

JIM REIL

ABSENCE

We hire a neighbour to cut down five backyard trees looming too close to the house, and now the late November landscape, sparer and harder suddenly, reminds me of my father, the austere plain prairie, no hills, unpainted barns, rusting barbed wire, where he was raised by his savage alcoholic grandfather Peter, despised universally; through winter my father would break ice in the farmhouse basin to wash his face, ride through blowing snow, drifts of sadness, the Great Depression, to the one-room school where his friends were still boys, still waiting for their lives to play out in booze and fucking women and killing animals and lesser or greater depression, as if they'd swallowed whole that landscape of grey absence, subtraction, no trees, no hills, the heart set permanently below zero.

LIFE MAGAZINE'S FAMOUS RECLUSES

To do reclusing properly
you need to first become
famous and rich because
no one wanted to photograph
or write in magazines about
the old woman at the end
of Wollaston Street
where I grew up
who answered the door
reeking of booze
when I was collecting pledges
for some school walk or run
and who invited me in
to a parlour strewn with empty
gin bottles while she shuffled off
to find her purse and returning
without it several minutes later
startled and asked: Who are you?