Chapter Eighteen

Serene Plateau

Vorse filled the slow retirement days with gardening, housework, reading, and meals with new friends, chiefly young people, many of them aspiring artists or writers, who either sought her out or rented one of the nine bedrooms in her house. She continued to write, almost daily for a while, but the old pressure of making a living was lifted from her. Rental income and charity from friends or from labor or literary organizations carried her through. Although she had nothing to spare for extras, she did not feel impoverished, for she had time enough at last to putter, to do nothing at all.

She had enjoyed general good health all her life, partly because she relished strenuous exercise. Until her late eighties, she took long daily walks whenever the weather allowed, about town or out Snail Road to the sea. At eighty-two, Vorse was swimming in the bay near her home. A careless boat driver did not see her in the water. The hull of the boat gave her a smart crack on the head as it skimmed past. The nearly fatal accident did not frighten so much as infuriate her.¹

The experience of aging intrigued her. More out of habit than intention, she organized her thoughts into a book outline and even roughed out a few chapters. People became “old,” she wrote, because younger people treated their elders as incompetent: “I . . . have friends whom I love that I don’t see because their quivering eagerness to help me get up, sit down, cross the street, get in a car, prevents any reasonable conversation.”²

Thinking of the times in her past when she had been most happy—as an art student in Paris, during the summer of 1909 when she broke free
from her attachment to Bert, “most of all, the times of hard work”—she knew she would not want to relive those days, because she was now having another experience—that of old age—which she did not want to leave. The youthful vitality of spirit she sustained as an old woman is wonderfully expressed in an entry written early one summer morning in 1964, when she was almost ninety years old.

One of the strangest things of age is the suddenly glimpsing oneself in the mirror. Here I am, waking with the dawn, feeling like the Valkyrie. . . . Then I watch the houses nearby become incandescent, eager for the day. Unable to keep in the house and making an excuse, [that] I need a breath of air [I go out to] the back of the barn. I toss the branches George has sawed off from the barn into the porch, only coming back because I have to pay the coal man, feeling full of joy and health. Then I catch sight of the dour aging creature in the glass. She walks uncertainly, she is toothless, she has no relation to the way I feel. True, I know I move uncertainly and slowly, but very surely. But the gaiety I feel at the light and simplest outdoor tasks, where is it? There is [instead] this aged creature who has no relation to my feeling of joy in life.3

During the early years of Vorse’s retirement, the Cold War witch hunt continued to dominate political life. Beginning in the late forties, more than a hundred Communist leaders were indicted and convicted under the Smith Act, for alleged conspiracy to advocate the overthrow of the government. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who had joined the party in 1936, was imprisoned for over two years. “Walter Lippmann thinks we’re out of the McCarthy woods,” Vorse wrote in 1956. “I say not so long as people like Elizabeth are in jail.” After Flynn’s release, Vorse, at age eighty-five, traveled to New York to meet with her old friend. The two aged rebels, whose political paths had often converged, enjoyed one last spirited evening together.4

By the mid-fifties, the American Communist movement that had so affected Vorse’s political life was near dissolution. When the government began the arrest of “second-string” party leaders like Flynn in 1951, the party undertook an internal purge and became an underground organization. In 1956, Nikita Krushchev publicly exposed Stalin’s crimes. A majority of the remaining American Communists either left the party then or called for democratization of party machinery and freedom from Soviet direction. The Soviet intervention in Hungary was a final blow to the hopes of many party members. By the summer of 1958 the party num-
bered only about three thousand. As Maurice Isserman so aptly phrased the matter in 1982: "It had taken the Communists a quarter of a century to learn that the American left could not be built on foreign models; that civil liberties and democratic institutions should be at the center of any vision of an American socialist future; and that Marxists had as much to learn from other political traditions as they had to teach about American political realities." This was precisely the lesson Vorse had grasped over sixty years earlier.

