

Theology in Scotland on arts and culture

Emergent Properties

Samuel Tongue

Samuel Tongue is a poet, writer, and editor, working at the Scottish Poetry Library as Project Coordinator. His latest pamphlet The Nakedness of the Fathers (Broken Sleep, 2022) features many poems that wrestle with biblical tropes and inheritance. That, and more details, are available at www.samuel tongue.com.



The inspiration behind the poem was a photographic exhibition based on the Ethiopian ‘forest churches’, small Edens in the encroaching desert: <https://emergencemagazine.org/film/the-church-forests-of-ethiopia/>.

To my mind, they sit like sacred, interconnecting cells (in the multiple senses of the word). This, in turn, set me to thinking about emergent neighbourliness and Abba Anthony’s famous saying: my life and death are in my neighbour. But who is my neighbour? Everyone and every thing, whether in the forest or the city.

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a church is enveloped by a forest and the forest
is the creator and redeemer of the church. the hermits
who disappear into the trees, are trees. every time
a tree moves it is a bustling prayer.
susurrance as supplication. the habit of the tree is its form in the world.
Heidegger was wrong. no, the stone is not worldless;
no, the animal is not poor-in-the-world; no, man is not
only world-forming. the stone can be ground and
underground – a negative capability – and the animals are adept at dwelling.
neahgebur – they who dwell nearby. try not to think that clearing
the forest is a clearing for thought. leave it dark for all the neighbours;
they are essential. my life and death are in my neighbour and

a church is enveloped by a city and the city
is the creator and redeemer of the church. the anchorites
who disappear into their cells, are cells. every time
the bus doors hiss open, it is a shushed prayer.
pneumatic pneuma. the habit of a tenement is its dwelling in the world.
Le Corbusier was wrong. no, the house is not a machine for living in;
no, the streets do not belong to the automobile; no, ornamentation
is not a religion of beautiful materials. the tenements can be forest and
bewilderment – a negative capability – and the streets can be recovered.
différance – that iterative, unrepeatable stranger. try not to think that
expanding
the city will end emergence. leave it dark for all the strangers;
they are essential. my life and death are in each stranger and

