

# THE MARINER'S WIFE

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BY JOANNA KIDMAN

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Turn seaward from the land and hills.  
Fix the ballast, raise the sails. Rhyme  
mariner rhyme the body boned and fleshy  
the throat held in the beak thrust from the salt  
caul of the sea the heartbeat tattoo of rain  
on the cabin and watching from the shore  
the journeyman, the provost, the cruel widows  
stern and silent under the winter awnings.

And water sailor water everywhere now  
torn from the stained sheets the birth blood dry  
on the bed linen and the woman hollow and howling  
in the dry lungs of the desert. She is the sand, the dunes,  
the beating of wings against the face. And the night.  
This turbulent visitor carved from misfortune.  
There is no wedding guest,  
no land on the horizon. Merely water.  
And birds.

We learnt these stories on the mattress  
in a darkened room as the wind sent the curtains  
blowing from the window frames  
with the braying laughter of men next door  
and the faces peering from behind the screen—  
the monstrous bird, the ill-fated journey, omens  
and treachery, winged wraiths, battles and despair.  
We heard the hero whining in the prolixity of sailors' tales.

Here the turbulence of domestic seasons, the wide-gaited  
march of trolleys down the supermarket aisle, the fulsome  
music of shopping malls, the perfect symmetry of a coffee cup,  
the mathematics of a table are each held in the curved claw  
of suburban ventures—that is the household contract. But watch now—  
the woman in her robe at the door with the caryatid's smiling face  
swoops across the Strait of Magellan breaking through the cloud,  
making thunder and burning the breakfast.