

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 40
Issue 2 *Fall*

Article 15

2010

Rabble Letters

Saint James Harris Wood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wood, Saint James Harris. "Rabble Letters." *The Iowa Review* 40.2 (2010): 76-85. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6901>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

SAINT JAMES HARRIS WOOD

RABBLE LETTERS

EDITOR'S NOTE

We received the first letter that follows as a cover letter with a poetry submission. When we asked to publish the cover letter as a short essay in itself, Mr. Wood entered into a correspondence with our associate poetry editor, Emily Liebowitz, and sent us several more meticulously typed and illustrated letters detailing his adventures as an inmate in the California Men's Colony (CMC), a state prison near San Luis Obispo. He is assembling a collection of what he calls his "rabble letters" into a memoir possibly to be titled Chronicle of a Mad Prison Poet.

nov. 2009



The TORY'S Day of JUDGMENT.

in the real world. The two good cellies were properly grave about our circumstances. But most of these guys are not feeling punished. They enjoy playing tennis and pinocchle all day, their leisure only interrupted by ~~the~~ surprisingly good breakfasts, lunch and dinner (best prison food in the state) and have no reason to avoid prison. Half the guys on the yard have sex every morning and evening with their live-in boyfriends for God's sake! I have nothing against queers (my militantly gay neighbor and his cadre insist on the name Queer. Insist! It's tastes like nigger in my mouth; neither word is something straight Caucasians should experiemnt with), but this place has become an over-the-top bacchanalian sports and game joint/love nest for aging drug addicts and wild middle-aged gay men. I can't convince these people that they should be suffering. We have barbed wire, cells, and guards in towers with guns with bullets with our names on them. That's why I deliberately use my long full name. Anyway, the point is, my current cellie, with the nationally ranked millet, Johnny O'Neil has a vast host and plague of humorous tics and peccadillos which I shall now mock in the usual manner. He quit school, his ADS couldn't bear the class that desperately tried to prepare him for another class that ended with a GED. In six months he cut class 72 times, and when in class spent every second stealing pencils, erasers, pieces of paper, never learned a thing. He almost gets in fights every day with the people in his card game, has a giant marijuana leaf tattooed on his back, curses the police (causing our cell to get searched), and in the cell reads the Bible for hours. Strangest: Johnny O'Neil dotes on his pot belly which is the size of a twenty dollar pumpkin. I asked about it and he claims that where he comes from women are driven sexually wild by pot bellys. My imagination is thwarted, but he says he lives in the wilds of Tulare; I picture a trailer park in the desert populated by drunk women on methamphetamine. So he oils his pot belly, stares at the results in the mirror, buffs it, studies it thoughtfully and displays the belly as if it were an Oscar or an expensive poodle. My foible may be that I keep talking to people here, even in my own cell, when I know it's going to end badly. Not violently badly for me. No one gets hurt here because this yard is gay. When the judge sentenced me I imagined many weird complicated scenarios—nothing like this. How in God's name did I get here?

Theoillologically Yours,

SAINT JAMES

Dear Ms. Leibowitz & Mr. Valentino,

All is lost. The state occasionally has irrational spasms where it changes our program in ways that make little sense to those trapped in its sad, futile plan. Last Saturday, 24 single cells were suddenly snatched up and turned into holding cells for recalcitrants; meaning, that I will not be getting my own, sweetly private cell any time soon. So, the first thing I did was tell my current cellie, Mr. Johnny O'Neil, of the profound pot belly and nationally ranked mullet, that he had to find another cell for he is driving me out of my mind. Night after night he cries out in his sleep as if murderous detectives are about to steal his dope and kick him to death. He complained and swore that he'd quit throwing fits about my insomnia, late night reading habits, and incessant typing; but I can stand it no more. He has moved out and was replaced by an interesting fellow, Ryker, an international surfer, drug dealer, and maker of trouble. He seemed like a good guy. The first night in the cell he started telling stories and talked non-stop from 8 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. when I pretended to be asleep. During that filibustering soliloquy he told me his entire life's story, explained how modern cocaine was invented, tried to verbally teach me how to surf while showing me a map of every reef on the North Shore of Oahu, gave me thumbnail sketches of dozens of his many friends in various prisons throughout the state, showed me pictures of everyone he ever liked, and more, much more, it was an astonishing performance that I was sure depleted his store of tales, sort of an introduction to me, the new cellie, but the next day he did another two hours, seemed driven to explain his life, and polite man that I am, I listened. Ryker is new to CMC and had to go to a committee (cops, doctors, counselors) who decided that he had to live in another cell because of his custody level, and they moved him quickly out. This morning Junior moved in with me. He's been in prison for 33 years, since he was 17. Seems quiet and clean. We'll see. // / /// Other than that I am slaving away on the memoir. I think I'm going to call it *The Chronicles of Saint James*. Reliving the last 20 years by writing it has been harrowing and often sad. I had enough fun, music, and sex to last several lifetimes; but made more mistakes than any five normal men might be able to live through. I wonder what's wrong with me. ////

