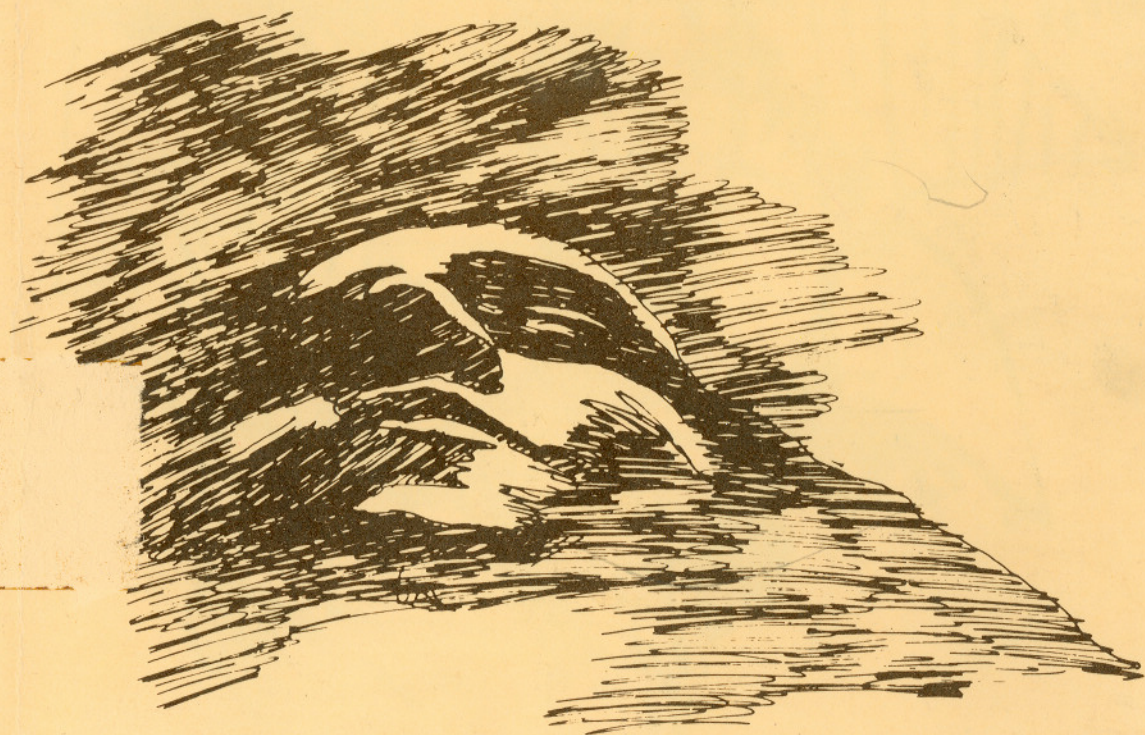


THE COMMON WOMAN



1. Helen, at 9 am, at noon, at 5:15

Her ambition is to be more shiny and metallic, black and purple as a thief at midday; trying to make it in a male form, she's become as stiff as possible.

Wearing trim suits and spike heels, she says "bust" instead of breast; somewhere underneath she misses love and trust, but she feels that spite and malice are the prices of success. She doesn't realize yet, that she's missed success, also, so her smile is sometimes still genuine. After a while she'll be a real killer, bitter and more wily, better at pitting the men against each other and getting the other women fired. She constantly conspires.

Her grief expresses itself in fits of fury over details, details take the place of meaning, money takes the place of life.

She believes that people are lice who eat her, so she bites first; her thirst increases year by year and by the time the sheen has disappeared from her black hair, and tension makes her features unmistakably ugly, she'll go mad. No one in particular will care. As anyone who's had her for a boss will know.

The common woman is as common as the common crow.



2. Ella, in a square apron, along Highway 80

She's a copperheaded waitress,
tired and sharp-worded, she hides
her bad brown tooth behind a wicked
smile, and flicks her ass
out of habit, to fend off the pass
that passes for affection.
She keeps her mind the way men
keep a knife—keen to strip the game
down to her size. She has a thin spine,
swallows her eggs cold, and tells lies.
She slaps a wet rag at the truck drivers
if they should complain. She understands
the necessity for pain, turns away
the smaller tips, out of pride, and
keeps a flask under the counter. Once,
she shot a lover who misused her child.
Before she got out of jail, the courts had pounced
and given the child away. Like some isolated lake,
her flat blue eyes take care of their own stark
bottoms. Her hands are nervous, curled, ready
to scrape.
The common woman is as common
as a rattlesnake.

