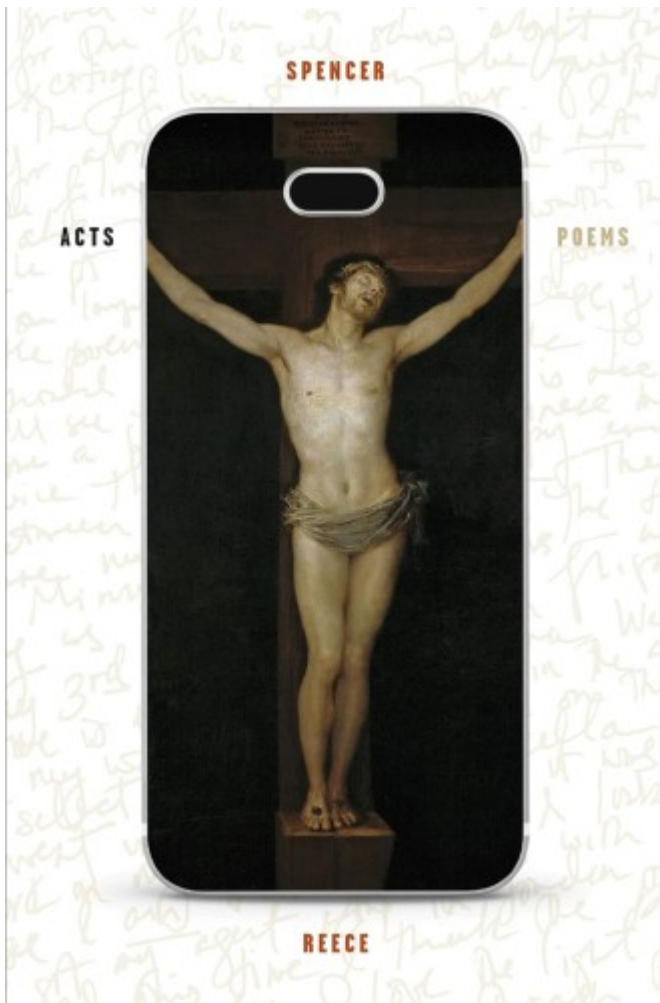


Poems for a difficult life of faith

Like Paul, Spencer Reece has journeyed to see what he would suffer as a servant of Christ.

by [Diane Glancy](#) in the [March 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Acts: Poems

By Spencer Reece

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

A man has a vision. He is walking on a road. He is going to bring the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem. He will persecute them. But something happens. He is struck on a road just outside Damascus, and his life is readjusted. He then is the recipient of hardship: the Lord will show him the great things he must suffer for his name's sake (Acts 9:16). The book in which Saul becomes Paul is called Acts. The vicar of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Wickford, Rhode Island, gives this same title to his newest book of poems.

Like Paul, Spencer Reece has journeyed to see what he would suffer as a servant of Christ—for we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Reece writes of his residencies in Madrid, Honduras, and the East Coast of the United States as Paul tells us of his journeys to Lystra, Derbe, and Lycaonia—their foldout beds with a mattress coil that pokes their backbone.

It's suffering enough in itself, this Christ servitude: "I write this among bare walls, mildew stains, / and nail holes. I grow obsolete among the blue tiles." There are pipes that don't work. Stairs that creak. The discomfort of not having a place of one's own. But in weariness—in the backwater places with orphans and those left beside the road in the fast-moving traffic of this world—Reece envisions another reality, not of this world but of one to come. "Acts is the biography of the Holy Spirit, / tracking the story of how the faith spread / with bread and spit and letters."

Reece is a master painter of detail. A librarian smells like mothballs. The air has the stench of a commode. Shirts are stained with sweat. Refrigerator trucks fill with the dead during the pandemic. "O, buckling blue esotery falling apart! / My anonymity increases with each entrance. / Will our hope be transfigured by this dust?" Reece does not ignore the hard parts of the Christian journey.

He experiences faith in the real world. He sheds light on the sometimes doggedness of pastoral work. It's almost as if the ministry were a trial in which the Lord asks, Are you willing to follow me even through this? "I am what I am and have not been called in vain," both the vicar and the apostle insist. They will bring others with them. Their letters and words will help when the path is rugged.

“Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand,” writes Paul (Rom. 15:21), and Reece keeps this mission in mind. His descriptions are palpable. The reader feels present with the poet as he writes, “Upstairs the chandelier sparkles on the floor / and the instructions for heat are painted over— / they look like Braille.” These poems have the same quality as the impressionistic watercolor paintings in his 2021 book *All the Beauty Still Left*.

For the Christian reader, Reece’s poems trail with verses from the epistles, such as Hebrews 11:37-38: “They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy.” As a whole, the collection offers a road map through faith and a well-rounded portrait of Christianity. Goya’s painting *Christ Crucified* on the cover gives hope as well as purpose to those grittier parts.

In the end, Reece writes, “I’m headed home, wherever that might be,” and “poetry is what we do while we wait / to come into the kingdom.” Reading these poems, one acknowledges what it takes to matter in God’s kingdom—even when God asks of us suffering.