

SQUEEZE

## “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” by Ocean Vuong

(excerpt from the novel published 2019 by Penguin Press)

That’s when I see her. About seventy, her hair white and windblown across a narrow face with mined-out blue eyes, she has the stare of someone who had gone beyond where she needed to go but kept walking anyway. She peers into the shop, clutching a burgandy alligator purse with both hands. I open the door and she steps inside, hobbling a bit. The wind had blown her olive scarf off her neck, and it now hangs on one shoulder, brushing the floor. You stand, smile. “How I hep you?” you ask in English.

“A pedicure, please.” Her voice is thin, as if cut with static. I help her out of her coat, hang it on the rack, and lead her to the pedicure chair as you run the air jets in the foot tub, fill the bubbling water with salts and solvents. The scent of synthetic lavender fills the room. I hold her arm and help her onto the seat. She smells of dried sweat mixed with the strong sweetness of drugstore perfume. Her wrist throbs in my grip as she lowers herself into the seat. She seems even frailer than she looks. Once she eases back in the leather chair, she turns to me. I can’t hear her over the water jets but can tell by her lips that she’s saying, “Thank you.”

When the jets are done, the water warm, an emerald green marbled with white suds, you ask her to lower her feet into the tub.

She won’t budge. Her eyes closed.

“Ma’am,” you say. The salon, usually bustling with people or music or the TV with Oprah or the news, is now silent. Only the lights hum above us. After a moment, she opens her eyes, the blue ringed pink and wet, and bends over to fiddle with her right pant leg. I take a step back. Your stool creaks as you shift your weight, your gaze fixed on her fingers. The pale veins on her hands shiver as she rolls up her pant leg. The skin is glossy, as if dipped in a kiln. She reaches lower, grabs her ankle, and, with a jerk, detaches her entire lower leg at the knee.

A prosthesis.

Halfway down her shinbone, a brownish nub protrudes, smooth and round as the end of a baguette—or what it is, an amputated leg. I glance at you, hoping for an answer. Without skipping a beat, you take out your file and start to scrub her one foot, the puckered nub beside it shaking from the work. The woman places the prosthesis at her side, her arm resting protectively around its calf, then sits back, exhaling. “Thank you,” she says again, louder, to the crown of your head.

I sit on the carpet and wait for you to call for the hot towel from the warming case. Throughout the pedicure, the woman sways her head from side to side, eyes half-closed.

When you finish, turning to me for the towel, she leans over, gestures toward her right leg, the nub hovering above the water, dry this whole time.

She says, “Would you mind,” and coughs into her arm. “This one also. If it’s not too much.” She pauses, stares out the window, then down at her lap.

Again, you say nothing—but turn, almost imperceptibly, to her right leg, run a measured caress along the nub’s length, before cradling a handful of warm water over the tip, the thin streams crisscrossing the leathered skin. Water droplets. When you’re almost done rinsing the

soap off, she asks you, gently, almost pleading, to go lower. "If it's the same price anyway," she says. "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can. I can."

You pause—a flicker across your face.

Then, the crow's-feet on your eyes only slightly starker, you wrap your fingers around the air where her calf should be, knead it as if it were fully there. You continue down her invisible foot, rub its bony upper side before cupping the heel with your other hand, pinching along the Achilles' tendon, then stretching the stiff cords along the ankle's underside.

When you turn to me once more, I run to fetch a towel from the case. Without a word, you slide the towel under the phantom limb, pad down the air, the muscle memory in your arms firing the familiar efficient motions, revealing what's not there, the way a conductor's movements make the music somehow more real.

Her foot dry, the woman straps on her prosthesis, rolls down her pant leg, and climbs off. I grab her coat and help her into it. You start walking over to the register when she stops you, places a folded hundred-dollar bill in your palm.

"The lord keep you," she says, eyes lowered—and hobbles out, the bell chime over the door clanging twice as it closes. You stand there, staring at nothing.

Ben Franklin's face darkening in your still wet fingers, you slip the bill under your bra, not the register, then retie your hair.