Over, Under, Sideways, Down,
Saint Jim

My Dearest Emily,

Okay, how about \$25? These letters come from my diaries which are eventually going to be in a book. I can't give them away. Please understand me. My mother, Rita, my brother, John, my sister, Terri, and I were visiting last weekend while my father sat out in the parking lot—they wouldn't let him in the prison because he has a metal plate in his leg. "I'm Commander Wood of the United States Navy!!" my dad loudly informed the correctional officers who steadfastly brandished and stuck to the regulations. I think it's 250 miles to San Diego, a hard distance for my 81-year-old father. John said the Commander threatened the state's representatives with legal nastiness, letters to the governor, and unnamed repercussions if he wasn't allowed to visit his lost son. My dad does have a history of visits gone askew. Last year he brought his dog Sammy with him and argued that dogs had certain rights which should include visiting privileges. John says that he finally ordered the lieutenant to bring him a knife so that he could cut out the metal plate. Luckily they refused him. Otherwise I had a lovely visit with 3 of the most important people in my life. It felt good to laugh. Between us we have a dozen kids and a half-dozen grandkids. It's hard to believe. / /// Drastic, rabid change in my prison life. That I no longer have a cellie, and a single cell to myself is...it's literally impossible for me to explain what it's like after 8 years with only fleeting moments of privacy, to be left alone from 8 in the evening to 7 in the morning; well, it's 1 a.m. right now and I'm typing. I had to knock it off at 9 in the evening at the latest. Now, some nights I type until 3 in the morning. And I yodel and practice my modern dance and make faces in the mirror. In the last year there were a dozen times I almost got in little fights, which would have meant a write-up and back to the end of the single cell line, and I simply repeated the phrase, "single cell, single cell" over and over, a calming mantra. It paid off. / / /// However, the same week I got my cell, I was also advised by The Committee that if I know what's good for me (a silly notion) I should get a job. I'm good at that in prison or out, and in short order get the kitchen clerk job, which at first glance sounds harmless; but up close, I discover this job to be as close to a real nightmare (something with fantastic, unreal elements) as our supposed awake state can produce, and I'm in it. The clerk is trapped in a tiny airless room deep beneath the kitchen where inmates are forced to prepare and cook 20,000 meals a day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner for 6,700 inmates) and my job is to

