

2022

## Be Holding

Taylor Byas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Byas, Taylor (2022) "Be Holding," *Birmingham Poetry Review*. Vol. 49, Article 75.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr/vol49/iss2022/75>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

# Be Holding

by Ross Gay

**Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020, 120 pp. \$17.00. (pa.)**

*Be Holding*, Ross Gay's book-length poem, is a breathless meditation on what it means to behold, to be held, and to be beholden to those who came before us. And the framing device for the collection—Julius Erving's famous move from the 1980s NBA finals, the baseline reverse scoop—is a thing to behold in itself. But it is also didactic in how it teaches us as readers how to *look*. The poem's movement is almost accordion-like, stretching Dr. J's basketball move across the span of the entire collection while simultaneously collapsing both personal and public junctures of Black history into these few seconds of action. Through this fluid back and forth, Gay illuminates how the Black present and past are always colliding and how joy cannot exist without grief lapping at its heels.

To consider what it means to behold and to be held is also to consider the difference between the Black and white gaze, a dichotomy that is inseparable from the NBA itself. On the one hand, the act of watching NBA basketball is a communal and joyous occasion for Black spectators. This delight is evident in the speaker's spirited descriptions of Dr. J, "the precision and elegance // with which Doc knows when and for how long / to pull his head towards his heart // so as not to smash it into the glass backboard" (42). On the other hand, many have critiqued the NBA for being a contemporary institution of slavery. With over 70% of the NBA's players being Black and most of the NBA owners being white, some would argue that the Black NBA star is merely entertainment for the white spectator, "and his life, *loot*" for the white owner (56).

Gay furthers this conversation through studies of photographs throughout the collection. One of the most notable moments in the poem occurs when the speaker examines a picture of Tiare Jones and her godmother Diana Bryant falling from a fire escape that collapsed “in a college gallery / for mostly white wealthy children”(30). Through this picture, Gay highlights the commodification of Black bodies, pain, and death. We move seamlessly from a description of Tiare and Diana’s falling to the realization that Tiare looked directly into the camera, meaning she saw “herself being seen / shot captured . . . and held like that / unlovingly by the camera” (35). Not only does a white photojournalist capture this moment, he went on to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in spot photography for cataloging Tiare’s terror, moving the celebration of Black trauma to an institutional and systemic level. But even this exploitation isn’t enough. When the speaker researches the photograph, he discovers an article that contains another image in which the still-alive Tiare is pointing and smiling at the original photo of her falling. Gay imagines someone stopping the photographer from taking this perverse and insulting picture:

and no one took the photographer,  
as he was on one knee adjusting tenderly

his lens with the tenderest parts  
of his thumb and first two fingers,

bringing the child into sharp focus for capture,  
and squinting and chirping directions,

*can you smile for me honey,  
can you point to your dead godmother and yourself forever falling*

*honey*, putting their hands over the lens  
and guiding it towards the photographer's hip,

before pinning him to the wall by his collar  
or arm and whispering deep

...

take that photograph

and I will cut the eyes from your head.

(40–41)

Gay's focus on the tenderness the photographer lends to the camera and to the adjusting of the lens points to the glaring lack of tenderness the photographer holds for Tiare herself. Although Gay imagines the photographer calling Tiare "honey" as a term of endearment, the word becomes patronizing when juxtaposed to the absurd instructions to "smile for me" and "point to your dead godmother and yourself forever falling." Tiare is held not once but twice in the harmful white gaze, captured in the photographs of white men who only wanted to contribute to "the museum / of black pain" (41). And in the museum of Black pain, viewers will behold that Black trauma over and over and over.

