

Virginia Church

Selected Poems



Virginia Frame Woodson Church

February 18, 1879 [St. Joseph, Missouri] –

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Church was born Virginia Frame in St. Joseph, Missouri. She attended Smith College, where she published her first poems, graduating in 1898. She published her first play, *Commencement Days*, co-written with Margaret Mayo, with Samuel French in 1908. She married Col. John William Church (originally from Kentucky) in Richmond, Virginia, in 1908. They moved to San Diego in 1912, then moved to Pasadena, eventually settling in Los Angeles. Church's first book, *Teachers Are People*, published under the name of "Miss Agatha Brown" in 1926, earned her some small fame — it was reprinted twice after WWII with additional poems. Around 1929, Church spent a year in Europe trying to find a cure for her failing eyesight. Her second book of poems, *Silhouettes of the Latin Quarter*, appeared in 1931. She died a widower in 1956 and is buried at Mountain View Cemetery and Mausoleum.

Teachers are People. Hollywood: D.G. Fischer Corp., 1925.

Silhouettes of the Latin Quarter. Atlanta: Bozart Press, 1931.

Teachers are People. Hollywood: D.G. Fischer Corp., 1945.

Compliments

Once Bob Carter said I had nice hair;
“Chuck” Weill wondered how anyone could know so much;
Many pupils have brought me:flowers,
Also boxes of candy;
But what pleased me most
Was when Mike· exclaimed:
“Gee, Miss Brown, you’re not a bit like a teacher,
You’re so human.”

Progress

Four years ago the teachers were lecturing about short dresses,

Last year it was bobbed hair and colored slippers.

Every term there seems to be something to harp on,—

Something

That a few years later

We shall be doing ourselves.

Intercepted

Jimmy sits in the front row;
Across the aisle is Flossie.
Today as I turned from the board
I intercepted a look,
Holy as altar fires,
That flamed from youth to youth.
I caught my breath.
All afternoon I've felt old and lonesome.

Common Ground

I waxed enthusiastic over the gerundive;
I grew eloquent in consideration of mood and voice . . .
When I started in zealously on subjective compliments,
I saw Mike's eyes feasting hungrily on the hills
Whose pine-crested tops he could see through the windows.
I closed the grammar
And read to the class **Keat's** Ode on a Grecian Urn.
Mike's eyes traveled back from the hilltops
And smiled into mine.
We had both visioned the vale of Tempe.

Gwen

I sent for Gwendolyn Hall's mother,
She must be made to understand
That silken hose and spangled gowns
Were not for school.
Other girls could not afford them;
Besides, the lack of taste.
She came,
A shawl over her faded cotton dress. "I'm a washerwoman,
I never had nothin' pretty.
I mean Gwen shall have the best
If it means rubbing the skin from my knuckles."
Tears came into the old eyes.
I, too, pledged myself that Gwen should have the best—
Though it might mean discarding spangles.

Jennie

I seem singularly fortunate in having
Some little wren-like person always ready
To take me under her wing.
This term it has been Jennie McGregor.
It is Jennie that arranges the flowers
That Flossie brings;
It is Jennie that takes the roll
And hangs up my slips;
It is Jennie that reminds me of faculty-meeting.
Jennie disapproves of the football boy's freedom
In my sanctum;
I can see that my levity in class
Frequently pains her,
As does my predilection
For such unclassical writers
As Christopher Morley and Ogden Nash.
She is genuinely concerned over my welfare
After her graduation.
This morning she ventured to suggest
That maybe I might still get married—
If I tried hard enough.

Mame

All she thought of was dress;
Or powdering her nose.
Helene Arnold, whose parents read with her
And were sending her to Vassar,
Was getting high grades.
Professor Emmet's son had marked intelligence.
Why couldn't Mame appreciate Milton
After a whole week on his sonnets?
I called her into my conference-room.
She told me her father and mother were both blind
I found they were the two beggars I had often pitied
On the corner of Spring Street.

Unanimous

It distressed me to learn
That one of our boys
Had spoken disrespectfully
Of his Math teacher,
Had called her a fool.
Meeting him in the hall
I asked for a conference,
Perhaps I could make him see.
After a well-chosen prelude
I queried,
“Aren’t you what you called her?”
He was genuinely startled
And protested.
“Exactly what was it you called her?” I asked.
“An old hen,” he confessed.
I had **corraled** the wrong boy.

