Valentine for Ernest Mann

*Naomi Shihab Nye, 1952*

You can’t order a poem like you order a taco.

Walk up to the counter, say, “I’ll take two”

and expect it to be handed back to you

on a shiny plate.

Still, I like your spirit.

Anyone who says, “Here’s my address,

write me a poem,” deserves something in reply.

So I’ll tell a secret instead:

poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,

they are sleeping. They are the shadows

drifting across our ceilings the moment

before we wake up. What we have to do

is live in a way that lets us find them.

Once I knew a man who gave his wife

two skunks for a valentine.

He couldn’t understand why she was crying.

“I thought they had such beautiful eyes.”

And he was serious. He was a serious man

who lived in a serious way. Nothing was ugly

just because the world said so. He really

liked those skunks. So, he re-invented them

as valentines and they became beautiful.

At least, to him. And the poems that had been hiding

in the eyes of skunks for centuries

crawled out and curled up at his feet.

Maybe if we re-invent whatever our lives give us,

we find poems. Check your garage, the off-white sock

in your drawer, the person you almost like, but not quite.

And let me know.