

The New Criterion

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Mrs. Vitt

by David Mason

The first to realize what a liar I was,
a boy pretending to have read a book
in second grade about a big black cat
(I'd made it as far as the cover silhouette),
the first to let us choose our spelling words
like *telephone* and *information*, long
pronounceable portions of the sky outside,
words I ever after spelled correctly,
the first to tell me I was a funny boy
or had a funny sense of the truth, or had
no sense of it but was funny anyway,
Mrs. Vitt began to shake one day,
lighting her cigarette in the teacher's lounge,
or carrying coffee in her quaking hands.
I was in high school then, but heard she'd quit
and went to visit her in the old north end
of town, and met her thin, attentive husband
strapping her to a board to hold her straight.
She smiled at me, though her head shook to and fro.
It took her husband many lighter flicks
to catch her swaying cigarette. She looked
like a knife-thrower's trembling model. *Mrs. Vitt*,
I blurted out. *I'm sorry*. She stared at me,
but whether she was nodding or shaking no
I couldn't tell. *Sorry I lied so much.*
I must have given you a lot of grief.
And she, with each word shuddered out in smoke:
No child I taught was any grief to me.

David Mason's latest book of poems is *Pacific Light* (Red Hen Press). He lives in Tasmania.

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