A Question of Phraseology

I'm continually after the hall-lizards,
Girls that help the boys
Support the walls.
I called two offenders
Into my office.
I spoke eloquently
On the dignity of our institution of learning,
Of the inappropriateness
Of their conduct.
“How,” I made inquiry, “would a visitor
Designate such an entrance
As that our school presents?”
“Dunno,” said Ardis,
“We kids call it a ‘spoon-holder.’”

Not Mellin's Food

In the Study Hall today
I took a lurid-back novel
Away from Clarice Ritter.
It was called "The Purple Passion."
I warned her
Not to waste her God-given intellect on such trash,
To spend the remainder of the period
On Pope's Essay on Man.
I was about to consign the Passion
To the waste basket,
When a phrase intrigued me;
I took it home and finished it in bed.

Trifles

Uriel Pinski's father

Wrote an excuse for his son's absence.

"Dere teacher," it said,

"Excuse Uriel,

His mother ran away with another man.

My God! It is annoying!"

Antiquated

Mr. Edison says

That the radio will supplant the teacher.

Already one may learn languages by means of Victrola records.

The moving picture will visualize

What the radio fails to get across.

Teachers will be relegated to the backwoods,

With fire horses,

And long-haired women;

Or, perhaps, shown in museums.

Education will become a matter

Of pressing the button.

Perhaps I can get a position at the switch-board.

Myopia

Blasé boys in black berets
Sit at cafe tables, affecting sophistication
 With wide yawns;
Appraise the ogling girls and the runners;
Quote Mencken and Hemingway;
Drink first to the noisy, dirty-joke stage,
Then to blinking stupefaction.
Occasionally attempt irony:
“The world’s gone to pot—No faith—No God—
No hell—No love—
Nothing to do—Nothing to see—”

 In the back room of the Cafe au Bon Père,
 There is a Brittany wedding.
 A red-faced father is uncomfortable in store-clothes;
 A placid mother smiles in content at the mating.
 The fiddles sing; a viol sounds;
 The bride enters in peasant frock, starchy lace cap, and wooden shoes;
 The groom with clean smock and clear eyes comes;
 Their hands clasp; their glances meet;
 Their hearts are singing with the fiddles,
 “Love, love, love!”

Blind boys in black berets
Sit at the Dôme and order pernod.

Home Is So Dead

Young boy in black beret
Sat at the Dôme and wrote letters
To his mother:
“Dear Mother, So there’s a new baby;
Thought there were enough.
Too bad grandma died but she was old.
Guess Dad’s busy as ever on the Hoover job.
No, I can’t come home,
Everything’s so dead there.
You and Dad are mighty fine—
And all that—
But you don’t understand the Younger Generation.
I’ve got to see Life.”

Young boy in black beret
Sat at his table at the Dôme
Seeing Life.
Saw a buxom girl selling *Montparnasse*;
Saw the candy-man with candied fruit
 on little sticks;
Saw big men with little portfolios,
And little men with big portfolios;
Saw men smoke and drink
And drink and smoke some more;
Heard them tell dirty stories—
Understood some of them;
Heard of their way with women—
Wondered if the girls at home knew what he knew;
Saw men laugh fatly and women craftily;
Saw Kiki with her blue-penciled eyes;
Saw the man with the Panther.

After twelve o’clock
Young boy in black beret
Went to the Jungle to see

More Life.

The Rich Poor

He saw the cigarette
Roll from the gold-embossed case.
He managed to kick it under the table;
Then, when no one was looking,
To pick it up.
That bloke would never miss it,
One of the lucky rich—lawyer, perhaps.
That's what he might have been, if—
Might have had a mansion on the Hudson
Instead of an attic in Paris;
A Cadillac instead of Job's shanks.
He might have had these things and more
If—
He'd chosen dollars instead of dreams,
Alice instead of Art.
He had sold himself for paint,—
 Paint to mix the sunset's challenge to night,
 Paint to catch the steel of the mountain,
 the mauve of the valley;
Paint to snare the scarlet of a girl's lips,
 the midnight of a woman's hair;
Paint to trap the **untrapable**:
 the song of the bird as it fled the cage,
 the other-worldness of fading eyes.
 the tragedy of birth
 the exultation of death.
Sorry that he had renounced the soil for the cloud?
Not by a damn sight!
Someday he meant to sing on canvas
A Paean to Paint.
In the meantime,
That fellow smoked darn good tobacco.

