995-1996 **Container** 15.5

The Civil War in Hell (originally published in Esquire, December 1990) and The Small Boys' Unit (originally published in Harper's, October 2000)

Research, includes notes, clippings, 1990 **Container** 15.6

'Africa 92,' research articles, 1992 **Container** 15.7

'Taylor,' research about Charles Taylor, 1992 **Container** 15.8

Notebooks, map of Africa, circa 1990-1992 (*five micro-audiocassette tapes transferred to Sound Recordings Collection) **Container**
15.9*

Travel documents, 1992 **Container** 15.10

'Liberia Movie' and 'Liberia Treatment' (based on The Civil War in Hell), notes, outlines, and film treatment drafts, 1992, undated **Container**
16.1

'Liberia,' typescript of An African War (screenplay by Denis Johnson), first draft, August 1993 **Container**
16.2

Notes, draft fragments, and leftovers, 1996-1999 **Container**
16.3-4

'SB' [Small Boys'] notes, 1998-1999 **Container** 16.5

The Civil War in Hell, photocopy of Esquire article, 1990, 1997 **Container**
16.6

'SB final cut-Harper's,' The Small Boys' Unit typescript and photocopied proof, April 2000	Container 16.7
Dispatch from World War III (originally published in Esquire, March 1991), 'WWIII Notes,' drafts, 1991-2000	Container 16.8
Distance, Light, and Dreams (An alternate version was previously published as the introductory essay, Border of Sight, in Traces of Eden: Travels in the Desert Southwest [1986]), 'Border of Sight' typescript draft, 2000 and photocopied excerpt from Traces of Eden, 1986	Container 16.9
Down Hard Six Times, 'Alaska,' notes, drafts, packing lists, 1992-1993	Container 16.10
Hospitality and Revenge (originally published as Last Days of Najibullah in Esquire, April 1997)	
Notes, research, travel documents, 1996 (*one audiocassette tape and two micro-audiocassette tapes transferred to Sound Recordings Collection)	Container 17.1*
Notepads (5), 1996	Container 17.2
Working drafts, notes, proof of article, November 1996-February 1997	Container 17.3-4
The Lowest Bar in Montana (originally published in The Big Sky Journal, Summer 1997), notes and drafts, 1997	Container 17.5
The Militia in Me (originally published in Esquire, July 1995), 'Militia article-Esquire,' notes, drafts, and copy of original article, 1995-1996	Container 17.6
Ram the High-Jacker (was to be included, but ultimately was omitted from Seek; originally published as The Pirate with Low Self-Esteem in Spin, April 1998), notes and drafts, 1997	Container 17.7-8
Book manuscript	
Loose notes and drafts from various writings, 1997-2000, undated	Container 18.1
'Notes,' 2000	Container 18.2
Three Deserts: Hospitality and Revenge; Distance, Light, Dreams; Dispatch from World War III, drafts of section, issues of Neon (Nevada Arts Council) containing reprint, 2000-2001	Container 18.3, 47
Typescript, April-May 2000	Container 18.4-5
Typescript, 'copy edited,' October 2000	Container 18.6-7

Reviews, 2002-2004	Container 18.8
The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly: Poems Collected and New (poetry collection, 1995)	
Manuscript, also uncollected and additional poems, 1995	Container 18.9, 19.1
Page proofs, 1995	Container 19.2-3
Book jackets and published essay about artist James Hampton (Smithsonian Institution, 1977), 1995	Container 19.4
Train Dreams (novella, 2011, first published in the Paris Review [2002] and in Europe [2004])	
Notes, chronology, leftovers, draft fragments, 1996-2000	Container 19.5-6
Section Notes	
'Train 1 Chinaman,' March 1999	Container 19.7
'Train 2 Trestles,' July 1999-August 2000	
'Train 3,' September 2000	
'Train 4 Burn,' September 2000	
'Train 5 Jobs and Rumor,' January 1999-September 2000	
'Train 6 Courtship,' January 1999-September 2000	
'Train 7 More Jobs,' September 2000	
'Train 8 Wolf-daughter,' January 1999	
'Train 9 Pulchritude,' January 1999	
Manuscript Typescripts	
Final 1, 13-20 September 2000	Container 19.8
'Final 3,' 25 September 2000	Container 19.9
'Final 4,' December 2000, also page one of draft dated November 2000	Container 19.10