do all of the paperwork for all of the food and the people involved including schedules, bills, orders, menus, samplers, payrolls, reports, retorts, invoices, tallies, reckonings, vouchers, charts; and literally thousands of copies have to be made of all of these documents and tabulations and then distributed by me. There's more, but I didn't learn it because I basically got fired, something that has never happened to me in prison. My boss didn't care for my attitude (it's normally whimsical, but...), and I discovered you can actually catch a bad attitude just like a cold. I admit that even my whimsical attitude sometimes annoys certain types of serious people. So...my boss told me that I had a week to find a new job, but within 4 hours I was transferred into the kitchen upstairs at the position of SCULLERY—again, a nightmarish development. Full circle if you know my history in the crucible. I've been here in the scullery for 10 days and it's actually easier to take than the insane document factory downstairs. There are murmurs on the mainline that I can get a job in education as a clerk and helper to the developmentally disabled teacher, something brand new to me. That's good. "He not busy being born is busy dying." We'll see. // /// This letter could go on for ten pages with all of the latest developments, but here's some bits and pieces of the high and low lights: I've cut my hair to Marine shortness and am growing my skinny little goatee out long enough to be braided in order to look like a punk rock gypsy pirate. A project helped along when I went to the dentist and he gave me a steel cap. Saw it in the mirror and thought, "Prison Steel Tooth," a song title to my ear. I'll send you a copy. / /// Setback in the ongoing weight war with myself. As a kitchen worker I am treated to extraordinary things: pizza, quish (keesh?), hot pockets made from scratch, and baked goods, insidious delicious things. I ordinarily don't care about food, though I have a weakness for sweets. A lot of the men in here, especially lifers (doing "all day" as they say) have a strange sensuous, passionate relationship with food since it is one of the very few pleasures left us. I've formed my unnatural attachment to books. // // // Listening constantly to these 2 songs: "Pictures of You" by The Cure & "All Your Way" by Morphine. // /// One of the kitchen workers burnt his hand and then medical gave his hand a 7 day lay-in. Only the hand, the rest of him was expected to come to work. The prison staff are often humorous in this mean way. / /// I've encouraged my fellow kitchen workers to develop a handful of birdcalls (like a crow "caw caw...caw caw") to warn when one of the cops is walking our way. Pretty soon five or six guys are cooking, stirring, stewing, and doing whip-poor-wills, quails, and jaybirds as if trained by

Indians, making the kitchen sound like an aviary. I once tried to use the bird-call system as a way to cheat at dominoes—but it made people suspicious. /// While walking to work at 6 a.m. one morning I came upon a clutch of inmates staring at a seagull trapped in barbed wire only a yard above the lieutenant's office door. It's alive, feebly moving its wings and there's a small pool of blood on the asphalt below. The inmates stand in the darkness studying the bird as if watching a play or a stripper. I say, "That seagull is us." ½ joking, and several of them glare at me as if I were the warden or a crooked banker. / / // 2 things overheard on the yard: 1) "I got six teeth left and fives of them hurt." 2) inmate talking about nurse: "I can tell she wants me by the way she hands me my medication." / / // I've written 48 songs and will practice them until I get out of here. And then...I don't know. It's hard for me to indulge magical thinking anymore. // // My 70-year-old neighbor, Ernie, got a single cell the same day I did. He lives with 8 mice who run free in his cell. He's a grizzled cowboy 30 years into a life sentence, looks like an old cook on a cattle drive in 1830. Several of the mice live in his clothes and go to work with him in the dining room. It's mildly disturbing to be talking to him and have a mouse crawl out of his collar. People here have pet lizards, snakes, gophers, praying mantises, and tarantulas. / / // I am officially quitting the monk business and am upgrading myself to the rank of mystic. I've read enough religion (Book of Mormon, Old & New Testament straight thru during a lockdown, and pieces of many others), plus popular physics galore, tons of fiction (necessary for mystics I claim) and through my poetry will try to find and describe that which animates us all. "The Mystic Poet of San Luis Obispo" sounds absurd. I like it. // // Constant unrelenting blather about early releases, for eight years. No releases. //// / Soooooo let me know what you think about buying one of my lunatic letters. I would love to be in *The Iowa Review*. I really do need you more than you need me. But I also need postage.

81

Inelegantly Yours,
Saint James

P.S. All right...twenty dollars damn your hardball tactics.