3. Nadine, resting on her neighbor's stoop

She holds things together, collects bail,
makes the landlord patch the largest holes.
At the Sunday social she would spike
every drink, and offer you half of what she knows,
which is plenty. She pokes at the ruins of the city
like an armored tank; but she thinks
of herself as a rip saw cutting through
knots in wood. Her sentences come out
like thick pine shanks
and her big hands fill the air like smoke.
She's a mud-chinked cabin in the slums,
sitting on the doorstep counting
rats and raising 15 children,
half of them her own. The neighborhood
would burn itself out without her;
one of these days she'll strike the spark herself.
She's made of grease
and metal, with a hard head
that makes the men around her seem frail.
The common woman is as common as
a nail.

4. Carol, in the park, chewing on straws

She has taken a woman lover
whatever shall we do
she has taken a woman lover
how lucky it wasnt you.

And all the day through she smiles and lies
and grits her teeth and pretends to be shy,
or weak, or busy. Then she goes home
and pounds her own nails, makes her own
bets, and fixes her own car, with her friend.

She goes as far
as women can go without protection
from men.

On weekends, she dreams of becoming a tree;
a tree that dreams it is ground up
and sent to the paper factory, where it
lies helpless in sheets, until it dreams
of becoming a paper airplane, and rises
on its own current; where it turns into a
bird, a great coasting bird that dreams of becoming
more free, even, than that—a feather, finally, or
a piece of air with lightning in it.

She has taken a woman lover
whatever can we say.

She walks around all day
quietly, but underneath it
she's electric;
angry energy inside a passive form.
The common woman is as common
as a thunderstorm.



5. Detroit Annie, hitchhiking

Her words pour out as if her throat were a broken
artery and her mind were cut-glass, carelessly handled.
You imagine her in a huge velvet hat with great
dangling black feathers,
but she shaves her head instead
and goes for three-day midnight walks.
Sometimes she goes down to the dock and dances
off the end of it, simply to prove her belief
that people who cannot walk on water
are phonies, or dead.
When she is cruel, she is very, very
cool and when she is kind she is lavish.
Fishermen think perhaps she's a fish, but they're all
fools. She figured out that the only way
to keep from being frozen was to
stay in motion, and long ago converted
most of her flesh into liquid. Now when she
smells danger, she spills herself all over,
like gasoline, and lights it.
She leaves the taste of salt and iron
under your tongue, but you don't mind.
The common woman is as common
as the reddest wine.

6. Margaret, seen through a picture window

After she finished her first abortion
she stood for hours and watched it spinning in the
toilet, like a pale stool.
Some distortion of the rubber
doctors with their simple tubes and
complicated prices,
still makes her feel guilty.
White and yeasty.
All her broken bubbles push her down
into a shifting tide, where her own face
floats above her like the whole globe.
She lets her life go off and on
in a slow strobe.
At her last job she was fired for making
strikes, and talking out of turn;
now she stays home, a little blue around the edges.
Counting calories and staring at the empty
magazine pages, she hates her shape
and calls herself overweight.
Her husband calls her a big baboon.
Lusting for changes, she laughs through her
teeth, and wanders from room to room.
The common woman is as solemn as a monkey
or a new moon.

7. Vera, from my childhood

Solemnly swearing to swear as an oath to you
who have somehow gotten to be a pale old woman;
swearing, as if an oath could be wrapped around your shoulders
like a new coat:

For your 28 dollars a week and the bastard boss
you never let yourself hate;

and the work, all the work you did at home
where you never got paid;

For your mouth that got thinner and thinner
until it disappeared as if you had choked on it,
watching the hard liquor break your fine husband down
into a dead joke.

For the strange mole, like a third eye
right in the middle of your forehead;

for your religion which insisted that people
are beautiful golden birds and must be preserved;

for your persistent nerve
and plain white talk—

the common woman is as common
as good bread

as common as when you couldn't go on
but did.

For all the world we didn't know we held in common
all along,

the common woman is as common as the best of bread
and will rise

and will become strong—I swear it to you

I swear it to you on my own head

I swear it to you on my common
woman's

head.



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