

*The poet describes her experience of obliging a homeless man's request for a hug. The stranger's hug is so powerful that the experience leads her to a surprising and powerful moment of realisation, about our universal human instinct to give and receive love.*

### **The Hug**

A woman is reading a poem on the street  
and another woman stops to listen. We stop too,  
with our arms around each other. The poem  
is being read and listened to out here  
in the open. Behind us  
no one is entering or leaving the houses.

Suddenly a hug comes over me and I'm  
giving it to you, like a variable star shooting light  
off to make itself comfortable, then  
subsiding. I finish but keep on holding  
you. A man walks up to us and we know he hasn't  
come out of nowhere, but if he could, he  
would have. He looks homeless because of how  
he needs. "Can I have one of those?" he asks you,  
and I feel you nod. I'm surprised,

surprised you don't tell him how  
it is – that I'm yours, only  
yours, etc., exclusive as a nose to  
its face. Love – that's what we're talking about, love  
that nabs you with "for me  
only" and holds on.

So I walk over to him and put my  
arms around him and try to  
hug him like I mean it. He's got an overcoat on  
so thick I can't feel  
him past it. I'm starting the hug  
and thinking, "How big a hug is this supposed to be?  
How long shall I hold this hug?" Already  
we could be eternal, his arms falling over my  
shoulders, my hands not  
meeting behind his back, he is so big!

I put my head into his chest and snuggle  
in. I lean into him. I lean my blood and my wishes  
into him. He stands for it. This is his  
and he's starting to give it back so well I know he's  
getting it. This hug. So truly, so tenderly  
we stop having arms and I don't know if  
my lover has walked away or what, or  
whether the woman is still reading the poem, or the houses—  
what about them?—the houses.

Clearly, a little permission is a dangerous thing.  
But when you hug someone you want it  
to be a masterpiece of connection, the way the button  
on his coat will leave the imprint of  
a planet on my cheek  
when I walk away. When I try to find some place  
to go back to.

**Tess Gallagher**