“Ideogram” poem

--from Cardinal Ideograms

0  A mouth. Can blow or breathe,  
    be a funnel, or Hello.

1  A grass blade or cut.

2  A question seated. And a proud  
    bird’s neck.

3  Shallow mitten for a two-fingered hand.

4  Three-cornered hut  
    on one stilt. Sometimes built  
    so the roof gapes.

5  A policeman. Polite.  
    Wearing a visored cap.

by May Swenson

© May Swenson (1913-1989). Swenson wrote some of the most thought-provoking poems in the English language. “Cardinal Ideograms” is from The Complete Poems to Solve, by May Swenson, which is a REALLY COOL BOOK!!! Find it! Read it! Solve the riddles in it!!

Poetry Idea

In case you haven’t already figured this poem out, May Swenson looks at the numbers 0-5 (the poem actually goes up to 9) as mere shapes, and tries to figure out what they look like. Try writing an “Ideogram” poem:

1. Use the letter of your first (or last) name, either capitals or lowercase. Line them up vertically on the page:

   J
   O
   Y
   C
   E
2. Look at each letter individually. What does its shape remind you of? Write a brief descriptive phrase or two next to each letter. ("J: A raindrop splatting. A cane, waiting, handle down.")

3. Try to make each descriptive phrase relate to your life somehow, so that when you finish your Ideogram, the poem is really about YOU.

J  A raindrop splatting. A cane, waiting, handle down.
O  A mouth, eating chocolate.
Y  The fork of a tree where creatures shelter.
C  A big toe, hanging over the sun-drenched dock.
E  Hair, streaming behind a running girl.

Prose © Joyce Sidman 2012 May be copied for classroom use but may not be reprinted or resold for commercial purposes