

Commonapp:

I heard an eighth-century Confucian poet call literature a deed of eternity, and the more I read, the more I understood. Li Bai was among the most influential Tang-era poets; he was an ecstatic, intoxicated, Rumi-esque mystic who believed his verse to be the dictation of the will of the greatest forces. It was this euphoric intoxication that led to the traditional yet apocryphal tale of his demise, that he drowned in the Yangtze river, drunkenly, trying to hug the moon. His work was reinterpreted by Ezra Pound in *Cathay*, the editorial influence of which was exerted on Pound's longtime friend, Ernest Hemingway, who described their relationship in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*. When I read that book after having stumbled upon Li Bai's verse maybe years earlier, his "deed of eternity" revolved around my entire reading of the memoir - how could it be that I, with a used copy older than my parents, found such warmth and familiarity in a hundred-year-old Paris? When I started *East of Eden*, it struck me how intimate and confidential Steinbeck was able to paint Adam, Charles and Samuel, and in *Hamlet*, how utterly sympathetic and tragic the Prince, in *White Nights*, the tenderness of lovers; what struck me was the words of Li Bai, thirteen centuries dead, ringing in my head like tinnitus, "A deed of eternity."

For my whole life, eternity has watched over me, attentive to my every move and I to it. I read a book in first grade about the implosion of the sun. I hadn't previously considered inevitability, but I soon became excessively familiar with it: I closed my eyes to try to conceive of something so inconceivable, and the blackness of my eyelids tossed the horizon into its gullet. When I looked up, I saw thousands of stars swarming the Earth like ravenous fireflies; fire grew out of each oxygen molecule and gnawed on the air. The porch floors crept up to me. From then on, eternity was a neutron star in my viscera, a dark, unyielding current of pure nothingness. The deep fear I had for it was paralleled only by my intrigue; from that point on, I knew I was part of something inescapable, for all the beauty and all the horror it was worth.

What combined these two for me was Camus. Before COVID I was a fervent reader; I checked out new books from the library every week by the armful. Labatut on Neumann in *The MANIAC* comes to mind, "I once saw him carry two books to the bathroom for fear of finishing the first before he was done." But by the time COVID hit I hadn't read in ages: not for lack of desire, I had simply phased out of reading YA novels and "adult" fiction was foreign, and "literature" too inaccessible. Before then, books had been magnetic. I had to will myself to *stop* reading, not to start.

Then, the summer before ninth grade, I read *The Stranger*.

From the first line I was wholly enthralled, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don't

know.” So enthralled that I read the book again in my native Spanish; Camus wrought together two worlds right before my eyes, the world of eternity and the world of reading, and I couldn’t tear myself away. Mersault’s existentialism put words to a feeling I had never been able to articulate but had felt pawing at the edges of my consciousness since before I could remember. After *The Stranger*, books carried a new purpose: to make sense of the incomprehensible. Over the years, I sought out more mystics, romantics, existentialists - Gibran, Jung, Dostoevsky, Faulkner - each a new companion to my consumption of the ideas of time, space, the self, and society. Eternity returned as the depth that philosophy swam through, and literature the ark that held it; and I couldn’t be more grateful.