'Final 5,' October 2001	Container 20.1
Publisher's catalog, 2004	Container 20.2
Tree of Smoke (novel, 2007)	
Research material and notes	
'Background,' photocopied book chapters and notes, undated	Container 20.3
'Door notes,' includes journal Parabola (Fall 1981, reprinted 1997), 1997 (*bound volume transferred to the Library)	Container 20.4*
'Labyrinth notes,' internet research and notes, 2003-2006	Container 20.5
'Malaysia' notepads (8), clippings, notes, draft of Johnson's U.S. Casualty in a Bloodless War (essay), notes for Door in a Blank Wall [?], 1989-1990, undated	Container 20.6-8
'Philippine Islands,' maps and research, undated	Container 20.9
'Philippines Trip,' photographs, drafts of essay about Mindanao, 1988-1989	Container 20.10
'Philippines-first trip,' journal notes, undated	Container 20.11
'Philippines-second trip,' journal notes, notepads (2), letter, 1988	Container 21.1
'Phoenix Program-Ice X,' internet research, undated	Container 21.2
'Research,' notes, list of books, and internet research about Vietnam, CIA, and military, 2003	Container 21.3
'Vietnam,' maps, internet research, copied book chapters, 2004	Container 21.4-5
Chapter draft fragments, notes, and outlines	
'1963,' September 2003	Container 21.6
'1964,' September 2003	
'1965 Luzon,' April, October 2003	Container 21.7
'1965 Luzon Pt.2,' October 2003	

'1965a Mindanao, Carnigan,' January 2004	
'1965b Mindanao, Skip to Damulog,' January 2004	
'1965c K. Jones Damulog,' February-March 2004	
'1967a Skip Arrives,' November 2004	Container 21.8
'1967c James Arrives,' November 2004, January 2005	
'1967d Skip goes to Villa,' September 2004	
'1967e James Gets Lucky,' November 2004	
'1967f Skip at Villa,' September 2004	
'1967g James Goes Down,' September 2004	
'1967 unsorted,' September 2004	
'1968' - '1974,' February 2001-September 2004	Container 21.9
'Smoke Final,' drafts of chapters 1963 and 1965 (contains a note regarding a reading in Chicago), 2002-2003	Container 21.10
'Hao-Minh-Viet,' December 2003	Container 21.11
'Monk,' February-March 2004, undated	Container 21.12
'Things to get straight,' March 2004	Container 21.13
'Additions' to Final, November 2006	Container 21.14
'Smoke notes,' research sources and story ideas, January 2007	Container 21.15
'Leftover Notes,' 1996-2003	Container 22.1
Loose draft fragments, notes, outlines	
Chapters 1963-1965, research, The Years (early story draft, 1999), 1995-2003	Container 22.2-4
Assorted chapter notes, poems, notepad (1), clipping, The Years (early story outline and drafts), Big Nothing (early story drafts), 1993-2007	Container 22.5-8
Chapter 1983 and other notes, outlines, Drink the Poison draft, August 1998-December 2006	Container 23.1

Chapters 1964-1965, outlines and other notes, 2001, January-March 2004	Container 23.2
Chapters 1966-1968 and other notes, February 2001-December 2004	Container 23.3-5
Chapters 1963-1966 and other notes, September 2003-May 2004	Container 23.6-7, 24.1
Assorted notes, December 2003-March 2004	Container 24.2
Chapters 1966-1967 and other notes, May 2004-March 2005	Container 24.3-4
Chapters 1963-1968, email, October 2004-April 2005	Container 24.5-7
Chapter 1968, outlines, September-November 2005	Container 24.8, 25.1
Chapter 1968 and other notes, March-May 2006	Container 25.2
Outline, May 2006	Container 25.3
Chapters 1969-1970, 1983, additions to final, June 2006-January 2007	Container 25.4-7, 26.1
Chapters 1969-1970, 1983, July-September 2006	Container 26.2-3
Chapter 1969 and other notes, malaria research, additions, motivational notes, July-October 2006, 2007 (*CD-Rom separated to Electronic Records Collection)	Container 26.4*
'Tree of Smoke 06'	
Chapters 1965 and 1968 and other notes, outlines, notepad, Drink the Poison draft, and notes labeled 'Door,' February 2001-March 2006	Container 26.5-7
Chapters 1963-1967, draft containing loose notes and outline, May 2005	Container 26.8, 27.1
Chapter 1968 drafts and outline, December 2005-April 2006	Container 27.2
Manuscript notebooks (typescript of chapters)	

