

# My Parents

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

## My Parents

My parents kept me from children who were rough

*Analysis: The verb "kept" suggests both protection and restriction, introducing tension between safety and isolation. 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, while the exaggeration of fearing them "more than tigers" reflects overwhelming intimidation. The boys are portrayed as almost superhuman.*

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" acts as metaphor "my world", representing his social class, showing the conflict between two different social spheres.*

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 line reveals emotional complexity. Despite the abuse, he desires reconciliation. Their lack of response reinforces his isolation and the permanence of the divide.*

## 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 boys represent both **threat and freedom** at the same time
- The speaker is trapped between **protection and isolation**
- Bullying is both physical and psychological
- "Like dogs to bark at my world" is the key. It shows class conflict, not just bullying