



# Magnolia

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## Peter Schmitt

### **Class Photo: Bisbee, Arizona, 1890** by Peter Schmitt

So that no boy's hand  
tugs a girl's hair  
or wanders to his nose,  
the photographer has had  
all forty or so pose  
with arms folded frankly  
across their chests—  
the picture taken  
in front of their one-room  
schoolhouse, all dressed  
in their best knee-length  
suits and dusty,  
laced-up boots.  
They range in age  
from maybe six

### **Runaway** by Peter Schmitt

You'd think I'd done it just last week,  
the way my mother still brings up  
the time I ran away, at eight  
or nine, and stayed unfound for hours.  
In a cave of my own making  
beneath the bleachers at the park  
I hid, nursing some slight now long-  
forgotten, and the growing sense  
of my own power, watching as  
the afternoon slowly darkened,  
and the other kids ran off the fields  
toward their houses. I stared out  
as various vehicles passed;  
a patrol car crept by, looking,  
probably, for me. It stopped, once,  
almost, but kept going. I held

to sixteen, but only one  
or two have allowed themselves—  
or gotten away with—  
a smile. Their teachers,  
the two women at the back  
in high, white starched shirts  
are the only ones  
whose arms aren't crossed.  
But their pupils stare past  
the man, black-hooded  
like an executioner,  
in what they've accepted  
as the posture in which  
one meets eternity—  
especially those  
who have seen their fathers  
similarly arranged,  
but framed  
in a long pine box,  
their eyes forever closed  
just as the flash went off.

## **The Priests of My Adolescence** by Peter Schmitt

When I see on the news some damaged guy  
my age, and across the courtroom the priest,  
white-haired and impassive, unrepentant,  
I think back to high school, and the Jesuits  
who guided my own spurt from boy to man:

studious Father R, who explained to me,  
non-Catholic that I was, exactly how Christ  
was killed by the Crucifixion, the slow  
agony of the asphyxiation;  
and jovial Father T, portly and bald,

who'd boxed in his youth and called everyone  
"Champ"

(at least the boys—I don't know what he called  
the girls). And our young principal, Father E,  
whom my mother may have had the slightest  
crush on, mentioning that he was good-

my breath till it turned the corner.  
Streetlights were blinking on, the air  
cooling, when I made up my mind  
that they had been punished enough,  
and slipped on home the mile or so  
by way of the alleys and back yards.  
I walked in then as if nothing  
had happened, like I'd just come home  
from work, and as if my parents  
weren't frantic. When their tears had dried  
they immediately marched me off  
to the police station, where I  
stared up at a tall man behind  
a tall counter and whispered out  
an apology. He must have  
heard it, nodding that way, but I  
don't think my parents ever did.

looking.

He also had a habit of appearing  
in our locker room, just as we'd come in  
sweaty from the playing fields and peeling off  
our shorts to shower. I don't think he was  
there  
to deliver some post-athletic speech

of inspiration; he'd just mill about  
in a corner, arms crossed in front of his chest,  
maybe saying something to the coaches,  
while we moved quickly under the nozzles  
and refrained from our usual snapping

of the thin white towels. By the time we were  
dressed  
he had vanished, perhaps to reappear  
an hour later for the freshmen. Sometimes  
one of us was summoned to his office  
for a punishment. The guilty party

would emerge some time thereafter, red-faced  
and never wanting to talk about it.  
Just last year, I saw where old Father E,  
now long-reassigned to another school,  
had abruptly resigned from the priesthood—

citing illness—just as the prosecutors  
were closing in. Young men had come  
forward...  
And aside from the usual thoughts of  
"There but for the Grace..." I wondered about  
all the mouths over the years that had opened

in acceptance, unsuspecting, of the host  
he dropped—or if those faithful wondered too,  
if they ever saw in his sky-blue eyes  
what he must have seen himself, just as the  
steam  
was clearing from our locker room mirrors,

before he passed back into the blinding sun.