

# Missionary Court

*Lance Larsen*

Hunched over and rocking a little,  
he answered the president in stutters,  
and I wrote it all down in the ledger—  
*the girl's name, how many times*, my pen touching  
each detail, *the garden, the grape trellis,*  
*the blanket* until the whole room ached.  
Finally the recess: silence mostly,  
with the president shaking his head.  
When the elder shuffled back in, I stared  
at the locked closet filled with blue reports,  
fifteen years' worth, faded and filed away,  
but never faded enough if you had a bad one.  
Then the president said the elder's name,  
his first name this time, and the room  
found its breathing and seemed to relax,  
then he said church membership, and the elder  
began to moan, a low grinding cry,  
his broken shoes digging into the carpet,  
the room tightening, and I smelled sweat,  
the acidy bite of something like excrement,  
an oily scared smell that could have been  
any of us, but wasn't, and the president hugged  
the elder breast to breast, and held him  
for a long time. After the final prayer,  
the president motioned me over: *They'll run*  
*sometimes*, he said, *or sneak out to see*  
*the girl again, so watch him*—which I did,  
the entire night, eyes glued to his back,  
though the bile in my throat was my own.

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LANCE LARSEN is a Ph.D. candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston. His poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in the New Republic, Shenandoah, Western Humanities Review, and the Hudson Review.