That night, bellydown on the hardwood, your face resting on a pillow, you asked me to scrape your back. I knelt beside you, peeled your black T-shirt over your shoulders, unhooked your bra. Having done this hundreds of times by now, my hands moved on their own. As the hands fell away, you grabbed the bra, pulled it out from under you, and tossed it aside. Heavy with sweat from the day's work, it landed on the floor with the thud of a knee brace.

The chemicals from the nail salon rose from your skin. I fished a quarter from my pocket, dipped it into the jar of Vicks VapoRub. The bright eucalyptus scent filled the air and you started to relax. I dunked the coin, coating it with the greasy ointment, then dabbed a thumb's worth across your back, down your spine. When your skin shone, I placed the coin at the base of your neck and pulled it outward, across your shoulder blades. I scraped and rescraped in firm, steady strokes, the way you taught me, until russet streaks rose from under the white flesh, the welts deepening into violet grains across your back like new, dark ribs, releasing the bad winds from your body. Through this careful bruising, you heal.

I think of Barthes again. *A writer is someone who plays with the body of his mother*, he says after the death of his own mother, *in order to glorify it, to embellish it*.

How I want this to be true.

And yet, even here, writing you, the physical fact of your body resists my moving it. Even in these sentences, I place my hands on your back and see how dark they are as they lie against the unchangeable white backdrop of your skin. Even now, I see the folds of your waist and hips as I knead out the tensions, the small bones along your spine, a row of ellipses no silence translates. Even after all these years, the contrast between our skin surprises me—the way a blank page does when my hand, gripping a pen, begins to move through its spatial

field, trying to act upon its life without marring it. But by writing, I mar it. I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once.

You groaned into the pillow as I pressed along your shoulders, then worked down through the stubborn knots. "This is nice... This is so nice." After a while, your breathing deepened, evened out, your arms slack, and you were asleep.

### Tyra's thoughts on "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" in relation to *SQUEEZE*

This chapter from Vuong's book moves me deeply every time I read it. A transformative interpersonal meeting between strangers connected through recalling and treating a missing piece. A missing body part that is felt as if it was there. Reading studies about the phantom limb syndrome, I learnt that it requires alternative, aesthetically-stimulating, treatments to ease pain in the phantom limb, and even to give it pleasure. The "phantom massage" that we practice in *SQUEEZE*, does not claim that something is missing from the bodies in the space. Our virtual touch aims to expand the perception to what more our bodies can be beyond their physical limits.

I'm fascinated by the caring gesture in all its forms, yet the hand gesture speaks the strongest to me. In *SQUEEZE* we fill our hands with caring intention and transport it to the space. When gazing at a shoulder belonging to a physical person in the space, the shoulder expands into our caring hands, where it can be treated and transformed.

The end of the chapter, when Vuong describes treating his mother's back after a long day's work at the nail salon, speaks of another theme dear to me: the care for the caregiver. In real life this is a rarity for caregivers who doesn't have the resources, or a benevolent child, to care for their exhausted bodies. In *SQUEEZE* we search for ways of giving and receiving massage simultaneously. A sort of instantly regenerative care. Not as relaxing as the massage when the receiver can fully let go, but a fun way of hanging out and emphasizing the reciprocal process that good caregiving is.

## *Squeeze & SQUEEZE*

[https://ubu.com/film/rottenberg\\_squeeze.html](https://ubu.com/film/rottenberg_squeeze.html)

It was in 2016, long before my choreographic project *SQUEEZE* was born, that I visited a large solo exhibition by artist Mika Rottenberg a Palais de Tokyo in Paris. In a small, dark room in the exhibition I encountered Rottenberg's video work "Squeeze" from 2010 –the same year that I finished my diploma as a massage therapist. I guess it was my immersion in massage therapy (and perhaps a subconscious passion in ASMR before I had a term for it), that intermeshed my perception to the different materialities and textures in "Squeeze". Especially the scenes treating the rubber blocks gave me a vivid haptic imagination. My hands were digging into that texture, my fingernails breaking it until my whole arms were in it. Watching longer, I started to identify with that rubber, becoming one with its weight, letting myself be confidently treated by hands and machines. Never before had I been so physically engaged in an audiovisual artwork.

