A Stone's Throw

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We shouted out

'We've got her! Here she is!

It's her all right'.

We caught her.

There she was -

> *Analysis: The poem opens in the middle of action, the crowd already in pursuit and triumphant. The pronoun "we" is central: the narrator immediately distributes responsibility across a group, making collective guilt the poem's foundation. The exclamation marks convey a disturbing excitement; this is not solemn justice but a hunt, a chase, and the woman is the quarry. "Here she is" and "It's her all right" have the ring of displaying a trophy, exhibiting her body for the crowd. "We caught her" echoes the language of animal trapping.*

A decent-looking woman, you'd have said,

(They often are)

> *Analysis: The narrator concedes that she is "decent-looking" but immediately distances himself from the observation: "you'd have said," not him. The sarcasm runs deep. The aside "(They often are)" is a generalisation that reduces her to a type, a stereotype, stripping her of individuality entirely. She is not a person but a category of woman. The brackets are a key technique throughout the poem; they carry the narrator's unguarded, contemptuous thoughts.*

Beautiful, but dead scared,

> *Analysis: The contrast between "beautiful" and "dead scared" is chilling. Her fear does not register as a moral signal to the narrator; it is simply another detail of her appearance, noted alongside her beauty with the same flat tone.*

And not the first time

By any means

She'd felt men's hands

Greedy over her body -

> *Analysis: The narrator reveals that the crowd is physically handling her body, and justifies it by implying she is accustomed to it. The word "greedy" is the narrator's own, exposing the hunger and violence beneath the crowd's touch. The enjambment across these lines mimics the slow, deliberate nature of the assault. The insinuation that she is a prostitute or adulteress is used to erase her right to protest: if she has been touched before, she cannot be wronged now.*

But ours were virtuous,

Of course.

Analysis: The irony here is the poem's sharpest. The crowd's hands are doing exactly what they condemn her for, and yet they call themselves "virtuous." "Of course" is delivered with complete, unquestioned self-assurance. The two-word line isolated on its own creates a pause that amplifies the absurdity of the claim. This is the poem's central moral contradiction: the accusers are guilty of the very thing they punish.

And if our fingers bruised

Her shuddering skin,

These were love-bites, compared

To the hail of kisses of stone,

Analysis: The conditional "if" is a deliberate attempt to minimise: the narrator will not fully admit to bruising her, only entertain it as a possibility. "Her shuddering skin" makes her terror viscerally physical. The extended metaphor of stoning as kissing ("love-bites," "hail of kisses of stone") is the poem's most disturbing device. Violence is reframed as intimacy, execution as erotic. The personification of the stones as kisses exposes the sexual sadism underlying the crowd's "justice."

The last assault

And battery, frigid rape,

To come

Of right.

Analysis: "Assault and battery" is legal diction: the narrator borrows the language of the law to legitimise what is, in reality, murder. "Frigid rape" is a paradox: rape implies violation and force, but "frigid" applies the coldness of stone and clinical detachment, stripping the act of any human warmth. The combination is more disturbing than either word alone because it presents the stoning as simultaneously intimate and utterly impersonal. The phrase "of right" (meaning by entitlement) reveals that the narrator believes this execution is not just permitted but owed. Justice, in his mind, is a debt the woman must pay with her body and her life.

For justice must be done

Specially when

It tastes so good.

Analysis: The metaphor "tastes so good" completes the disturbing sensory register running through the poem: violence as appetite, execution as a meal to be savoured. The narrator does not disguise his pleasure. This is not reluctant justice but gleeful punishment. "Specially when it tastes so good" demolishes any claim to moral authority; this is Schadenfreude, the pleasure taken in another's suffering, dressed up as righteousness.