Shortly after the discussion of Tiare's photographs, the speaker begins to "wonder *how* / [he], too, [is] a docent / in the museum of black pain," and in some ways, the speaker does continue to guide us through the way white people commodify Blackness (41). In a later discussion of another picture—the picture that was also chosen for the cover of the book—the speaker notes a similar exchange taking place between the famous white photographer Jack Delano and the Black individuals within the image. Gay presents both the grandmother and the younger boy as skeptical and

cautious of the white gaze embodied by the camera. The grandmother is aware of “the looking / this camera wants to do // to her boy . . . for the insurance” (67). It is important to notice that the looking is no longer a passive act but is now something that can be *done to* something else. Wrapped up in the grandmother’s knowledge of the camera’s intentions is also the acknowledgement of “her boy” as an object onto which the camera will act. The young boy also has some awareness of the camera’s disingenuity:

for he too knows  
he’s being looked at,

he knows  
he’s being shot,

he’s being shared,  
by someone who doesn’t love him,

and so does not give his whole body  
to the camera. (67)

In this passage, Gay equates the white “looking” to both “shooting” and “sharing,” actions that violate the agentless recipient. Even in the boy’s awareness and in his withholding of his body, which is the only agency he has, he is still seen, shot, and shared.

Gay’s repeated use of the word “shot” is also intentional and is only one instance of how he utilizes repetition and the layers of language. “Shot” is used to mean “to be photographed” throughout the poem, but the literal meaning of being shot simmers right beneath the surface. In our current political and racial climate, it is nearly impossible to read “she sees herself being seen / shot” and “he knows / he’s being shot” and not imagine the Black men and women who have been murdered by the police.

The phrase “thrown overboard for the insurance” also appears multiple times throughout the collection, and the double-meaning of “insurance” shifts, as “insurance” can be either protection or monetary compensation. “Thrown overboard” is mostly metaphorical within the poem, but the phrase alone is heavy with the real and horrific history of the transatlantic slave trade, where slaves were thrown overboard and drowned. The concept of “flight” also shape-shifts throughout the poem. We watch as “Doc continues his flight / over the baseline” as the speaker returns time and again to this moment on the court (28). Dr. J has actually taken flight from the ground, but the concept of “flight” also has historical connotations, as it once referred to an escape to the north during antebellum slavery. Gay also hints at other meanings for flight when the speaker recalls a memory with an old basketball friend:

and Timmy would engine  
his arms and shoulders

at first as though whirling a quick cabbage patch,  
before sinking into a squat

from which he'd spin back upright while  
typhooning centrifugally, his head dipping to his chest

...

Little astilbe little trillium  
little delphinium drowsing in the rain

to *Spread My Wings*  
(and fly away

to the place that I long for)  
(48)

In this passage, Gay directly ties this childhood memory to an earlier image of Dr. J pulling “his head towards his heart” while also connecting physical flight to liberation, a return to a state of joy.

So what does this liberation look like? It looks like Gay making the choice to suspend Dr. J in his joyous flight for the entirety of the book. It looks like the final photograph in the poem, a picture of two Black women smiling and running towards the camera. In the book’s final pages, Gay reclaims the gaze. By including a picture taken by Black photographer Carrie Mae Weems, featuring Black individuals who are running towards the camera’s flash “like [they] are going to // bound through it, / [they are] going to fly through it,” Gay drives home the difference between the white and Black gaze (95). Instead of doubt and hesitation, the women are “moved / by the looking / toward the looking” because they know they aren’t being objectified or commodified by a white audience. There is a clear and necessary distinction made between being beheld by a voyeuristic white gaze and being held by one another. In the book’s final lines, Dr. J finally lands, and we—the audience at the game, the speaker, the reader—can finally breathe. But this isn’t simply because we’ve been waiting for the moment from the book’s beginning pages. Gay sprinkles reminders to breathe through the entire poem, particularly in the poem’s most painful places, writing, “But let’s breathe first. / We’re always holding our breath” (39). And it seems that as Black people in this country, we *are* always holding our breath, waiting for the next tragedy, for the next hashtag, for the next photograph to be taken of our pain. But Gay’s final line, “we breathe,” is a statement and a mantra. We breathe in this moment of joy. We must continue to breathe through whatever comes next.

—Taylor Byas