Dear Emily & Russell,

How be thee? I hope that *The Iowa Review* is solvent and thriving. I'm sending you a piece of what I suppose we could call creative non-fiction, "The Death of Danny James," which is the story of my cellie who died of Lou Gehrig's disease. It's supposed to be simultaneously harrowing and humorous even though he was a slightly deranged racist convict who spent twenty years in prison and then died. I've been here too long myself. One would suppose that after nine years in prison there isn't much lower to go—yet I have accomplished it. Trouble, write-ups, stitches, single cell lost, and grim tidings in general. Although the single cell is history, I pledge anew to not complain or write about my cellies; that issue has been beaten into the boring ground; unless, of course, some character cries out to be taken note of or described. // // My troubles with the write-up are still being adjudicated, but you may study the document on the back of this missive; suffice to say, I fucked up. I gave into birthday hysteria, which ordinarily means nothing to me, and so will be punished. There have been signs and trouble all month. The governor has been blithering and attacking us. Black crows follow me. The institutional movie channel in the last few years has cut us down from eight movies a month, to four, and now to one. And the next two movies are *G.I. Joe: The Movie!* And *Transformers*. The twelve-year-olds among us are ecstatic. This movie crisis means that when I'm released, the two years I've already allocated (I figure six movies a day) to watch all the movies I've missed while in the crucible will have to be increased to three years maybe. Among so many others, I've missed the last four or five Coen brothers' movies, and God knows what current auteurs I've missed while embraced in the state's juvenile idea of culture. // // / Another trouble is that while I've been selling poems all over the place, and several stories have seen the light of day, nothing has sold for more than a hundred dollars, which is just about the break-even number when one takes in the postage, typewriter ribbons, and other crap. So, my lack of stamps and big sales has driven me to sell my time by writing and typing the irrational and unsound legal briefs and habeas corpus writs manufactured by the gross by the poor fellows trapped in here with me. This means I have to listen to case-talkers who will discuss their fall and incarceration for as long as anyone will listen, years even, if one is unfortunate. It is absolutely not necessary to talk these jobs out, I just need the documents, but it is evidently human nature to try and talk your way out of here and nearly to a man they insist on verbalizing

every single detail of their cases. One scholarly ex-crackhead, Cleofas, bends my ear for hours layering endless detail onto one single simple fact: that he was in jail the day his alleged murder took place. Cleofas found malfeasance, conspiracy, and prosecutorial misconduct throughout every step of his arrest, prosecution, trial, and conviction. His innocence during his diatribes and soliloquies is a constant. We sent his writ in about a month ago and the court replied with astonishing quickness, saying in essence, "Of course you were in jail the day the murder occurred—that's because you were arrested at the scene of the crime and were taken to jail on that date." So...then Cleofas concocted an entirely new universe where he was innocent because it wasn't murder but self-defense, an unfortunate and gloomy accident that occurred when someone was trying to steal his drugs. He can again talk about it for hours and hours and wants to hire me to help him with a new motion. I begin to loathe him. / / / Ordinarily, if I was depressed or plagued with troubles, I'd go buy some clothes, but here that is not possible, so instead I got a New Prison Scar. I'm barrelling down the hall when someone throws open the thick oak dayroom door and cracks me in the head, right over my left eyebrow, causing an immediate explosion and fountain of blood. The guy who opened the door, an older black dude, grabbed my arm, as I was stunned, and proceeded to repeatedly apologize, and then guided me to the cops' podium, which is barely five yards away. Officer Stephens, a big joker who had to have seen the accident, immediately asked if my boyfriend had beaten me up; but his japery fades as my blood forms a pool at his feet. I suggest that he write me a pass to medical because obviously I'm going to need stitches, but Officer Stephens is bored and decides to call a medical code, putting the whole yard down and summoning an ambulance, usually only for someone who can't walk or is unconscious. This means a thousand inmates have to sit down wherever they are. And then, because I am white and the fellow with the dangerous door is black, Stephens decides to call a Code One, which means a fight or potentially dangerous security problem on the yard, and this brings about ten cops up to the second floor. C.O. Stephens keeps telling new arrivals, "Wood *says* he ran into a door," making every cop and inmate within hearing believe that I'd been in a fight. Now I am a suspect who needs two cops to ride with me in the ambulance and escort me to the hospital. I have to say that a man with a wound spouting blood in this prison is attended to immediately at medical. They wheel a bed out into the reception area and I feel like I'm in a combat zone in a field hospital. They quickly sewed me up right there in front of the