And then - this guru,

Preacher, God-merchant, God-knows-what -

Spoilt the whole thing,

Analysis: The narrator's tone turns contemptuous and flustered. The string of labels ("guru, preacher, God-merchant, God-knows-what") reveals his frustration at being unable to categorise or dismiss the intervening man. The dashes in the poem around this list enact his spluttering irritation. "Spoilt the whole thing" is bitterly casual: the execution of a woman is referred to as a ruined occasion. The pun embedded in "God-knows-what" is the poet's quiet joke; God does, in fact, know exactly who this man is (Jesus), even if the crowd does not.

Speaking to her

(Should never speak to them)

Squatting on the ground - her level,

Writing in the dust

Something we couldn't read.

Analysis: The bracketed aside "(Should never speak to them)" lays bare the narrator's contempt; speaking to this woman is, in his view, a social transgression. The preacher's act of squatting to her level is a radical gesture of equality: he does not stand in judgement above her but descends to meet her as a human being. "Her level" is the narrator's phrase, dripping with condescension, but the preacher inhabits it differently, without shame. What he writes in the dust is deliberately unresolved. The crowd lacks the moral discernment to understand what is being communicated to them.

And saw in her

Something we couldn't see

At least until

He turned his eyes on us,

Her eyes on us,

Our eyes upon ourselves.

Analysis: This is the poem's pivotal moment. The repetition of "eyes on us" (first the preacher's, then the woman's) creates a sequence of gazes that culminates in the crowd's forced self-reflection. "Our eyes upon ourselves" is the turn: for the first time, the self-righteous mob is made to look inward. No words are spoken; the silence is the judgement. The woman they objectified as a category, a body, a sinner, is revealed to have a humanity they could not see until they were made to confront their own lack of it.

We walked away

Still holding stones

That we may throw

Another day

Given the urge.

Analysis: The final stanza is the poem's most unsettling conclusion. The crowd does not repent; they leave "still holding stones." The metaphor of the stones extends beyond rocks: they still carry their judgements, their prejudices, their capacity for violence. "That we may throw another day / Given the urge" confirms that nothing has changed within them. The insight forced on them by the preacher's gaze was temporary discomfort, not transformation. The poem closes not with redemption but with a warning: this crowd, and what it represents, will act again.

About the poem

Author: Elma Mitchell (1919–2000)

Context: Scottish poet; the poem is a dramatic **retelling** of the biblical story found in John 8:3–11, in which a woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus to be stoned. Jesus challenges her accusers with the words "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." The accusers scatter. Mitchell retells this story from the perspective of one of the accusers.

Core idea: By giving voice to one of the would-be executioners, the poem exposes the hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and sexualised violence that masquerade as moral justice, and warns that such impulses are not confined to biblical times.

- **Main themes**
- Hypocrisy and self-righteousness
- Violence against women
- Religion and moral judgment
- Sexism and the objectification of women
- Justice vs. vengeance
- The capacity for human cruelty and its persistence
- **Mood:** Violent, disturbing, and deeply uncomfortable; darkening throughout
- **Tone:** Braggadocious and nonchalant at the opening; contemptuous in the middle; deflated but unrepentant at the close
- **Narrative technique:** The poem is narrated in **first person plural ("we")** by one of the attackers. This forces the reader to inhabit the perspective of the perpetrator, making the irony all the more powerful.

Remember

- The **title is a pun**: "a stone's throw" means a short distance, but also refers literally to the stoning, suggesting that this kind of violence is never far away, even now
- The entire poem is a **biblical allusion** to John 8:3–11. Students must know this story to fully appreciate the poem's irony and structure
- The **brackets** throughout are not decoration; they carry the narrator's most revealing, unguarded thoughts. Always analyse them
- The **sex/violence metaphor** runs through the whole poem: "love-bites," "kisses of stone," "frigid rape"; violence is consistently sexualised, exposing the crowd's sadism beneath their claim to righteousness
- "Our eyes upon ourselves" is the poem's moral turning point, but the final stanza confirms it produces no lasting change
- The stones the crowd walks away with are a **metaphor for judgment**: they are not reformed, only temporarily interrupted
- The poem is as relevant today as it was in biblical times; Mitchell's point is precisely that human cruelty and hypocrisy are not historical but enduring