

## Little Hugs: Encouragement for Your Soul

**Raman Mander**

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*Concerned with personal and spiritual relationships, Little Hugs is an insightful, encouraging poetry collection.*

Raman Mander's poetry collection *Little Hugs* concerns love, self-worth, and spirituality.

These accessible poems tend to prioritize readability over developing meanings, forwarding encouragements to help audiences through the day. Each takes a brief plunge into its themes, which are suggested by the titles that appear in an unusual place, beneath the entries. Poems like "Determined", "Symptoms," and "Love" become puzzles for their audiences to crack, with their solutions following them.

Verses are centered on the page, grounding them in their core themes. The tactic is sometimes a graceful touch, as with the short poem "Torpedo":

*I open up with so much courage.  
You shut me down with so much ego.*

As it is concerned with sharing emotions, which it suggests are weaponized in relationships, the entry's centered text interacts with the soul of the poem well; each line explores the same core. This clever poetic structure falters, though, because it is repeated 147 times throughout, its consistent use suggesting a lack of trust in the poetic language itself and making for a more laborious reading experience.

"Eternal," modeled after a catechistic self-affirmation, uses its structural elements to set the scene:

*Everlasting—  
You are the diamonds that fall on Saturn.  
Forever and always, You will remain.*

These reminders of individuals' inner beauty and divinity are encouraging. Even more powerful is the metaphor which relates an individual to a "diamond": unbreakable, valuable, and desired. *Little Hugs* so constructs its most tender moments in a masterful way. "Birthmark" muses "My face holds a mark so deep, / It marks a new birth in me," its concluding, faux-heroic couplet asserting that what the speaker first saw as an unloved part of her to "fix" became the catalyst for her rebirth.

But poems' passive voices sabotage otherwise beautiful and unsettling images. "Transformation" notes, "I am my own demon. / Flesh composing of maggots." The maggots' destruction of the body is less shocking because the flesh is the subject.

“Love”, which encourages the audience to “Stop being in love. / Start being love,” places “in” in a bold font, while underlining the second instance of “being.” Such reliance on bold words, italicization, and underlining overexplains the entries’ intended emphases. Many poems rely on interactions between high and low registers. In “Ache”, this is manifested by the relationship between medical and everyday language:

*You can't touch the smell of lavender in her perfume.  
You can't hear the egg fusing with the sperm.*

The full-stopped lines juxtapose an intimate act—smelling perfume—with a medical definition of conception, resulting in thought-provoking and insightful distance between the act of sex and the romance around it, though the lack of medical language in the rest of the poem makes the instance somewhat jarring.

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GEORGE HAJJAR (March 27, 2020)

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