

A Tribute to Janice Gould

DEAN RADER

It is hard for me to imagine a world without Janice Gould in it.

Janice and I did not see each other that often, and we could go months without communicating, but I always felt close to her. Her death affected me more than I feel like I can express, adequately, here. In fact, I'm still coming to terms with the realization that she is no longer on this earth. She was kind, compassionate, patient, and crazy smart.

Composing a text about someone in close proximity to their death is beyond difficult. As I write this, Janice has only been gone a few days, and I am reminded so clearly of trying to compose my father's obituary on the very day he died—a task both impossible and necessary. I was on a plane, a United Airlines flight, back to Oklahoma to make arrangements for his body while trying to convey something about his essence to those who knew him and those who did not. Ironically (or not) I was also on a United Airlines flight when I learned of Janice's death, this time, though, headed the opposite direction—to Colorado, where she both was and was not. When I landed in Denver, I was aware that I was closer to my friend than I had been in a long while, and yes, also much farther away.

Time—Transit—Transformation. The great triumvirate of our lives.

I don't know where Janice is now, but I already miss her. I do not think of myself as a collaborative person, but it would appear that I have spent most of my academic career collaborating, and Janice was my first collaborator. Our work on *Speak to Me Words* was formative in the field but also for me personally and professionally. Working with Janice on that book changed my life in small and not-so-small ways. I still remember the first time we spoke on the phone about the project. I had proposed the book idea to the University of Arizona Press, and while they liked the idea, they recommended a coeditor. Our editor at

the press, Patti Harmann, and I discussed several different folks, but we both kept coming back to Janice, though Janice and I had never met. Some emails were exchanged between Patti and Janice, then the three of us, then Janice suggested she and I talk by phone. I was nervous when I dialed her number and more nervous at the beginning of our conversations. There were many pauses on her end. Was she being cautious? Did I sound stupid? Was the former because of the latter? In my memory, we had a lovely and fruitful exchange. That conversation evolved into a wonderful working relationship that went beyond *Speak to Me Words*. I have so many fond memories of the arc of our personal and professional lives: Janice sending me chapters of her dissertation. Me seeking advice for the special issue of *Sentence*. Janice sharing photographs. Me sending Janice poems. Janice sending me poems. Janice dissecting panels we were on. Janice emailing me to tell me that just yesterday she and Mimi had gotten married! Janice, Qwo-Li, and me reading at Powell's, Janice telling me about her MLS degree, her move to Tucson, her move to Colorado Springs. Janice as a poet laureate! Janice and I discussing what to include in *Native Voices*. Janice getting sick. Janice dying.

Janice dying.

Janice dying.

That sentence caused me to stop and reread what I've written.

I fear I have said too much about myself and not enough about Janice. But people are important to you because of how they make you feel, and Janice always made me feel good. She understood my writerly restlessness. She and I seemed perpetually to be wearing different professional hats—often at the same time. She was a brilliant poet, an amazing photographer, a gifted scholar, a badass musician, and an excellent essayist. And if that was not enough, she decided, right in the middle of everything, to go back to school and get a graduate degree in library science. Who does that? Oh, I almost forgot—she also earned a second-degree black belt in Aikido. When Janice and I met I was, less impressively, writing scholarly essays while also trying to publish poems while also writing about pop culture while also translating Latin American poetry while also trying to write about Paul Klee. Was I a poet? A critic? A scholar? If a scholar, was it of poetry? Painting? Fiction? Film? Janice understood my confusions, my ambitions, my disillusion. She is one of the few people with whom I've exchanged

both critical and creative work. We recognized in each other that desire to multitask. One genre was never enough.

That said, my favorite of her many genres is her poetry. I've long believed that Janice was and is underrated as a poet. Her poems were provocative spaces that, in retrospect, were ahead of their times. Her work engages lesbian erotics, land reclamation, Indian mascots, environmentalism, Indigenous genocide, and sexual violence. Her early poems were edgy but quiet. Maybe quiet but edgy. Smart. Sneaky smart. Her poems were autobiographical without being confessional—she never tried to mythologize the self or capitalize on trauma. Rather, she was able to connect with readers by way of candor, by way of truth. Reading her poems, you felt you knew her. Remember this passage from “Autobiography”?

After awhile, I manifested
 a tendency to howl,
 cry inconsolably,
 and choose the wrong women.

The appendix may be consulted
 for a list of lovers, pets
 travels, etc.

How can you not love the poet who writes those lines?

Though her early poems like “Coyotismo” and “Day of the Dead” are the pieces most readers are likely to know, I think her best work is *Doubters and Dreamers*. That book is just brilliant. Her deployment of the sonnet is gorgeous, and her fluency with the villanelle is top shelf. Like very top shelf, where the best stuff is. I mean, how good are these opening lines from “XXI Villanelle”?

Because I hear the voices of the dead
 at night (who call out in the circling storm),
 I cannot cut the knot or loose the thread.

Earth opens; I see a faint trail ahead
 but stay among the ones who laugh or mourn.
 Because I hear the voices of the dead,

I smudge the air with sage, incense, and red
 cedar and pray to see it all transform.

Beauty + darkness = unforgettable. Add truth and wisdom to that (as this one does), and you have a poem everyone should be reading. And by everyone I mean, like, everyone.

The poem I've been thinking about the most since I learned she passed is one we published in *Native Voices*. It is also the opening poem for her final book, *Seed*, which appeared earlier this year and which, fortunately, she got to see in print. It is one of those poems whose title is also its first line:

A POEM

is about to flower
 full force from my abdomen,
 my spleen, my wrists,

 my ankles. I could feel the pip of it
 in last night's dream
 that kept threading its way
 back to sacred land

It makes me happy—perhaps because it is some sort of victory over death—to think of a poem flowering from the totality of Janice's body. I think I'm just going to leave it at that.

Janice was, like her poems, gracious, generous, and giving. Working with her was a kind of base code for me in terms of collaborating with other artists and writers. She taught me more than she knew. My life—like this world—has been made richer because of her.