'1963-1966,' April 2006	Container 27.3-5
'1967,' April 2006	Container 28.1-2
'1968,' April-June 2006	Container 28.3
'1969,' August-December 2006	Container 28.4-5
'1970,' December 2006	Container 28.6, 29.1
'1983,' December 2006	Container 29.2-3
Empty binder, undated	Container 50
Complete manuscript typescript with notes inserted into pages, also novel outline, December 2006, 2007	Container 30.1-4
Proofs	
Typescript, setting copy, February 2007	Container 30.5-6, 31.1-5
First pass page proofs, April 2007 and errata, May 2007	Container 31.6, 32.1-3
Second pass page proofs, May 2007	Container 32.4-7
Uncorrected bound proof, 2007	Container 33.1
Advanced readers copy with audio book sampler, 2007	Container 33.2
Book jackets and sample pages, 2007	Container 33.3
Reviews and clippings, 2007	Container 33.4, 47, 49
1966 (excerpt published in the New Yorker, 11 and 18 June 2007), galley and page proofs, publication, 2007	Container 34.1

Subseries B: Short Stories and Essays, circa 1970s-2008, undated

Beelzebub Radio: The World Has Been Saved, typed draft, undated	Container 34.2
Jenny Lanes, notes and draft fragments, 2002	Container 34.3
My Commodore (published in Epoch [2008] and Woof!: Writers on Dogs [2008]), 'Col. Dog' notes, drafts, Epoch page proofs, 2006-2008	Container 34.4

- One More Geek, typed draft, undated **Container 34.5**
- 'Renzow,' fragments for a work-in-progress, circa 1970s **Container 34.6**
- The Starlight on Idaho (published in Playboy, February 2007), typed drafts and notes, 2003 **Container 34.7**
- Silence [variously titled Leg], typed drafts, undated **Container 34.8**
- 'Stories,' circa 1970s-1980s
- Cartoon, typed draft, undated **Container 34.9**
- The Heart, typed draft, undated [another story mimeographed on the back of the sheets]
- A Hundred and Fifty Years on these Trains, typed draft, undated
- Long Distance, typed draft, undated [another story mimeographed on the back of the sheets]
- Supertime, typed draft, undated
- Trapeze People, typed draft, undated
- Transform Me, notes, 1999-2003 **Container 34.10**
- Why I Write, handwritten and typed draft and notes, 1997 **Container 34.11**
- Xmas in Las Vegas (published in Tin House, Spring 2003), notes, draft fragments, 2001-2005 **Container 34.12-14**
- Magazine essays
- 'Bonnors drafts,' Why I Live in the Backwoods (published in Travel and Leisure, April 2003), typed drafts and notes, 2002 **Container 35.1**
- 'Esquire,' Down Hard Six Times, drafts, correspondence, proofs; Naked Man, draft; Solitude and Silence, draft; clippings, 1993, undated **Container 35.2**
- 'Kurdistan' (Boomtown, Iraq published in Condé Nast Portfolio, March 2008)
- 'Notes' and 'Outline,' 2007 **Container 35.3**
- Notebook, drafts, research, notes, maps, travel ephemera, passport photographs, printed material, 2008 **Container 35.4-6**

'New Yorker,' The Harley Millennium, page proofs, 1995-1996	Container 35.7
'Outside,' Borderland: The Rio Grande through Texas, drafts, correspondence, 1993	Container 35.8
'Salon,' Change Your Life FOREVER: God's Warriors in the 3rd Millennium, online internet essay with reader's comments, 1995-1996	Container 35.9
'Saudi Arabia,' notepads (4), notes, drafts, travel ephemera, and maps used to write Dispatch from World War Three [Esquire, March 1991] and Knockin' on Heaven's Door [Esquire, April 1991]), 1991	Container 35.10-12
'Spin,' press credential letter, stationery, incomplete draft proof (contains drawings on verso of each sheet), undated	Container 36.1, 48
'Stories-notes,' various notes and fragments, some for stories that appear in Jesus' Son, undated	Container 36.2, 48
'Miscellaneous writing and publications,' drafts and fragments, 1997, undated	Container 36.3

Subseries C: Poetry, circa 1980s-2008, undated

Poems, drafts and fragments, circa 1980s-1990s, undated	Container 36.4-5, 48
'Notes and drafts,' handwritten and typed notes, fragments, drafts, 1997-2008, undated	Container 36.6
'Throne,' The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly (poem), edited drafts, undated	Container 36.7, 48
Notebooks, contain poem drafts, fragments, journal entries, log of poem submissions, circa 1981, undated	Container 36.8-10
Notepad, contains handwritten notes, poem and story fragments, drawings, undated	Container 48
'Slide Show,' poems and fragments; 'Poetry Miscellaneous,' Red Darkness: The Paintings of Sam Messer, A Verse Interview, drafts and posters, circa 1982, undated	Container 36.11, 48
Countermeasures (literary magazine, contains two reprinted poems by Johnson: Now and Passengers), circa 1995	Container 37.1

