

Clinton F. Larson

## A LETTER FROM ISRAEL WHITON, 1851

*A crest of wind runs and rustles through the pinons  
Below the butte, and it is evening; the moss-green shade  
Glimmers with lancets and gems of the afternoon sun;  
The fields beyond glow yellow-gold; and the overcast  
Of azure dims pale and like powder in the air  
Fails away into the recesses of light and time.  
I sit before a candle that tips its flame  
From the door, and I write . . .*

Dear Mother:

I received a letter from you the 8 of May.  
I was very glad to hear from you but I had to wet  
The letter with tears. You are a good Mother to me.  
Their was a letter came from Father too.

*I crease them at the edge of the desk, splinters  
Shifting the pages awry . . .*

I and Eliza have not forgot what you told us  
Before we started our journey, If we was faithful  
In the Gospel of the Priesthood, we should be instrumental  
In the hands of God, of turning the hearts of the Children  
To the Fathers. My health has been good every day  
Since I left home; I am tough and herty, enjoying  
Good health and this I am thankful for as usal.

*There in New Haven, the bank of pillows and the skin  
Like the river sand beyond the sheeting water  
That subtly rises and fails, drawing grains  
In the tumult of recession, and the eyes sudden  
To see me near, from sleep, and my going away  
Beyond the doors that she sees closing.*

Eliza kept all my clothes in good order,  
She was a good woman to take care of things.  
I do not know what I should have done to travel  
Without her; we had a team of our own, one yoke  
Of oxen and 2 yoke of cows.

*Over the plains from Laramie, west, the bow of mountains  
Far to the south, and I write as if there, receding  
Into the blue and golden undulations of distance,  
Away from home and farther still to the great Divide  
Of the land, and down the reaches of the far slope,  
The canyons appearing between the walls and towers  
Of rock and the high vales of the wind and the wisps  
Of cirri against the high flanges of stone . . .*

We took in Sister Snow and her little boy  
To carry through to the vally for 75 dollars,  
When we got about 300 miles she died  
With the Cholery. Her husband was to the gold  
Minds and was a coming to meet her to the vally  
In the fall, but I heard from him; he has been sick  
In the Sutters' gold minds and has not come yet.  
By having Sister Snows things in my wagon  
I had to by another yoke of oxen when I got  
To Fort Carny where I got my cattle, because  
She was foot sore and could not go, for 55 dollars.

*The oxen before me, I watch the rhythm of the wagons  
Tipping and heaving, and the finite dust  
Settles in our wake, paling the sage on either  
Side, and after. I am the measure of that journey,  
Never to return, and here where the soundless sky  
Drifts from the still clouds, and where it goes  
I see the quiet periods of stars and the sleek  
Heaven of that other certainty . . .*

It was very bad for Eliza to have sickness  
And death in her wagon on such a journey.  
We see thousands and thousands of bufalows  
Moving in great heards; we kill some and had  
All the meat we wanted and it was as good  
As dried beef. We kill some antaloope, in animal  
As big as sheep; they was as good as mutton.  
Manly Barrows kill a good many rabbits because  
He had a shot gun; I shot some sage hens  
With Manly's gun. We see some raddle snake;  
A young man got bite by one, but got well,  
Very early one morning there was one run under  
Our wagon and they kill it. We see Indians  
In droves without number; one rode up to my wagon  
And give my Eliza some blake Cherrys  
And she gave him two crackers. They all ride  
Horses and have long slim poles fastened  
To there horses to carry there game.

*From the plain I see the declivity to the stream  
Then as we brake the wagon with poles, to the water's edge,  
Then easily into the cold, the oxen threshing for footing  
On the stony bed; I steady the wagon, reaching  
From my horse to the buckboard, but over it goes  
Like a vane against the current and the rills  
Of cold, and Eliza sinks there before I catch her,  
Her skirts the mantles of darkness, laden with water.*

*And she gazes wildly at me when I right her  
And help her to the bank. She shivers as I right  
The wagon from my saddle, and in the evening  
I touch the question in her, of the exposure and cold  
Of September, and the wind. She shivers again, trying  
Against the cold . . .*

We got to the Vally about the middle of October.  
I work one yoke of my cattle, the old brindle some.  
A cold storm come and one died. We have  
Some brown sugar that we brought from St. Louis.  
Wheat is worth 3 dollars a bushel, beef 10 dollars  
A hundred and maybe potatoes 1 dollar a bushel.  
There is grist mills and saw mills in the Valley a plenty.  
The wheat on the ground bids fair for a good crop;  
They raise from 40 to 60 bushels to acre;  
After harvest they plow in the old stuble  
And next summer get a great crop of wheat  
Without sowing and this they can follow up  
Year after year.

*Eliza, you lie there, under the window, the last sunlight  
Over your hands, and I cannot see where you  
Must see, the pinons flickering like lashes  
Over your eyes, the fire of embers waiting in the ash  
White powdering over them . . . You lie there,  
Tucked in the quilt you made for us in New Haven,  
Still as the evening before the crest of wind . . .*

Mr. Hunter finds teem and seeds and tools and land  
And I have one half of the crop and give him  
The other half in the shock. I have 18 acres of wheat  
On the ground, Mother, it looks fine up to my knees.  
We have good meetings every Sunday. Eliza is . . .  
The Vally is 100 miles long and about 20 wide  
With the river running through the middle, called  
The River Jordan and Mountains all around  
The Vally higher than the clouds.

*But Eliza is still as I write, and I must only  
Listen. I, Israel Whiton of the Salt Lake Valley,  
Write this letter to you, Mother, from the canyons  
And the butte above my land; it is a leaf  
From the spring before we came, as both you and Eliza  
Know, unanswerable except in the signs that come,  
That I cannot seek. So I give it to the wind  
From the tips of pinons or the butte, and it lifts  
Away, and I try to see it as it diminishes  
Away, then vanishing though I know it is there,  
As you know better than I, Mother . . . And it will rise  
Beyond the golden seal and touch the white hand  
In the cirri pluming the Oquirrh crest west  
Over the sunset, and it is as if I take a veil  
Full in my hand as I write, as if to let it yield  
To the days consecrated to the journey west  
That holds me aloof from all I have ever known,  
The East and the cities of my common being,  
As I am here, in Zion, wondering about you  
Who cannot respond except in the barest hints  
Of being that lift over me and show me the way  
To yield and rise into the Kingdom, the sky  
And the land like the white silver spirit  
That we know but is fathomless before us  
And indefinite as the planes of God rising  
Into the sun . . .*

With love,  
Your son Israel