

*Not*

*for Wislawa Szymborska*

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My sister does not write poems. She uses sign language to teach deaf children in wheelchairs which color is dangerous red. If something unexpected happens—say, a child who has a seizure every day, doesn’t—she does not rush from the room to scribble this down. If she has something to say, she calls me.

In this, she takes after our mother, who likewise did not write poems, not even when she was shot in WW II by a GI sailing home on her hospital ship. He shot the chaplain too—who may or may not have been my mother’s lover. The chaplain died. My mother lived to have two daughters and show them the pink scar in her back where the bullet went in, the angry purple welt over her heart where it came spinning out. Not a word on paper about any of this—not about my sister’s deaf but swiftly rolling children, or my mother’s chaplain who played both pinochle and piano.

In this, they take after my mother’s mother—who couldn’t read or write and so certainly never wrote a poem—though, once, I am told, she castrated her husband’s prize bull with a kitchen knife and calmly promised to do the same to him unless he spent his nights at home. My mother was there. She told me this story. My sister heard it too. But she never imagined it as a poem. But then, looking this over, it probably is not one.

Instead it is like the one family story that does involve the written word: how my mother once flew from Florida to visit me in Wisconsin with a styrofoam cooler of shrimp—marked clearly SHRIMP. On the way home, she wrote NOT in front of SHRIMP and packed her shoes in the cooler. At the airport, the ticket agent, puzzled, asked “What’s in the cooler?”

“Not shrimp,” my mother said. And let it go at that.

So—think of this as a Not Poem. Think of me as one more Not Poet in a long honorable line of Not Poets.

And let it go at that.