When I years later, in 2022, started to formulate the concept of *SQUEEZE*, I got reminded of the film that I appropriated my project title from. I rewatched it and found that those themes in "Squeeze" are also, in direct or indirect ways, my interests in *SQUEEZE*: the treating and transforming of different materialities, the will to give attention to the people who do manual labour, whether it's farming, industrial production, or bodywork, and the fact that beyond our social and subjective identities, all humans are just matter like any living matter on this planet. We can be used, extracted, processed, consumed, and cared for. The characters in the film are separated by walls with only partial and impersonal contact. The contact that we get to see is making tangible those otherwise invisible interrelations of all actors in the capitalist system. In difference to the power-disbalance in our racist reality, "Squeeze" displays most actors as both consuming and being consumed in the same, seemingly pointless, machinery. In my *SQUEEZE*, we subvert this double exploitation into a reciprocal utilitarian relation. By simultaneously giving and receiving massage, we strive for no other outcome than muscular release and interpersonal connection. Expanding manual labour beyond the production of material commodities.

To me, massage therapy is an essential practice in a culture that relentlessly produces static tension. With *SQUEEZE* I want to celebrate massage as something that through caring and softening intentions connects us beyond the isolation that comes from categorisation - even with other materials, or so called "empty space" in between giver and receiver.

Only a small part of society can afford to pay for massage or other body treatments, but who says it has to be a monetary transaction? In my utopia we as friends, colleagues, family members, and lovers, are massaging *each other* whenever we feel the need and desire. *SQUEEZE* is a search for this utopia.

TYRA WIGG  
SQUEEZE  
8-9.11

SQUEEZE offers a terrain to contemplate and experience different dimensions of massage therapy.

This ancient healing method is here lifted out of the treatment room and translated into a social choreography in the performance space. Driven by haptic desire and anatomical curiosity, five performers knead, press, shake and stretch each other's body tissues. Even thick textiles and empty spaces are carefully treated. From these actions, sculptural constellations emerge and dissolve, imbued with pleasure-pain and tension-relief. Alternating sounds of electronic music and open landscapes suggest that massage can and should spill over into other spheres of daily life.

Audience members who express their consent can be touched by the performers. Everyone is welcome to stay in the room, relax and practice massage after the performance.

CREDITS

Concept, choreography: Tyra Wigg  
Development, performance: Simon Fleury, Tejus Menon, Natascha Moschini, Yixuan Xiao, Tyra Wigg/Marie Popall  
Sound design, live DJ: Nya Buerki aka Graue Kreide  
Costume, scenography: Ernestyna Orłowska, Carolina Misztela, Tyra Wigg  
Dramaturgical support: Johanna Hilari, Sonja Jokiniemi  
Choreographic development: Mariana Suikkanen Gomes  
Musical research: Thy Truong, Tyra Wigg  
Production: ProduktionsDOCK. Tour: Caroline Fröelich (Moin Moin Productions)  
Co-production: ROXY Birsfelden, MDT - Moderna Dansteatern, PREMIO award for emerging artists in performing arts.

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ABOUT TYRA WIGG

Tyra Wigg (they/them) is a choreographer, performer and massage therapist from Stockholm, Sweden, living in Basel, Switzerland since 2020. They are interested in how artistic practices can expand cultural and personal perceptions of the body.

Tyra's work has been presented at Schinkel Pavillon Berlin, ROXY Birsfelden, Les Urbaines, Kunsthalle Basel, Kunsthau Baselland, Weld Stockholm, BONE festival Bern, festival far°, Shedhalle Zürich, depARTures München, YUP Osnabrück, Black Forest Institute of Art, and SITE.

Tyra has worked as a dancer and performer for Gisèle Vienne, Heiner Goebbels, Shu Lea Cheang, Inga Gerner Nielsen, Ernestyna Orłowska, Pontus Petterson, Marina Abramovic, Alexandra Pirici, Marie Fahlin, Virpi Pahkinen, and others.

Tyra holds an MA in Expanded Theatre from the Bern University of the Arts, HKB. Since 2022 they are a driving member in the nomadic queer feminist reading collective Blasphemous Reading Soirees. 2023-24 they are "LAB-artist in residence" at Kaserne Basel. 2021 Tyra participated in DanceWeb at Impulstanz with Anne Juren and Frédéric Gies as mentors. [www.tyrawigg.com](http://www.tyrawigg.com)