In the spring of 1959, Vorse managed one last trip to a strike scene. Boarding a bus, she traveled alone to Henderson, North Carolina, where the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) was leading a strike of over one thousand workers, 60 percent of them women. She witnessed again the labor battle she had known so many times, so many years. There was the intransigent employer, the generally hostile state press, the strikebreakers entering the plant under the protection of the soldiers, the angry workers watching sullenly. Once again she toured the workers' houses, was shown the bullet holes in the walls and the probable location of the gunman when he fired, told the stories of assaults on the union leaders, heard the tales of struggle and defeat. One of her last memories of the South "was of a frightened boy who looked younger than his nineteen years, accompanied by his indignant mother. He had been sentenced to sixty days or three years parole for possession of pyrotechnics, in other words, a giant firecracker, illegal in North Carolina, while two strikebreakers whose car was full of guns, which they were about to carry into the mill, received only a suspended sentence."6

Vorse received two hundred dollars from the TWUA for her story on Henderson. But the trip to North Carolina at the age of eighty-five proved too strenuous. On her way home to Provincetown, she stopped in Washington, D.C. to visit Neith Boyce's daughter. While there, Vorse experienced a stroke that caused the left side of her face to fall and shurred her speech. She did not attempt to write again. When the Alfred Knopf publishing house asked her to write her memoirs of the twenties and thirties, she agreed to do so, but never attempted the task. To her dismay, the stroke affected her memory. She often experienced "a peculiar sense that my brains are sticking to my skull. . . . It actually *hurts* to think."7

From the late fifties until her death, Vorse survived on funds from others. Ann Craton Blankenhorn and the reporter Louis Lochner were the greatest help, arranging that Vorse receive grants of twenty-five hundred dollars
from the League of Mutual Aid and from the Overseas Press Club. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Authors' League of America sent more than a thousand dollars to assist her in her recovery from the stroke. In 1963, the Correspondents' Fund sent another twelve hundred. 

Vorse traveled to the United Auto Workers' convention in 1957 to accept the honorary membership the union awarded her. But when she attended another labor convention in 1961, Ann Craton Blankenhorn was incensed at the expense of the trip: "I am told that old Mary Vorse who last spring looked so ancient and decrepit with a heavy cane . . . revived during the summer . . . and took herself to Miami to the recent convention," Blankenhorn wrote Margaret Larkin Maltz. "Why she wanted to go to . . . a most depressing affair I can't see. How she got there nobody knows. . . . I knew she had the last $150 from the Fund which for the first and last time I sent her in a lump sum, rather than a monthly check. . . . To think that extravagant old gal would use it to go to an unimportant convention because she still considers herself an important labor writer is something."

Fortunately, Vorse's benefactors did not know how she spent the donations sent to her during her last years. Beginning in 1956 she regularly sent a large portion of her tiny income to various civil rights groups in the South. In 1965, one year before her death, Vorse mailed a check to César Chavez and the farmworkers. Her world was stirring again. She had to be part of the process.

When Victor Reuther learned of her need for money he began a campaign in 1961 to elicit the help of UAW officials. The union bureaucracy moved slowly. It was over a year before the officers agreed to send Vorse a donation of a thousand dollars. Because Victor Reuther was reluctant to embarrass her with outright charity, someone suggested that she be given a special award in the name of grateful auto workers, along with an "honorary" of a thousand. Warmed to the idea, Walter Reuther invited Vorse to attend the 1962 UAW convention in Atlantic City as an honored guest. There she would receive the first Social Justice Award, originally conceived to pay her recognition, in a special ceremony at the formal convention dinner.

In May 1962, Vorse entered the UAW Twenty-fifth Anniversary Celebration on Walter Reuther's arm. The assemblage parted to make way—a swirl of applause, smiles, popping flashbulbs. Before the audience of over three thousand people, which included her son Joel, his wife, and Vorse's two granddaughters, Walter Reuther presented her with the golden shield of the Social Justice Award: "With admiration, affection and in thankful
appreciation for your years of dedicated and unselfish devotion to the cause of labor and our common struggles to extend the frontiers of social justice. Through your years of writing you have been a continuing source of hope and inspiration to workers as they fought to win fuller and richer lives for their families.”

Eleanor Roosevelt and Upton Sinclair were there to share her honor, all faces turned to her, everyone applauding in a long, standing ovation. The photographs show Vorse as a frail woman supported by others, wearing a new brocaded jacket, her large eyes predominant in an aged face lightened and softened by pleasure. She was eighty-eight, now the grand old lady of labor, again the living symbol of a heroic era. The members of the cheering audience fused for that one moment, imposing on her their deeply cherished, bigger-than-life memories of courage, struggle, meaning.