Subseries D: Film and Theater Projects, circa 1980s-2009

- Angels (screenplay by Johnson based on his novel of the same name), screenplay draft (2 copies), circa 1980s **Container**
37.2-3
- Des Moines (play), publicity flyers for staged readings, 2007 **Container**
37.4
- Hellhound on My Trail (play), publicity material, programs, tickets, reviews, 2000-2002 **Container**
37.5, 49
- Hit Me (screenplay by Johnson based on Jim Thompson's novel, A Swell-Looking Babe), press packet, promotional material, 1996-1998 (*VHS tape transferred to Film Collection) **Container**
37.6*
- The Prom (screenplay by Johnson and Steven Shainberg), publicity material, 1991-1992 (*VHS tape transferred to Film Collection) **Container**
37.7*
- Psychos Never Dream (play), correspondence, reviews, program, 2004-2009 **Container**
37.8, 47
- Shoppers Carried By Escalators into the Flames (play), publicity material, programs, tickets, book jacket for published play, reviews, 2001-2002 **Container**
37.9, 49
- Soul of a Whore (play), script draft, publicity material, reviews, 2003-2006 **Container**
37.10, 49

Series II. Personal and Professional Files, 1939-2009, undated

Awards and fellowships

American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1984-1993, 2009	Container 37.11
Lannan Literary Fellowship, press packet, correspondence, clippings, 1993-1994	Container 38.1
Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Study and Conference Center (Italy), correspondence, printed material, photographs, travel ephemera, 2004-2005 (*CD-R with unknown contents transferred to Electronic Records Collection)	Container 38.2*
Assorted, 1992-2007	Container 38.3

Book jackets

Angels, Fiskadoro, The Stars at Noon, The Veil, 1983-2000s	Container 38.4
Assorted covers of Angels and Shoppers (matted), undated	Container 48

Bound volumes, list of books transferred to Library **Container** 38.5

Correspondence

1990-1998	Container 38.6
2001-2005	Container 38.7
2006-2007	Container 38.8
2008-2009, undated, also photograph	Container 38.9
'Prison Correspondence,' also includes stories and poems, 1981-1991	Container 39.1

Ephemera, theater programs, tickets, bumper sticker, menu, map, receipt,
2002-2005, undated **Container**
39.2

Film option and contracts

'Africa,' synopsis, contract, correspondence, and notes for The Civil War in Hell, 1991-1993	Container 39.3
'Skinheads,' correspondence and contracts, 1991-1992	Container 39.4

'A Swell Looking Babe,' contract, 1990

Identification cards (4) and passports (2), circa 1980s-2000s	Container 39.5
Messer, Sam (artist), exhibition catalogue (Johnson wrote introductory essay), press kit (contains photographs and slides of Messer's art), 1991	Container 39.6
'National Millennium Survey,' correspondence and clippings, 1998-1999	Container 39.7
Notepads (2), contain personal notes and lists, undated	Container 39.8
Photographs, circa 1953-2000s	Container 39.9, 48
Album. Contains photographs of Johnson as a baby and throughout his childhood, as well as brother Randy, parents Al and Vera, and other family; clipping, 1939-1968, 1980-1994	Container 51
Printed material	
The American Poetry Review, January/February 2005	Container 39.10
Amica, 28 May 1987	
Best Life, In the Presence of Wood, September 2007	Container 39.11
Big Sky Journal	
The Lowest Bar in Montana, Summer 1997	Container 39.11
Spring 1997	
Big Wednesday, The Other Man, Vol 2, Issue 1, May/June 1990	Container 40.1
Black Book, The Invisible Terrorist, Spring 1999 [published as Run, Rudolph, Run in Seek]	
Book, July/August 2002	
Cold-Drill, issue 35, 2005	Container 40.2
Condé Nast Portfolio, Boomtown, Iraq, March 2008	
Epoch, My Commodore, Vol 57, No 1, 2008 series	Container 40.3

