Change like a cloud

A National Poetry Day resource
created by the Emma Press

It’s Easy for Clouds

I don’t know how,
but clouds can change
from their own selves to something strange:
a snake, a cake, a crow,
a crown, a car, a calf,
half a giraffe, a cart,
a carton or a tart.

Juris Kronbergs

From The Book of Clouds by Juris Kronbergs,
translated from Latvian by Māra Rozite and Richard O’Brien
illustrated by Anete Melece, Emma Press

Read the whole of this poem and two more from
The Book of Clouds on the National Poetry Day website
https://nationalpoetryday.co.uk/poem/its-easy-for-clouds/
Activities:
Fancy writing your own poem and then maybe illustrating it too? Poet and translator Richard O’Brien has come up with some ideas to help get you started.

• Juris Kronbergs’s poem ‘Encyclopedias’ gives a list of real types of cloud, and on the next page the author makes up some others and talks about their characteristics. Some examples from The Book of Clouds are ‘car clouds’ and ‘ant clouds’. Next time you’re outside, have a go at doing the same: look up at a cloud and try to describe what it looks like. This might be difficult, because clouds are changing all the time! But decide what category of cloud yours might belong to, and think about how it might behave. If your cloud is a whale, how would it feel slowly drifting around the sky? Would it be like a whale in the sea, or very different? If your cloud is a turkey, does it cluck and gobble? How do the other clouds feel about this?

• Clouds go to a lot of places in their lives – their perspective on the world is changing all the time, because they find it so easy to get around. You might not have gone as far as they can, but you can still imagine what it might be like to roam so freely, from so high up. Pick a place you know – somewhere near you, like a park or a swimming pool, or maybe somewhere you’ve been on holiday or to visit family. Try and describe how that place might look from above, to a cloud – especially a busy cloud with other places to be!

What does it think of everything it sees? Try not to think about the place the way you see it, get inside the head of the cloud.

• In ‘It’s Easy for Clouds’, my fellow translator Māra Rozīte takes on a tricky challenge: she wrote this list of words for things clouds can change into as an English version of what the original author does in his own language, Latvian.

It’s a fun way of writing, and it works because the lines are about change. So Māra feels free to follow the sounds – the ‘s’, the ‘c’, the ‘alf’ of ‘calf’ and ‘giraffe’ – and see where they take her. It doesn’t matter that there’s no other reason for these words to be in the same list – the sound is enough! Try putting together your own list of things changing into other things, where you let the letters and the rhythm help you choose the words. If you need something to kick you off, try this:
Clouds can change from their own selves to something strange:
a box, a fox, a frog,
a log, a [......], a [......]

• When the cloud ‘cries itself out’ in the same poem, the illustrator Anete Melece makes that idea something you can see on the page by having the writing gradually disappear. This makes it feel like just at that moment, the poem is the cloud. It’s a piece of writing and a piece of art at the same time. Think about ways in which you could do something similar, writing about a cloud and then making the look of your poem add to the ideas in it. For example, you could talk about a storm and write ‘Then the clouds THUNDERED’ to help the reader understand that the sky is dark, and that thunder is loud! What else could you do to make the words of the poem look as exciting as they sound?

• In ‘This’, Juris Kronbergs asks what clouds can teach us and gives one possible answer: they can help us learn a lesson about change. I like the idea of things in the world outside being able to teach us things in a different way to how we’re taught in school. But it’s not just clouds – frogs can teach us, and flowers, and bugs. Pay attention to something you see in the world – whether it’s natural or made by humans – and think about how it might also be able to teach us something. You could start with a version of the original question: e.g. ‘What can bugs teach us?’ Then give your own short response.

• In Juris’s poem about clouds, the answer seems especially neat because it rhymes all the way through — the words ‘slow’, ‘show’ and ‘go’ sound similar, so they tie the whole idea together. If you like, you could try the same thing: make your lesson even more memorable by picking words that rhyme and reinforce the idea.

We’d love to see what you come up with in response to these prompts! If you’d like us to take a look, email your poems and pictures to hello@theemmapress.com with ‘The Book of Clouds’ in the subject line.

Find even more information and inspiration www.nationalpoetryday.org