Solvent

At times the mockery of it all, the futility and the grime,
The lust and the debauchery,
Sweep over him till he has to struggle
To keep his footing.
At such times, it is well,
On some still star-dusky evening
To climb up the tower of Notre Dame
And get a new perspective of Paris.
There are gargoyles on the tower;
One that the boy in the black beret calls
“Nero, ge-nawing his nephew,”
And there is the arch-cynic, he of the ironic smile.
Perhaps if he can figure out
Why there are gargoyles amid the majesty of cathedral spires,
He may be able to understand
Why there are cankers in the heart of the rose,
And brothels in Paris.

Night's quiet like a cool hand laid on his fevered brow
Calms him.
He feels the unvoiced answer.
That it is the gargoyle reveals the majesty of the spire,
That the rose has something within that the canker cannot touch,
That it is not the stench of stale wine,
Nor the shame of painted women,
Nor the nausea of brothels
That is Paris;
But over and above this transient blight,
Beauty
An essence made up of all loveliness
Of towers and spires,
Of chapels and gardens,
Of the mist on the Seine,
The haze above the Luxembourg,
Of twilight from Montmartre,
Of dawn in the silence of the Madeleine,

This is Paris incarnate,
Incorruptable, immortal.

Kiki

Kiki, the eighth wonder of the world;
Kiki, that might have been a woman
 But is only a marvel;
Kiki, picked up in Les Halles as a child
 Because of the sly grace of her,
 The eerie face of her;
Kiki, become the gamin of the Quarter,
 The model of the far-famed,
 The plaything of the dilettanti;
Kiki, everyman's love
 Many men's mistress;
Kiki, hard, insolent, braggadocio,
 The Queen of the Quarter;
Kiki, with pale blue shadows painted on her lids,
with crescent eyebrows penciled on her forehead,
with scarlet daubings plastered on her lips;
Kiki, with the hard eyes and jeweled hands
 Behind that inscrutable mask,
 The painted face of the mime,
What does the real you think of the world of men?

And what is the real you?

The Model

Rene posed for a sculptor
In the Rue Bardinet.
She kept house for him
And cooked his meals;
She swathed the lumps of clay in damp cloths;
She swept up the chips of marble.
She gave the whiteness of her body
For his art,
And, because he was her first lover,
She gave him adoration
And kisses.
When he had finished his Madonna,
He dismissed her.
He was to do Jezebel
And Jezebel must be large and bold.

Rene became **model** for other artists.
She learned to take
And not to give.
She was in demand
On account of her beauty
But they fashioned her as Magdelene,
Never again as Mary.

Surprise

“Dear Teach,” Clifford writes me from New Guinea,
“I’m going to have a baby.
It’s all I can think of
Even when the bombs are whizzing overhead.
I’m writing you the news first
Because someday I believe you’ll be glad.
Remember Mary Wells who sat across from me
In American Lit.?
Maybe you didn’t hear that we were married
Before I went to Boot Camp.
Wish you’d see her some time.
So long, guess there’s a war on;
I’ll have to stop.”
I must see Mary soon
And tell her Cliff’s going to have a baby!

Pearls May Keep Their Lustre

It isn't good for the soul
To cease expecting silk purses from sow's ears.
Richard, with a superior smile,
Intimates that when I give fellows like Kelly,
Poets like Robinson, Frost, or Benét,
I'm casting pearls before swine.
Kelly is a truck driver
Soon to go over with the Sea-Bees.
He liked Jack London,
And the Saturday Evening Post
"Because of its ads."
But at Commencement he stopped me,
His face radiant,
His uncle had given him the complete works
Of Vachel Lindsay;
He meant to take them Over with him.
"And, I suppose," I gloated to Richard,
"You were given a silk tie."

Red Paint for the Dog House

Tom was kicked out of three classes,
But we found a common denomination in dogs.
When the class wrote treatises, on Chaucer,
I let Tom write on Caring for Pups;
When the group were busy on How-to-make outlines,
Tom's topic was Building a Dog Kennel.
His outside reading was Terhune and Mongrel Mettle;
He's going to vote for Roosevelt
Because of Fala.
The Army drafted him in April.
When he came to tell me good-by, he said,
"Don't feel bad.
With the hundred dollars I made at the grocery store
I've bought a lot at Puente.
When I come back, I'll raise collies.
You see, that gives me something
To come back to."

Retirement

When I get Up There,
I hope God will give me some cherubim to teach.
Not just the goody good ones,
But boys that slip away to play
At marbles with the stars;
A wistful child, perhaps,
Who's just a little frightened with the There.
Maybe He might even allow
One young devil to slip in
So I could bring him up to a front seat
And feel at home.