Esquire

Dispatch from World War III, March 1991 **Container 40.3**

Knockin' on Heaven's Door, April 1991

278 Books You Should Know by Now, September 1994 [lists Jesus' Son and Fiskadoro] **Container 40.4**

The Militia in Me, July 1995

King David's Blues, June 1996

The Last Days of Najibullah, April 1997 **Container 40.5**

My Car Story, October 1998

Esquire Sportsman, Lost in Alaska, Fall-Winter 1993

Harper's

The Small Boys' Unit, October 2000 **Container 40.6**

October 2007

December 2007

Ironwood

The Veil, All-Night Diners, Vol 10, No 1, Spring 1982 **Container 41.1**

The Other Age, Vol 13, No 1, Spring 1985 **Container 41.2**

Les Inrockuptibles, 10-16 October 2000

McSweeney's

Soul of a Whore: Act 2, Issue 11, 2003 **Container 41, unfolded**

Lucky [excerpt from Tree of Smoke], Issue 16, 2005

Mirabella, February 1991 **Container 41.3**

New York, 17 June 2002

The New Yorker

Dirty Wedding, 5 November 1990	Container 41.4
Emergency, 16 September 1991	
Tuesday, and After, 24 September 2001	
Homeless and High, 22 and 29 April 2002	Container 41.5
12 November 2007	
24 and 31 December 2007	
Newsweek, 8 April 1991	
Open City, An Anarchist's Guide to Somalia, No 4, 1996	Container 42, unfoldered
The Paris Review	
Car-Crash While Hiking, Spring 1989	Container 42, unfoldered
Beverly Home, Fall 1992	
Hippies, Summer 2000	
People, 25 March 1991	Container 42.1
Playboy, The Starlight on Idaho, February 2007	
Portlander, Dundun, Vol 2, 1993-1994	
Provincetown Arts, 1993	Container 42.2
Raccoon	
The Confession of St. Jim-Ralph, No 11, March 1982	Container 42.2
Killed in the War I Didn't Go to, No 24/25, May 1987	Container 42, unfoldered
Rolling Stone, Five Executions and a Barbecue, 17 August 2000	Container 42.3
Seneca Review, Why Write?, Spring 1998	
Shout, June 2000	Container 43.1

Swink, Issue 2, early 2005

TOPO, excerpt from Angels, Vol 1, No 2, 1981 **Container** 43.2

Trafika, Iowa City, Grocery on Venice Beach, Orchard, On the Morning of a Wedding, Winter 1994 **Container** 43.3

Travel and Leisure, Why I Live in the Backwoods, April 2003 **Container** 43.2

'Publicity and reviews'

1979-2008 **Container** 43.4, 48-49

'German' and French, 2001-2004 **Container** 43.5-7

Publisher and rare book catalogs, 1991-2009 **Container** 44.1-3, 48

Readings and workshops

'Future,' correspondence, contracts, publicity material, 1993-1998 **Container** 44.4-6

'Past,' correspondence, contracts, publicity material, 1991-1993 (*audio CD removed to Sound Recordings Collection) **Container** 44.7, 45.1, 48-49*

'Amsterdam' Crossing Border Festival, correspondence, printed material, travel ephemera, 2004 **Container** 45.2

General, correspondence, contracts, story drafts, publicity material, programs, photographs, 1985-2008 (*two audio CDs removed to Sound Recordings Collection) **Container** 45.3*

Scrapbooks

'DHJ Memories, Correspondence 1949-19- ,' birth certificate, school papers, Johnson's letters to his parents, 1949-1993 **Container** 45.4-6

'DHJ Readings, Awards, Journal Articles, Magazine, Creative Pub,' clippings, printed material, 1968-1997 **Container** 45.7

'DHJ Reviews 1970-9/25/86,' clippings, printed material, 1969-1986 **Container** 45.8

'DHJ Reviews 11/15/90-10/15/93,' clippings, printed material, 1990-1997 **Container** 46.1

'Denis Aug 39-June 56[?],' photo album, contains family photographs, report cards, graduation material, test scores, letter, 1939-1992 **Container**
46.2-3

Subject files

'FOIA' [Freedom of Information Act], correspondence, government publications, CovertAction magazine (Winter 1991/1992; Spring 1992), 1991-1992 **Container**
46.4

'Mars Trip,' NASA application, 1991 **Container** 46.5

'UFOs,' newsletter, 1991

Travel

'Afghanistan 96,' travel expense receipts and arrangements, 1996-1997 **Container**
46.6

'Croatia,' printed material, travel ephemera, photocopy of published story by Zoran Ferić, 2004-2005 **Container**
46.7

'Erbil, Iraq,' travel expense receipts, 2007 **Container** 46.8

Europe, correspondence, itineraries, travel ephemera, German reviews, 2002-2003 **Container**
46.9

