

"Nor will the candidates for my love (unless at most a very few) prove victorious..."

-Walt Whitman
"Calamus"

In 1952, I was a junior in Woodrow Wilson High School, Camden, New Jersey, where my family lived on Mickle Street and South 29th. Miss English was our English teacher and one day, when she was sick, we had a substitute teacher, James Law. I only met Mr. Law that one day, but my life was changed during the fifty minutes he taught Miss English's class.

Mr. Law explained that he was unaware of exactly what Miss English wanted him to do, she was so seldom absent from her classes. But, had any of us ever heard of the poet, who died right here in Camden, Walt Whitman? None of us had. I certainly hadn't. My only interest at the time was football. A back injury in practice had made even that once-consuming interest a frustrating one. Mr. Law read us the poems of Walt Whitman.

In 1958, I was manager of the Eighth Street Bookshop, in the Village, in New York. The manager's station was behind a plate-glass window with a nice view of the Village's most popular street. One day I noticed a car roll up and park in the no-parking spot right in front of the store. It had Pennsylvania plates. Two men got out. One was James Law.

Mr. Law and his friend browsed around the bookshop. After an hour's browsing, he came up to the register with his friend, who was buying a paperback copy of Crime and Punishment. I saw that the sale was rung up properly and turned to Mr. Law. "Aren't you James Law?"

Mr. Law and his friend were astounded. "We don't know a soul in New York! How do you know us? We just drove in from Chester, Pennsylvania."

I told Mr. Law how I knew him. "That day changed my life. It was the way you read. The, well, conviction in your voice. The devastating beauty of what you read. I found Leaves of Grass. I read Whitman for myself."

I told Mr. Law how my life had changed. I decided to go to college, to learn English and American Literature properly. Then I dropped out of Columbia, to write my own poetry. To work in the Eighth Street Bookshop. I gave him a copy of my poetry magazine, Pan, the first of many poetry magazines and poetry books to which I have dedicated my life, these past twenty-five years.

Mr. Law's friend, his boss, was very impressed. James Law himself didn't know what to say. "I guess I've been pretty lucky. Because of you," I concluded. "And how about you? What became of you after that one day substituting in our high school? I never saw you there again."

Mr. Law answered, and he spoke very slowly and softly and hesitantly. Although the bookshop was quiet, I had to strain to hear him. "I gave up teaching," he said. "I moved to Chester. I'm an insurance salesman."

His friend confirmed all this.

"I decided I didn't have the knack for teaching. It was very frustrating. I thought, I'm not really reaching anyone."