

Acceptance Speech, Sam Ragan Awards Dinner, Feb. 5, 2009

Thomas Heffernan

I am greatly honored to be named one of the recipients of the 2009 Sam Ragan Awards, the 29th year the Awards have been given. I want to express my appreciation to St Andrews Presbyterian College, to the members of the organizing committee, especially to Prof Ron Bayes who is a guiding spirit of this, as of so much other creative work that happens at the College.

The other day, re-reading poems in the St Andrews Press edition of Sam's Collected Poems, I paused to reflect on one that seems to me to say something especially appropriate to tonight's occasion and its setting, a poem called "Faces".

They say that Rembrandt
Was fifty years old
When he decided
To devote all his time,
His art,
His strength,
To faces.

We see them now—
Fragile, lumpy, shadowy things,
Each a mystery,
Each a face of its own.
A visible thing, an invisible thing.
We keep coming back
To Rembrandt's faces.

To say that each of our faces is "a visible thing, an invisible thing" might sound a paradox – as would be something sounding to the ear, and also sounding a depth. A situation or circumstance that might lead a reader to dwell a moment on the visible, invisible thing that each of our faces may be seen to be, is the sort

of education that St Andrews makes possible for its students. Education in the liberal arts.

It happens that I currently teach at St Andrews, a coincidence: so far as I know, few if any predecessor Ragan awardees have at the same time been faculty. But, being here, I can say that the liberal-arts character of this College is alive and well, and that its culture of fostering the arts, as did Sam, finds one of its expressions in St Andrews' devotion to his memory.

Sam wrote a poem called "Heritage" that is largely about Scotland County and Laurinburg. The presence of St Andrews College, being in Laurinburg, is implied in this poem that not only speaks of heritage but is itself inheritable; the poem is something Sam gave us to inherit.

So, too, I am reminded of a poem that focuses on the setting where we assemble this evening.

The poem is by Marie Gilbert. Marie and her husband Dick lived in Laurinburg before she passed away fifteen months ago. She loved this place and knew its moods. Her gentle appreciation of the campus even during the summer quiet found voice in her poem "Campus Off Season" where she says: "Strangely quiet ducks and geese / leave spreading wakes," a metaphor for events and experiences that move out from here and expand to other places and times.

Receiving this award. I am honored to be a fellow 2009 'class-mate' of Martha Blue Hooks, Lois Holt and Sally Ann Morris, and to be numbered among those earlier receiving this honor, among them Marie, who also received a St Andrews Fortner Award as did Ann Deagon who graciously introduced me tonight.