Three Poems by Jonathan Rothschild and Corresponding Writing Prompts

1. The Excuse Poem
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3. The “Colors” of Things
Tax Dollars

My lifetime contribution to this great country now is spent in bombs dropped on foreign soil.
I remain as calm as any German citizen in 1939, going about my business, my daily tasks, ignoring the papers, the radio. If I do not know the detail I am not implicated. No one asked me, and if they had, no one would have listened.

Jonathan Rothschild
(from The Last Clubhouse Eulogy, c1999, Chax Press, Tucson)
The Excuse Poem

Discussion: Read “Tax Dollars” once together as a class and once silently.

Look closely at the structure of the poem and the changes the speaker goes through in the seven lines. In the first line, the speaker says, “My lifetime contribution to this great country....” Rothschild has taken a simple, everyday action, “paying taxes,” and turned it into a patriotic gesture by looking at the big picture of the effects of that action. This first line establishes what Rothschild’s action of paying taxes should have done.

The second line tells us what happened instead: “now is spent in bombs dropped on foreign soil.” He used the same scope, the same big picture approach to discuss the ultimate effect of his small action.

The third line shows us what the speaker was thinking at the time of committing this action, and implies that there is something to feel guilty about: “I remain as calm as any German citizen in 1939,/going about my business, my daily tasks, ignoring....” This simile lets us into the speaker’s interior state, and provides a good contrast with the big picture of the first two lines. Note that Rothschild doesn’t tell us what the speaker is feeling, but shows us with a comparison to a historical figure the larger implications of one person’s actions.

The last three lines are excuses for the actions about which the speaker feels guilty, but they are tinged with a little sarcasm or irony. “If I do not know the detail I am not implicated.” Is this true? Or is he exaggerating? Is it even possibly a joke?

Writing Exercise: Ask the students to write a poem in which they excuse themselves for something they’ve done that they feel guilty about (it can be made up if they prefer). They should attempt to mimic the emotion expressed in each line of Tax Dollars.

Brainstorm: Ask the students to come up with two or three examples of things they feel guilty about either doing or not doing. Were they ever responsible for getting a task done that they blew off? Did they ever make a joke that was meaner than they meant it to be? Did they ever go somewhere they were told not to? Use one of these instances to write your poem.

The poem should answer the following questions in some way:

What should you have done?

Ask the students to take a simple action or task and enlarge it to see the big picture, the same way that Rothschild turns something as small as paying taxes into a “lifetime contribution to this great country.” What are the furthest-reaching consequences of this action or task?

Example line: If a student was supposed to do the dishes, he might rephrase this as “Taking part in the necessary mechanics of running a household.”
The Excuse Poem cont’d

What happened instead?

Using the language from the first line, turn the concept so that it describes what happened instead—the thing that makes the student feel guilty.

Example line: So if instead of doing the dishes, the student played video games, he might say, “easily slipped into hours of running up the electricity bill chasing down virtual demons.”

What were you thinking at the time?

“I remain as calm as any German citizen in 1939,/going about my business, my daily tasks, ignoring...”

Rothschild uses a simile in this instance to compare what he does to a citizen in Germany during the Holocaust—implicit support of atrocities. Encourage your students to use figurative language to express why they did what they did, and why it was something they now feel guilty about.

Example line: “Like my three-year old brother drawing art on the walls, this was my idea of ‘helping’” could be the next line in the hypothetical dishes poem.

How do you excuse yourself from this action?

Encourage your students to get creative with this part—they can be funny or silly or serious in explaining why they didn’t do what they were supposed to. Look at Rothschild’s line, “If I do not know the detail I am not implicated.” Is this true? Or is he exaggerating? Is it even possibly a joke?

Example lines: “How could I have resisted the siren call of Okami? Why should I take part in a real life where the only treasures I collect are pruny fingertips?”
New Orleans

Barges flow over the city.
The river carries the port
to Slidell. Down Claiborne
vessels shake, resurrect
the poor, unwashed each
holding his own ticket to fear.

Inundated, nowhere to go,
exposed as the cargo of dollars
wallows in smug rhetoric,
and sinks the black menace,
the crippled, the huddled.

As homes drown in lunar sunsets,
aging mannequins and neon
infants appear from nowhere,
astonished at the ignorance
and neglect revealed
in the drying flood.

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Associative City Poem

**Brainstorm 1:** Have students choose a line in the poem that stuck out for them—why did it stick out? Ask them to jot down (casually) what other ideas the line brings up—memories, related words, related concepts.

Example Brainstorm:

“They poor, unwashed each/ holding his own ticket to fear”

The circus, sideshow freaks
The Statue of Liberty (huddled masses)
Ellis Island
Chernobyl
*A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*—that scene where the doctor complains about Francie’s dirty arm in front of her when she goes in to get vaccinated

*The Last Unicorn*—the harpy who can see the unicorn and torments her, saying terrible things to her about being the last of her kind

**Brainstorm 2:** Have the students brainstorm images, sounds, smells, etc. that describe a favorite city or one they have lived in.

Example brainstorm: Tucson

monsoon clouds
Heat shimmer
spines
Day of the Dead
potholes
creosote smell
mountain lions
mosaics
homeless

Ask them to use these words, concepts, memories to write their own poems about a city.

Example poem: A mosaic of sideshow freaks

harpies and mountain lions leaping through potholes into Chernobyl.
The sweat-drenched homeless in black masks with white bones
in line to climb the Statue of Liberty, the shimmer of sweat from
hot bodies forming the anvil monsoon clouds that bring relief.
Colors

How is the wine and book and women’s stock club transformed tonight? What possesses you to disguise your desires, to collapse our natural divisions? Is it too much for me to hide in the study, watching television, watching the eternal season of sport? With pretzels and beer I am whole. Do I need to understand the matrix of my neighbor’s personality? Isn’t it enough if I think he is a nice guy, she a tempestuous ditzy eyed siren? Their needs and struggles, values and stresses are enough for them. As you mouth secrets under compelled oath, do not take my tight silence as arrogance or fear. What I know is that your soft orange heart can not bear the gold truth made blue by the fact of our long green experience.

Jonathan Rothschild
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The “Colors” of Things

Prewrite: Before even reading the poem “Colors,” ask students to write a list of ten nouns—at least two should be abstract, like gossip or education or wealth or weariness. For a good list of abstract nouns, click here. The other eight or so words can be concrete objects, but ask the students not to just list objects in the classroom—try to think of unique objects from home or from personal experiences that other students would not think to list. Tell them they’ll be using the words later and to take the time to come up with a good variety of words they like.

Discussion:

Spend a little time coming to a class conception of the poem—what do you think the speaker’s point is, and who is he talking to? Why does he want to avoid getting to know the neighbors more personally? Do you think this is a valid way to look at the world?

Look closely at the last three lines: “What I know is that your soft orange heart/ can not bear the gold truth made blue by the fact/of our long green experience.”

What is a soft orange heart? How old is the owner of that kind of heart? What is s/he like? Has that heart been in love before? Is it disappointed? What kind of emotions are soft orange ones?

What about the gold truth? What is that? How does it differ from a black or silver truth? How could a gold truth change to blue? What would have to happen to change the color that way?

And what is a long green experience? What ideas does the word “green” bring up, and do they seem to fit with the word “long?” So what do they mean together? What kind of experience have the speaker and his subject had?

Activity: Finally, ask students to construct a poem using five of the nouns they chose, and assigning a color to each one. How do the colors interact? What emotions do they think of with each color? Does the meaning change depending on which noun they put with which color?