“Dear Ada Wright” is a quasi-Italian sonnet. History is the specter for the poem letter whose many themes include the laden travails of young black men and women. It is as much a letter to Ada Wright (mother to Leroy and Andrew Wright—two of the Scottsboro Nine defendants) as it is to my nephew who recently joined the US Navy and is now stationed in Japan. The traditional habit of letters is to intimate a feeling that connects correspondents. In the case of Ada Wright, the interwar years marked by extraordinary poverty and the steady hunger for black bodies, dead or alive, provides the impetus for thinking about patriotism, anti-black racism, and duality.

Put differently, the poem letters are sound experiments that offer relief from the staid walk which poems sometimes demonstrate. In “Dear Marsha P. Johnson,” the letter opens with a chance operation built of lines and fragments harvested from archival research. Johnson was a self-identified black drag queen born in 1945 to working class parents in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The antagonisms of those early years, the often gender-based violence, shaped her life in New York City. A celebrated street walker, performance artist, and liberation activist, Johnson’s body was found dead, floating in the Hudson River on July 6, 1992.