

Vicarious

Max Freeman

*Say heavenly powers, where shall we find such love?
—Paradise Lost, Book III.1.213*

For and in behalf of those dead
before God's love could smother
them. I enter the font and take a baptism.
Buried in the temple's basement, twelve
garlanded oxen balance the precarious
pool on their broad stone backs.
The water feels progressively warmer
as I'm dunked again and again—
now for an 18th century Frenchman,
who may have been tall, gregarious
and proud. Or not. Who knows? He
is only a name mangled
in baptizer's mouth tied
indelibly to a spirit one step
nearer salvation. They harry us,
the dead, sharing our beds
at night and wearing our clothes
by day, driving us ever
to find them, save. And we,
we are devout Mormons curious
to discover ancestors and release
them from ignorance. We feel
for them that vague, indifferent
concern born of personal non-
acquaintance. Call it *caritas*—
a love effortless and light as afternoon.
The love, say, of Jesus on the trail
when he dropped the wooden beam
in the dirt (never mind that we
weren't there) and stooped to carry us.