Container 47-50 Oversize boxes

Index of Correspondents

- Adams, Laura--6.10
- Akin, Marla (James A. Michener Center for Writers)--38.6, 44.5
- Ali, Ahmad--17.1
- Almereyda, Michael--38.7
- American Academy in Berlin (Pilaski, Katharina)--38.9
- American Academy of Arts and Letters--37.11
- Anisfield, Nancy--38.6
- Augenbraum, Harold (National Book Foundation [U.S.]--38.8
- Barrett, Michael (Passages North)--44.7
- Behre, Louis (Crossing Border Festival)--44.4, 45.2
- Belford, Mary Blye--45.6
- Bellagio Study and Conference Center (Rockefeller Foundation)--38.2
- Beyond Baroque Foundation--44.7
- Bill, Tony, 1940- (Barnstorm Films)--38.6
- Blythe, Will (Esquire)--38.6, 39.3
- Bollinger, Lee C., 1946- (Columbia University)--38.9
- Bosselaar, Laure-Anne, 1943- --38.6
- Bourgois, Dominique--38.7
- Britton, Sherrill (PEN Center USA West)--38.3
- Browar, Lisa (New York Public Library)--38.6
- Burlingame, Phyllida (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)--8.1-2
- Byrne, David, 1952- --38.7
- Cade, Lisl (Rea Award for the Short Story)--38.3
- Campbell, Mary B. (Brandeis University)--44.6
- Canin, Ethan--38.9
- Central European University Prague (Summer Writers' Workshop)--44.5
- Charles Engelhard Foundation--38.3
- Chase, Lisa (Outside)--35.8
- Cornfield, Robert--6.10, 8.1, 24.5
- Costanzo, Gerald (Carnegie-Mellon University Press)--6.10
- Cox, Jeffrey (No Joke Productions)--8.5
- Crown Publishers (Whitney, Rebecca)--38.6
- Crozier, Lorna, 1948- --44.4
- D'Agata, John (Seneca Review)--38.6
- Dajani, Virginia (American Academy of Arts and Letters)--37.11, 38.9
- Davis, Christie Mazuera (Lannan Foundation)--45.3
- Davis, Christopher (University of North Carolina at Charlotte)--44.6
- Day, Douglas (University of Virginia)--44.4
- Debets, Cees (Crossing Border Festival)--45.2
- DeFrain, Darren--44.5
- Delillo, Don--38.7
- Deming, Alison Hawthorne, 1946- (University of Arizona)--45.1
- Dickman, Michael, 1975- --38.7-8
- Dillard, Annie--38.7
- Elie, Paul (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)--8.1, 38.6
- Emanuel, Rahm, 1959- --38.8
- Enyeart, James (College of Santa Fe)--39.7
- Evangel Bible Translators (Phillips, Laura)--38.6
- Evans, Sid (Sports Afield)--38.6

- Faber and Faber--8.1
- Farrar, Josh (Double Take)--38.6
- Faulkner, Bobo (Will Glickman Theatre Fund)--38.7
- Fenza, David (Association of Writers & Writing Programs)--38.8
- Fish, Karen (Loyola College in Maryland)--44.6
- Fisketjon, Gary L. (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.)--38.7-8
- Flynn, Michael--39.3
- Forbes, Calvin (School of the Art Institute of Chicago)--44.6
- Freund, Gerald (Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation)--38.3
- Gadbow, Kate (University of Montana)--44.5
- Galassi, Jonathan (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)--8.1
- Garrison, Deborah (The New Yorker)--7.2
- Gavin, David--38.6
- George, Ben, 1977- --38.9
- Gernert, David (Doubleday and Company, inc.)--38.9
- Glazner, Greg (National Millennium Survey; College of Santa Fe)--39.7, 45.3
- Grimes, Tom, 1954- --38.6
- Gurganus, Allan, 1947- (American Academy of Arts and Letters)--37.11
- Hadd, Charles--39.1
- Hannah, Barry--8.1
- Hardy, Edward, 1957- (Epoch)--8.1
- Harmsen, Tom, 1948- (Ambo Anthos)--45.2
- Harrington, Mary Kay (California Polytechnic State University)--44.5
- Hemley, Robin, 1958- (University of North Carolina at Charlotte)--44.6
- Hempel, Amy--38.6
- Hill, Adam (California Polytechnic State University)--44.5
- Hillis, Rick (Reed College)--44.6, 45.3
- Holbert, Christine (Eastern Washington University Press)--44.5
- Horowitz, Eli (McSweeney's)--38.7
- Horowitz, Glenn--38.9
- Houghton Mifflin Company--8.1
- Hunter, Holly, 1958- --38.6
- Huss, Sandy (University of Alabama)--38.6
- International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award--38.9
- Johnson, Cindy Lee--45.6
- Johnson, Randy--46.3
- Jones, Robert (HarperCollins [Firm])--1.6, 6.6, 8.1, 10.5, 10.8, 19.4, 38.1, 38.6
- Kamiya, Gary (Salon)--15.5
- Katrovas, Richard (University of New Orleans; Prague Summer Writers' Workshop)--44.5
- Kemp, Carol--45.4
- Kim, Jeanie J. (Lannan Foundation)--38.1
- Knepper, Matt--38.7-9
- Koch, Stephen (Columbia University)--44.6
- Kohl, Martina (United States Embassy in Berlin)--46.9
- Krusoe, James (Santa Monica Review)--44.7
- LeClerc, Paul (New York Public Library)--38.6
- Lee, Alma (Vancouver International Writers Festival)--44.4
- Lee, Michael (Trafika)--35.8, 38.6
- Liebeherr, Dora--45.4
- Linville, James Scott (The Paris Review)--8.1
- Lister, Nancy Jo--45.4-5

