

## Fear-Goggles

John Gardner, though deceased and personally unknown to me, is a cool dude. He has two somewhat well known books -- the novel, *Grendel*, and the book on writing, *The Art of Fiction*. I happen to own a first edition of his excellent and out-of-print novel, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, which I

have yet to have a conversation about, because no one's heard of it, let alone read it. For the most part, people will know *The Art of Fiction*, a book from which I hijack an exercise for my classes. Gardner's exercises go something like this: Describe a lake from the POV of a bird, but don't mention the bird. Or, Describe a barn from the POV of a man who has just committed a murder, but don't mention the murder. A good writer, he writes, should be able to convey to a reader that a man has lost his son in a war simply through describing a place, never having to mention the death. This is advanced writer territory, but its technique can be hammered home early in writing classes.



What I do with this exercise is ask all the students to write down an event or series of events that have put them in a particular mood. Some actual examples that students have written:

"Waking up, the first day after my partner died." (Certainly conjures a mood)

"Miraculously not being charged an overdraft fee by the bank when I had clearly overdrafted." (I love this one)

"Deciding to quit my job, and literally one hour before I was going to quit, being fired." (How would you feel?)

The students write down these events that elicit a specific mood-response, emotional response, then fold the paper, hand it to

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another student, but they do not look at the event on the slip of paper. These examples are from the adult education creative writing course, not the college. That's important to note, because what we do next is head to a bar.

At the bar, I tell everyone to get a drink, if they like, find a place to sit, get out a notebook, and then open up the slip of paper to find out what has just happened to them -- so, you're at the bar, and today you were not charged an overdraft fee when you had clearly overdrafted. Now, look around the room and describe everything you see -- the bar customers, what they are saying to each other, the bartender, the servers, the floor, the crap on the walls, the smell in the air, the beer on your tongue, the music from the jukebox, the displays on the megatouch game, and on and on. But don't mention what happened to you.

There's no such thing as a chair -- if you just lost your spouse, it's an empty chair. Everything in our sensory world comes through our mind and heart and looks, feels, smells, sounds, tastes different given our emotional state.

For the college kids, we go to a park if it's nice. Everyone likes a little field trip, don't we?

Then we come back together, share what we've written and everyone in class guesses what the emotional state was or the events that created it. It's a cool game.