

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 37 | Number 1

Article 16

Fall 12-1-2014

The Saints Keep Marching In

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Recommended Citation

Simkus, Joe (2014) "The Saints Keep Marching In," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 37: No. 1, Article 16.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol37/iss1/16>

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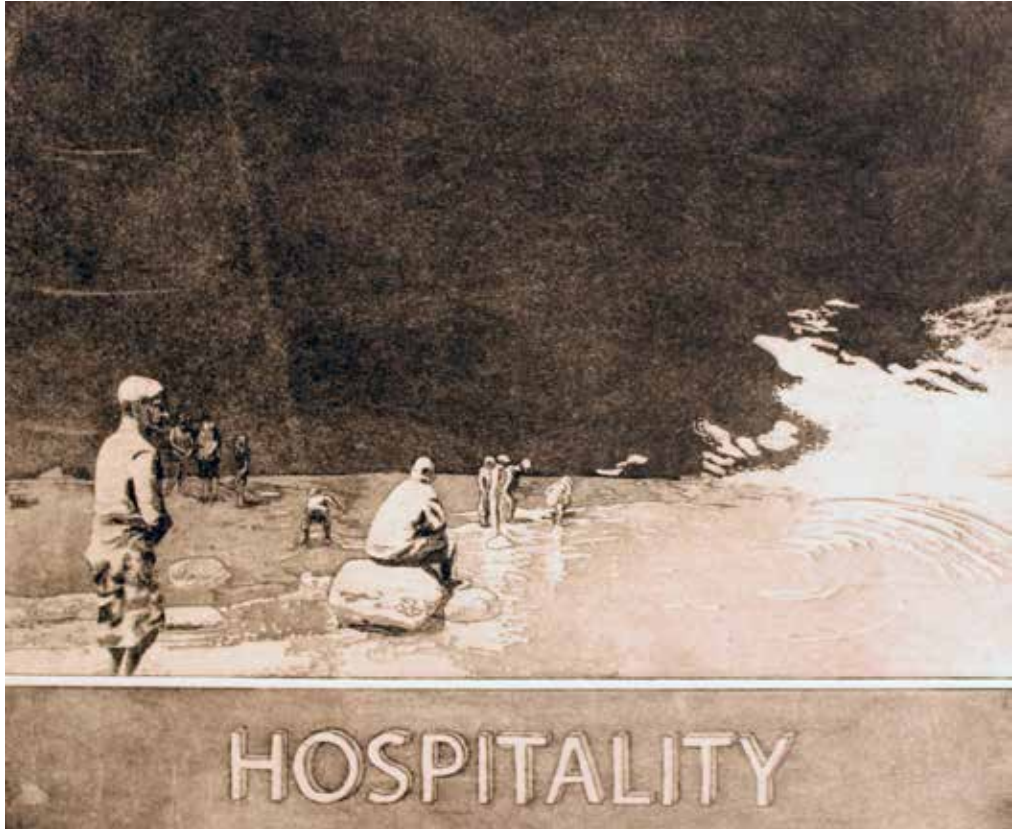
THE SAINTS KEEP MARCHING IN

The saints are marching in again. Trumpets blare while the drums keep time and our customers crane their necks. At one of the patio tables, an old couple tap their feet and shake their heads about half a step behind the rhythm. Everyone else starts snapping their fingers and humming along as their ten dollar bowls of gumbo go cold. A little boy kneels on his chair, peering over the back of his seat at the band and their horns bobbing with every step.

We get a rush in the evening time, every day with people hoping to catch the saints. The patio seats are so close you could tug at the sleeves of the procession as they walk by. You can almost feel the spit from the trumpets as it dots the front of your shirt, your face, your lemon water. That old couple out on the patio are regulars, a lot of people here are. The rest are tourists just trying to fit in.

Last week it was the same show. In the morning, they bring in the recently deceased. Nobody shows up for these matinees. That time it was one of the smaller caskets. Four pall bearers instead of six. The band played slow and quiet, but you could barely hear them for the mother's wailing. You could hear her from blocks away. She echoed off the closed shutters and locked doors in the quiet daytime street. In the evening, after they had left the dead, they returned with the saints. A young couple danced while others whistled and hollered. People who lived above the street flung open their windows to join in. Some ran out into the street to join the ranks. The mother was still wailing in her husband's arms, but you couldn't hear it. Her face pulled in tight around her eyes, deep lines set in when she opened her mouth to scream, but all that came out were the trumpets, loud and fast. The band played while the people danced and she stained her husband's jacket. That night, long after work, long after the parade, I remember turning on the TV and watching Miss America get her crown. Her makeup cracked and smeared, she was smiling so big. I remember watching her smile and wave like she won't be replaced this time next year. She smiled like that moment would last forever, and then they cut to commercial.

And now on the patio people are up and dancing. The old couple hand in hand, he spins her slowly. The little boy is now standing up in his chair, kicking his feet, scaring his mom to death. Everybody wishing this moment would last forever until the band rounds the corner and music starts to fade. And then everyone sits back down and pretends not to see the flies that have settled in their food. The old man and his wife call me over. He points to his bowl. Still full, freezing cold. I take it back to the kitchen to reheat it. Soon the crowd starts to thin. Their tables are cleaned and their chairs are stacked. But every night they come back. Every week a wailing mother. Every year a Miss America. And the saints keep marching in.



Jordan Szala

Hospitality
Etching