- Lister, Norma Jean--45.4-5
- Loyd, Amy (Playboy)--11.2, 38.8-9
- Luxford, Dominic (McSweeney's)--38.8
- Lyman, Coletta Burkhardt--38.9
- Marello, Laura (Lynchburg College)--38.7
- Mason, Alane Salierno, 1964- (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)--38.6
- McDonnell, Emily C.--38.7
- McFarland, Ron (University of Idaho)--44.6
- McGuire, Jerry (University of Southwestern Louisiana)--44.6
- Menaker, Daniel (HarperCollins [Firm]; Random House)--38.7
- Merker, K. K., 1932- ("Kim") (Iowa Center for the Book)--38.6
- Miller, Adrienne (Esquire)--38.6
- Mitchell, Ben (Whitman College)--44.6
- Montgomery, Lee (Tin House)--38.7
- Mooney, Robert (State University of New York at Binghamton)--44.6
- Morris, James M. (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars)--44.6
- Morrone, John (American Center of P. E. N.)--38.7
- Moses, Kate (Intersection for the Arts)--45.1
- Mullins, Brighde (Dia Center for the Arts [New York, N.Y.])--44.5
- Najafi, Sina (Cabinet)--38.7
- Neon Lit (Godzinski, Diane)--38.6
- Nordgren, Joe (Lamar University)--38.6
- O'Keefe, Michael, 1955- --38.9
- Odefey, Chad (Lingo)--38.6
- Osherow, Jackie (University of Utah)--44.5
- Paschen, Elise (Poetry Society of America)--45.1
- Paterniti, Michael (Outside)--35.8
- Patton, Will--38.8
- Paul & Peter Fritz AG--46.9
- Perks, Micah (University of California Santa Cruz)--45.3
- Pleshette & Green (Datt, Deepti)--39.4
- Plimpton, George--38.7
- Rhodes, Jewell Parker (Arizona State University)--44.6
- Richie, David--8.1
- San José, Sean (Intersection for the Arts, Campo Santo)--37.8, 44.6
- Sarabande Books (Gorham, Sarah, 1954- and Skinner, Jeffrey)--38.6
- Saunders, George, 1958-- --38.6
- Schaacks, Augustus--39.3
- Schaechter, Judith, 1961- --15.8
- Scibona, Salvatore (Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown)--38.7
- Shainberg, Steven, 1963- --38.7-8
- Shepard, Jim (Williams College)--38.6, 45.3
- Shipman, Leslie (Hudson Valley Writers' Center)--44.4
- Skoyles, John--38.8
- Smith, Robert--39.1
- Stein, Lorin (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)--13.3, 38.8
- Stovall, Gilbert (Montana Versatile Productions)--39.3
- Straus, Roger (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)--38.6
- Struthers, Ann (Coe College)--44.6
- Syracuse University--44.5
- Tabert, Nils (Rowohlt Theater Verlag)--46.9

- Thomas, Harry--18.2
- Toyne, Becky (Harvill Press)--38.7
- Treisman, Deborah (The New Yorker)--34.1
- Upshaw, Lea (University of Montana)--45.3
- Van, Eric M. (Readercon)--44.7
- Vaughn, Stephanie (Cornell University)--44.6, 45.3
- Venverloh, Faith (University of Houston)--44.5
- Vos, Sarah C. (Harper's)--16.7
- Wardak, Ahmad Ali--38.7
- Williford, Lex, 1954- (University of Alabama)--38.6
- Wilsey, Sean (The New Yorker; McSweeney's)--38.6
- Wright, Franz, 1953- --38.6
- Wright, John H. (Central Intelligence Agency)--46.4
- Wronoski, John (Lame Duck Books)--38.7
- Zesiger, Sue (Esquire)--35.2
- Zubick, Kelleen (on behalf of Kurt Brown)--38.6
- _____ Keith and Susan--38.8
- _____ Michael--38.9
- _____ Peg--45.4
- _____ Sam (Picador)--38.8
- _____ Sandra--44.6
- _____ Susan--45.6
- Unidentified (Spin)--17.7
- Unidentified--38.8
- Unsigned--14.9

