

# My Parents

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

## My Parents

My parents kept me from children who were rough

*Analysis: The title itself carries three possible readings: the most boring interpretation is simply the first two words of the poem; but "my parents" can also imply responsibility, meaning my parents are to blame for this; and the poem reads as though addressed to his parents directly, explaining the damage their protection caused. The verb "kept" is charged: it implies the speaker wanted to be with the rough boys and was held back against his will. Protection shades into captivity. The word "rough" implies not only danger but also class prejudice, establishing a divide between the speaker and the other boys.*

Who threw words like stones and wore torn clothes

*Analysis: The simile "threw words like stones" equates verbal abuse with physical violence, showing that emotional harm is just as damaging. "Torn clothes" signals poverty, reinforcing class difference.*

Their thighs showed through rags they ran in the street

And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.

*Analysis: The boys are associated with movement and freedom through active verbs. Despite their poverty, they possess physical confidence and vitality, suggesting the speaker both fears and envies their lifestyle.*

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron

*Analysis: The simile "muscles like iron" emphasizes strength and toughness. The exaggeration of fearing them "more than tigers" is worth examining: "feared" here carries a dual meaning: it is not simply terror but deep reverence, almost awe. The speaker does not merely dread the rough boys; he is genuinely impressed by them. This is why the poem is not simply a tale of bullying but something more conflicted.*

Their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms

*Analysis: This line conveys physical domination. The boys overpower the speaker, making the bullying tangible and traumatic rather than abstract.*

I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys

*Analysis: The metaphor "salt coarse pointing" makes mockery feel abrasive and painful, like salt on a wound. It transforms emotional harm into something physically felt.*

Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.

*Analysis: The imitation of his speech highlights vulnerability. The bullying targets something intrinsic to his identity, intensifying humiliation and isolation.*

They were lithe they sprang out behind hedges

Like dogs to bark at my world.

*Analysis: The simile "like dogs to bark at my world" presents the boys as animalistic and territorial. "My world" is a metaphor for his social class and the sheltered life his parents built around him, and the rough boys spring out from behind it to challenge its very existence. The boys are "behind him on the road" in the metaphorical sense too: the metaphor of the "road" for life suggests the speaker is further ahead socially and economically, while the rough boys are left behind. Their aggression is partly the anger of those who have been overtaken.*

They threw mud

While I looked the other way, pretending to smile.

*Analysis: The speaker's reaction reveals passivity and coping. "Pretending to smile" suggests suppression of pain, highlighting emotional restraint and internalized fear.*

I longed to forgive them but they never smiled.

*Analysis: The final line carries a deliberate ambiguity. "They never smiled": who is "they"? The most natural reading is the rough boys, whose refusal to smile prevents reconciliation. But on a second reading, "they" could refer to the speaker's parents, who never smiled at the rough boys either, never acknowledged their humanity, and whose own coldness toward the other class perpetuated the divide. The speaker cannot forgive what he was never given the chance to resolve.*

## About the poem

**Author:** Stephen Spender (1909–1995)

**Context:** Reflects class divisions in early 20th-century England and the social separation between middle and working classes

**Core idea:** Parental protection, intended to shield the child, instead isolates him and intensifies his vulnerability, exposing deeper class divisions and emotional trauma.

- **Main themes**

- Class conflict and division
- Childhood trauma and bullying
- Parental influence and protection
- Social isolation
- Fear and envy
- Identity and vulnerability

- **Mood:** Uneasy and tense, with underlying fear and emotional discomfort

- **Tone:** Reflective, conflicted, and slightly bitter, blending fear with a reluctant admiration

### Remember

- **The title** has three readings: first two words of the poem; my parents are responsible; addressed directly to his parents
- **"Kept"** implies against his will: he wanted to be among the rough boys; protection was also imprisonment
- **"Feared"** carries reverence as well as terror; this is not simple bullying, it is complicated admiration
- **"Road"** as a **metaphor** for life: the rough boys are behind the speaker socially; their aggression is partly the anger of those overtaken
- **"They never smiled"**: deliberately ambiguous, the rough boys OR his parents, whose own coldness mirrored the divide
- The boys represent both **threat and freedom** at the same time
- "Like dogs to bark at my world" shows class conflict, not just bullying