

THE HUG

by Tess Gallagher

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 am 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 has not 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 am surprised, surprised you don’t tell him how it is –
that I am 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 if 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 in my cheek when I walk away.
When I try to find some place to go back to.