

SIAN

If you're wondering where the Women on the Walls are,
They're actually just next door.

Through here.

Just in case you'd thought we'd forgotten to put the pictures up
Saw these college stalwarts and wondered
Where the new portraits are berthed
We'll be going through soon
But, first, the poets have been invited
To open the proceedings in this room.

Aoife has entered, humming the refrain, stops on stage, looks around her.

AOIFE

Sorry, I'm just a moment late.
Not being funny but,
where are all the ladies?

SIAN

That's what I'm just after saying -
They're next door,
In the Board Room.

AOIFE

Oh grand. We'll head in soon.
Wait, what are you up there for?

SIAN

A dramatic touch, Aoife,
I'm trying something out.
I felt it would be fitting to begin
On higher ground
This is where most of the women in this hall were to be found,
Once upon a time.
This is where you ate,
Resplendant in your most fashionable dress
At Charter Day Dinner,
If you were a college Fellows plus one
A wife or spouse or guest.

AOIFE

Is that so?

SIAN

Which meant a lot of women sat up here because
You were much more likely to be a wife than a Fellow
If you were female in this hallowed hall
pre-1985.

AOIFE

A lot has changed.
It is a wonder, really.

SIAN

New energy, new era, new range
Of opportunities waiting to be seized

AOIFE

Ones that used to happen down wind
Of women's rigid Irish social position,
Down-wind of viewing balconies.

SIAN

Not all the women sat here though.

AOIFE

There were the pioneering female fellows

SIAN

The faculty founders and future councillors
The surgeons and physicians who,
Even all those years ago,
Broke the expected social mould.

AOIFE

They would have stood down here
With me.
Talked and eaten with their
Hippocratic colleagues.

SIAN

Time is a wonder, really.

'Male' no longer synonymous with 'doctor'

AOIFE

Or 'guest' synonymous with 'wife'.
So much has changed.

SIAN

And still with preservation and protection
How much history has been retained

AOIFE

How much of what is treasured has been cared for, has survived.

SIAN

How much has survived.

AOIFE

You know,
I met eight women in an archive.

SIAN

So did I.

AOIFE

Their achievements stacked in
Documents, photo albums, files.
Harder workers you never would have met.
Often photographed in an ocean full of men.
If that would bother others, it never seemed to bother them,
I imagine it may have felt, somewhat isolating, in those crowds
Always a minority
But they thrived.
Lived through and survived
Some much tougher times
Than we know of today.

SIAN

Each did things so memorable that
Their achievements were archived
But archives preserve accomplishment
Away from light.

AOIFE

Posterity has a cruel way of forgetting
What it owes to whom.

SIAN

History, the homemaker, only keeps
A handful of framed photos
In the front room.

AOIFE

Do you think we could we take even one or two
Or eight
Legacies
Back?

SIAN

Is remembering
A calming
Or a revolutionary act?

AOIFE

What is left to say?

SIAN & AOIFE (In alternating order)

Mary Frances - Mary Josephine – Maura - Mary Somerville – Barbara – Victoria –
Margaret - better known as Pearl - and Winifred.

SIAN starts to walk down the balcony stairs, she picks up a shruti box

AOIFE

Their legacy
is larger
Has more weight
Than just those four supporting walls can take
When said, their stories recitation
Spreads beyond these halls and adds a balm
To an old omission, an old mistake
New tissues form and fuse to heal an old break
And this is why

SIAN is down on the floor.

SIAN

This is why

UNISON

This is why

SIAN

We commemorate.

Backing music starts to play.

SIAN

I met eight women in an archive

AOIFE

The first received her license in 1890.

SIAN

The second became a fellow in 1893.

AOIFE

One was a senior demonstrator within this college,

SIAN

An impassioned advocate without

AOIFE

One lives on in the walls of St Michael's House.

SIAN

One was Waterford's first female councillor.

AOIFE

One, I have been told, was an excellent dancer.

SIAN

One was the college's first female examiner
Richmond's first female gynaecologist,

AOIFE

We commemorate their aptitude, their courage,
Perseverance and stamina.

SIAN

I met eight women in an archive,
One was the matron of the Red Cross Hospital, Saint-Lô
Who served alongside the Parisian Irishman who delivered us Godot
One of many not afraid of risk, of mortar, gunfire
We commemorate their grit and graft and gumption to aspire
Beyond a woman's station
One was Angola and Uganda's obstetric revolutionary
We commemorate the strength of her vocation
To train so highly in a field that gives easy access to privilege and plenty
Yet to live a lifetime amongst the poor
We commemorate not just her kindness but her faith
Her unwaivering fulfillment of her Marian mandate
Proof, if ever proof was needed,
that courage, resilience and vision
Are not male,
But human traits
And this is why
This is why,
When the odds are adversely stacked so high
This is why we commemorate.
We commemorate suffragists and activists,
One conscientious tax-evader.
Refused to pay levies charged to single women but not unmarried men
She said

AOIFE

Do I go to prison now?
I don't know what your mens' procedure is in these matters.
I am glad I've been able to afford you so much entertainment.
You won't want to go to the bioscope tonight.