Her acceptance speech was short. “The bucket of life is full,” Vorse said simply.

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Four more years were left to her. She spent them quietly, fully alert to the last, living with her son Heaton in her beach home. He provided tender care. All her children were safe. Her place in history was secure. Her ideals would survive. Other generations would be rising to defend them.

In the early sixties, Vorse helped to organize a Provincetown protest against the dumping of nuclear waste. In 1963, she testified before a congressional committee in support of the successful effort to preserve the Cape Cod back country and beach in a national park. Two years later, at ninety-one, she began her last campaign. She backed Provincetown’s young Episcopalian minister who would be one of the first to march against the Vietnam War. Twenty years after her death, he recalled: “Many church people were horrified by my liberal politics. I knew that Mary Vorse was the intellectual and spiritual giant of the town. The emotional support she offered was very, very important to me at the time.”

On June 14, 1966, Vorse arose early. As was her custom, she read the morning newspapers in bed. The daily press reflected the uneasy truce of the time, on the eve of major new confrontations with the old injustice. It was the day that the Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Earl Warren, announced the Miranda decision limiting the power of the police to question suspects in their custody. Leftist students marched in Panama in opposition to new U.S. arrangements for the Canal Zone. Through heavy rains, civil rights demonstrators walked in Mississippi, across bright red, foot-high letters painted on the pavement of Highway 51 which spelled:

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“Red [read] nigger and run. If you cant red, run away—KKK.” Some of the black leaders called for armed self-defense. In Los Angeles, Ronald Reagan won financial support from wealthy Republicans in his race for the California governorship, and prepared for a fund-raiser party to be addressed by Richard Nixon at the Sports Arena. In labor circles, George Meany and Walter Reuther fought over Meany’s opposition to the International Labor Organization Conference, which had elected a Polish Communist to head the session. That day, the National Student Association released a report calling for radical reshaping of college curriculums judged irrelevant and alienating. In 1966 the newspapers still featured a “Woman’s Page,” which presented menus, society news, and reports of new success in skin care.

The front page of the day focused on the news from South Vietnam. Five hundred Buddhist demonstrators in Saigon, carrying a letter accusing Lyndon Johnson of having turned “deaf ears to our cry for human decency and human rights,” burned two jeeps and were halted in their attempt to march on the U.S. embassy by riot police. At Hue, where two monks and twenty youths were arrested, residents placed thousands of small household Buddhist altars in the streets as a gesture of passive resistance to the military regime of South Vietnam’s Premier Nguyen Cao Ky.

At noon, Heaton brought her lunch in bed. The Buddhist demonstrations had greatly disturbed her. She and Heaton discussed various options, as she pondered what she might do personally to protest the continuation of the war. Heaton walked downtown in mid-afternoon on some errands. When he returned, he found her still in bed, dead of a heart attack at ninety-two, her morning reading spread about her on the covers.

The funeral was a small affair, for she had outlived her close friends, and lost contact with her colleagues in the labor movement, most of whom were too infirm to travel to Provincetown anyway. Besides, the death of a woman who had lived so long and well as she was not a tragic loss, but a natural event, which one honored best with merely a quiet pause for reflection. Walter Reuther could not attend the last rites, but he sent his representative to Provincetown—the first woman to sit on the UAW executive board—and issued a press release:

She was one of the great labor writers of all time. While still young, she gave up a bright literary future to devote her great talent to reporting labor’s struggles for justice and freedom in this country. At a time when accurate, much less sympathetic reporting was a novelty, she wrote with deep compassion of the human need for working class people. . . . Mary Heaton Vorse was part of the UAW.
This magnificent woman responded to every call for help during the early days of the sitdown. . . . Gentle in manner, Mary Heaton Vorse was a woman of invincible spirit and fearless courage.\textsuperscript{12}

Just as she had always planned and hoped for, Mary Heaton Vorse was buried on the cemetery hill above Provincetown, where the beat of the distant foghorn can be heard around the clock. She wanted sea, sky, and earth on her tombstone. The red granite carries carvings of a seahorse and a gull in flight.
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