receptionist's desk, with a crowd of C.O.s, interns, nurses, and gawkers shouting out suggestions as to thread gauge and needle size, and there were side discussions on how I really got the injury. The doctor obviously enjoyed the crowd and played to them, making arcane references and inside medical jokes. I felt like I was in a carnival or crappy TV show. Amazingly, though, I was stitched up and out of medical in less than an hour. If we ever meet you'll notice the scar. What with the new goatee and crew cut I am looking quite the reprobate. The goatee is getting pretty long and the locals have many comments such as: it looks like a weasel's tail; I resemble Col. Sanders; it doesn't look human; what am I trying to pull?; and it looks like rabbit fur./// // My new job (clerk for the free staff teacher who deals with the many needs of the developmentally disabled) has not turned out to be what I expected. Ms. Haun, my boss, was hired by the state to deal with laws that demand that the prison deal with those deemed mentally disabled. Our clients have dyslexia, schizophrenia, minds damaged by drugs and motorcycle crashes, lifelong mental retardation, pathological eccentricities, OCD, extreme quirkiness, and God knows what all. There's a whole world of mental dysfunction on D Yard, which has a thousand people who fit the criteria one way or another. Ms. Haun is about 4' 10", eighty pounds, and has a tendency to run in circles almost literally barking and is incurably perky. I thank the almighty literary gods that our office is in the library, a small precious piece of grace that allows me to roam the stacks looking for any sort of distraction (this week I found and read *Timescape* by Gregory Benford—1421 about Chinese sailors discovering America—*The Lovely Bones*—all three excellent according to my tastes). I thought my job would be a good change of pace since it was something I'd never done, but it turns out to be another strange business. Ms. Haun seems genuinely unhinged herself, prone to gentle hectoring. She not only has to deal with our huge caseload, but two days a week is left in control of the library staff (20 inmates) and she reacts to the stress by going into overdrive and oversupervising all of us. However, when it comes to helping out clients one-on-one, she is so steady, patient, and helpful that it makes me feel inadequate because I cannot focus on their needs, helping these poor men as well as she does. I am so consumed with my writing quest, and my empathy has been drained and depleted over worry of my children and family, that I just can't cater to these guys as well as I might. I do try take as much load off Ms. Haun as I can by dealing with the eccentrics who need letters written. This week I wrote a letter to Martha Stewart for a seemingly easygoing black man,

Seymour, who hopes Martha will finance one of his many inventions designed to clean the sky and the ocean. A white fellow, Mad Bob (as in crazy not angry, he always tells me), writes famous rich people and government officials asking them to hire him so that he can impress the parole board when he's supposed to get out in 2025. I have more than a dozen regulars who come up with one scheme or another every week that needs letters and tactical support. I also keep Ms. Haun's daily appointments in order and write letters for *her* to various legal entities asking for materials and help since we are profoundly understaffed and underfunded. And once a week she makes me bring in my guitar and put on a little concert for 20 or 30 of our clients; she calls it musical therapy. I sing some blues, Dylan, Waits, and whatever weirdness I feel like bellowing out at the moment. As strange as these fellows' lives and yard surely are, my loud, singular singing and songs (free at darklyabsurd.com) most definitely blows their clouded minds. / /// // / So, let me know what you think of the story and thank you for your support and nice letters. Seriously, drop me a note and if you have any old copies of *The Iowa Review*, well, maybe you could send me a couple.

Respectfully Confused,
Saint James

85

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

CDC 128-B (4-74)

NAME and NUMBER: WOOD, JAMES T-30027 Rm: CQB6F26254

On 01-18-2010, Inmate WOOD, JAMES, T-30027, was ordered to submit a urine specimen for drug screening, as a routine procedure, based on the following:

- 1) Probable cause, specifically: Bundle of green leafy substance discovered in doorway of cell 5147 and one green leafy substance cigarette discovered in cell 5147. U/A ordered by Officer K. McEwen.
- 2) After completion of Family Visiting, which is routine and required for the Family Visiting program
- 3) Program requirement (Job Assignment / Job Related)
- 4) CDC-115 disposition requiring mandatory random drug testing.

On 02-02-2010, results were received from San Diego Reference Laboratory indicating the test results were positive for THC (MARIJUANA).

SAINT JAMES HARRIS WOOD