SIAN

All this to the all-male courtroom in Pretoria.
One took on the IPP's John Redmond, public sanitation and addiction
Though not in that exact order
One was a campaigner for disability rights

One a paediatrician, one a columnist
An expert epidemiologist
She pioneered the BCG programme
Gave Irish children their indigenous tattoo.
Near eliminated TB, left the old poets fuming
Their chronic illness was a subject that had
Heretofore consumed them.

AOIFE

What did you just say?

SIAN

Just a reference to Seán Ó Riordáin

AOIFE

Was that a bit of tuberculosis word play?

SIAN

One was an educator, a director, a nurse,
The founder of your Faculty,
Another Irish first.
There is only one of eight who's voice I've heard
In an RTE news special about her work in James's
Resonant, authoritative, honest, charming, tough
Most of all she speaks of parents and their children
In a time when others were not speaking of them enough.
Ní fheicimid a leithead arís.

AOIFE

We won't see her like again.

SIAN

All deserve a bigger place in Irish memory
Let's carve one out for them.

SIAN & AOIFE (In alternating order)

Mary Frances - Mary Josephine – Maura - Mary Somerville – Barbara – Victoria –
Margaret - better known as Pearl - and Winifred.

SIAN

Keep the names loud and alive

(Quietly continues to recite the names, underneath Aoife's poem)
Mary Frances - Mary Josephine – Maura - Mary Somerville – Barbara – Victoria –
Margaret - better known as Pearl - and Winifred.

AOIFE

We commemorate because it can be hard
To believe the strength of a story
So unlikely to be true.
We commemorate because they were astonishing
And we think maybe how different things would be
For more women, if more women knew

SIAN

How much more progress made post-1985

AOIFE

I met eight women in an archive

SIAN

And their story is the throughline
The stained glass, incense
The collection plate
For homage and memorial is a tithe we pay
For inheriting advancement from the greats
And we can pay it
With our songs
Our call and response
Our turpentine and paint
And this is why
This is why
While time just flies by
And we risk leaving it too late
This is why
We commemorate
Mary, Mary, Mary, Winifred, Maura, Margeret (Pearl), Barbara, Victoria
This is why the poets write
Why sometimes we're invited to
Bellow to a crowded room
This is why we work ourselves into such a state
For it is our work,
To cut into the marrow

Of your mystery
And sing your labours back to you
So first,
The bad news
Difficult, but true
All the more worth the saying, today,
Because if you're hear you probably know it
And you've taken valued steps
To expose and dethrone it
Things were not OK
For women
In this country
This city
Those Dublin streets, outside,
Not for a very long time.
A lot of what we had
Was fought for,
Met significant challenge,
And was won.

For a long time a girl was simply lesser than her brother
A son's ambitions much more important than his mothers
A small amount of high-achieving female professionals
The distinct and distant 'other'
And if we are to usher in a new era's dawning
We must understand historical inequality
To be a urgent, whispered warning
We must name past harms in the hope we can negate them
We repeat mistakes if we do not old hurt with current circumstance conflate
We recycle harms whose root causes
We now have cause to hate
Those girls
Those girls speaking on that tape
In terms of tenacity
Innate ability
Intellectual capacity
Are equal to their male peers
Some of them too have the potential of our archived eight
Women of grit and graft and gumption and not professional plus ones,
Not simply the audience to the success of their husbands and their sons
Young girls can easily become the proverbial assistant
And not the pioneering scientific lead

Even when legislation creates
The conditions for equality
Intellectual potential keens
And mourns for
It's own fruitless waste.
And that is not OK.
And it was not OK, before.
For women
There were no bygone halcyon days.

But then the good news
The more comfortable truth
As we sing your labours back to you
The thing that will be done, today,
It's significant is huge.
The thing that has been done
Six artists, carefully capturing the essence of their muse.
Such a commemoration is an act of poetic restitution
Such an action gently admits that female genius has
Been overlooked in many far-seeing institutions
Such a rich addition to the living history
Of medicine and science
An artistic, a generous, a colourful defiance
A simple re-configuring of gendered expectation.
Those women studying in this college, back then,
When the social odds were stacked against them,
It means something, still, today.
By changing the educational landscape
They broke the ice and paved the way
The first makes it easier for the second,
And on it goes.

UNISON

We commemorate because it can be hard
To believe the strength of a story
So unlikely to be true.

AOIFE

We didn't always know to whom our gratitude was due
But we met eight women in an portrait
And now we do.

And as we say these womens' name we represent
Re-frame, engage, empower, educate, one day, employ
We affirm our understanding that the status we enjoy
Is not inevitable, inalienable

SIAN

We met eight women in a board room
And now we see you, we are humbled by your work
We will remain grateful
We commemorate because girls and women cannot be
What they cannot see and

SIAN & AOIFE (In alternating order)

Dr Strangman, Dr Hannan, Dr Coffey, Dean Crowley, Dr Dickson, Dr and Sr Lynch,
Dr Stokes, and Dr Pearl Dunleavy

UNISON

You look pretty spectacular to me.

SIAN

It just goes to show
There are a multitude of heroines
Right under your nose
I wonder how many smaller
Stories we have over looked
I wonder if one day
I'll get to write for them
Recite for them,
Too

AOIFE

Another days poem, I suppose

SIAN

Just goes to show

AOIFE

Most of us here
We didn't always know to whom our gratitude was due
History, the homemaker, only keeps
A handful of framed photos

In the front room.

SIAN

But we met eight women on these walls
And, now

UNISON

We do.