Index of Works Not Already Listed in Container List

- After Mayakovsky--36.11
- All-Night Diners--36.4
- An African War--16.2
- At Which this is an Attempt--36.4
- August--36.11
- Blessing--19.1, 36.4-5
- The Bluebird Motel--36.4
- California--19.1, 36.4
- A Car-Crash While Hitchhiking (poem)--36.4
- A Carmelite Monk Waits for Morning--36.4, 36.11
- The Catharsis is an Ugly Beast--19.1
- The Civil War in Hell--16.6
- Crow--19.1, 36.5
- Dead Youths--36.4
- [Dear Natasha]--36.4
- Dirty Wedding--7.6
- [Dreaming of a woman]--36.4
- Drink--19.1, 36.4
- Drink the Poison--23.1, 26.5
- Dundun--7.5
- Emergency--7.4-5
- Feet--19.1, 36.4-5
- The Flower--36.4
- Fragments--19.1
- The Get-Together [The Jailer Speaks]--36.4
- Grocery on Venice Beach--19.1, 36.4-5
- The Hands--19.1
- [I did go walking]--36.4
- [I don't wish to be a pimp]--36.4
- I Will Always Love You--36.11
- Improvisations Around Silence--36.4
- In Dark--22.6
- [In dark bars]--36.4
- In Lucinda's Studio / I Watch Lucinda Work / I Watch Lucinda Work--36.4-5
- [The intricate rain]--36.4
- Iowa City--19.1, 36.4-5
- Killed in the War I Didn't Go To--22.7, 36.11
- Kissing You Lucinda--36.5
- The Light--36.11
- Little Bear--36.4-5
- Little Store on a White Beach--36.4-5
- Love Poem--36.4
- [Lucifer]--36.4, 36.6
- The Man--36.4
- Man Walking to Work--36.4
- Mindanao--20.10
- Much Later--19.1
- My Commodore--45.3
- The Night Before the Hallowed Evening--36.4

- A Night of Moonlight Like Water--19.1
- 1972 A.D.--1.7
- Notes and Improvisations (Notes from Two Separations and Improvisations Around Silence)--36.4
- Notes from Two Separations--36.4-5
- Ocean and Wilshire--19.1, 36.4-5
- October--36.4, 36.11
- On *Fat City*--36.3
- On the Morning of a Wedding--19.1, 36.4-5
- On the Morning of the Ceremony--19.1
- One Thursday Morning--19.1, 36.3, 36.5
- Or How About If I Put It This Way--19.1
- Orchard--19.1, 36.4-5
- The Other Man--7.6, 36.2
- Our Feature by the Waters--36.4
- Our Sadness--19.1, 36.4
- Out on Bail--7.5-6
- The Parting--36.4
- [A Petal dripping off a flower]--36.4
- Place of Skulls--36.4
- Poem [Cigaret smoke in television light]--36.5
- Poem [Who owns the rain]--36.4, 36.6
- Poem [With its grill, its lights,]--36.11
- Poem [With reasons peopling their music]--36.4-5
- Port-Town Melody--36.4
- Red Darkness--36.11
- Regarding L-- --36.4-5
- A Saint--19.1, 36.4
- [Sam Messer]--36.3
- [Sex in the Movies]--36.3
- Sheraton Hotel--36.4
- Sheraton Hotel Room--36.4
- The Small Boys' Unit--16.7
- Snow--19.1, 36.4
- Some Italian Churches--36.5
- Song--36.4, 36.6
- The Starlight on the Idaho--45.3
- Steady Hands at Seattle General--7.4, 7.6, 36.2
- Street Scene--36.4
- Summer's End--36.4
- Them Dreams--22.7
- These Winter Nights --36.4
- The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly (poem)--1.7
- Tomorrow in Venice, California--36.4
- Two Men--7.4-5
- Ulysses--19.1, 36.4-5
- U. S. Casualty in a Bloodless War--6.8, 20.6
- Vacancies at Pink Motels--36.4
- The Visit--36.4
- Visits--19.1, 36.4
- Where the Failed Gods are Drinking--19.1, 36.4-5

- While Our Marriage Slides Like Surf into the Sand--36.5
- Why I Write--18.1, 36.3
- Window--19.1, 36.4
- Winter Nights--36.4
- [The Wonderbread truck is flying]--36.4
- The Words of a Toast--22.7
- Work--7.4, 7.6
- XXXXXXXXXX--36.4
- The Years--22.3-4, 45.3
- Your Eyes--36.4
- Your Strawberry Hands--36.4
- Untitled film treatment (based on The Civil War in Hell)--16.1
- Untitled/Unidentified--1.7, 22.7, 36.4-5