An Imaginary Life

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MALOUF

David Malouf was born in Brisbane, Australia in 1934, one of two children. From his early years, Malouf was an avid reader, tackling such difficult works as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* by the age of 12. He grew up in Australia and graduated from the University of Queensland in 1955. He spent several years working as a professor at his alma matter before relocating to London, where he lectured at several universities until 1968. After that, Malouf returned to Australia to lecture at the University of Sydney, where he stayed for another decade before resigning to become a full-time writer. Malouf published his fist novel, a semi-autobiographical story about growing up in Brisbane titled *Johnno*, while still teaching in Sydney in 1975. It sold well and received a theatrical adaptation in 2004. In 1978, he followed up with his tale of the the Roman poet Ovid's exile, *An Imaginary Life*, which critics praised for its style and execution. Throughout the 1980s, Malouf published several prize-winning novels and short stories about Australia, and developed several theater productions as well. In 1993, Malouf published *Remembering Babylon*, a novel about Scottish homesteaders settling in Australia and struggling against their own racism and fears. The novel won a long list of accolades, including the notable Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and made the short-list for the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction. Malouf continued writing until 2018 when he announced his retirement, leaving behind a prolific legacy of fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, plays, poetry volumes, and opera librettos. Malouf lives a private life in Sydney.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Publius Ovidius Naso, commonly called Ovid, was a real-life historical figure born to a wealthy family in Sulmo, 90 miles from Rome, in 43 B.C.E. His father funded his education in Rome, where Ovid studied rhetoric. Ovid excelled in this field, and many thought he might become a public orator, but instead Ovid chose to commit himself to writing poetry. Since his father was a provincial man, he expected Ovid to follow his footsteps and work in public office. Ovid briefly took on an official career, but soon abandoned it to write and foster poetry in Rome. His writings, beginning with *Amores*, *Heroides*, and *Ars amatoria*, found immediate success and he soon became a revered public figure and advocate of the pleasure-seeking life. However, his success was cut short when Emperor Augustus exiled him to Tomis, a distant village on the far edge of the Roman Empire. Although the exact reason for Ovid's exile is unknown, Ovid himself suspected that it was partially due to *Ars amatoria*, which many saw as indecent, and partially due to some level of involvement (though what that involvement was is lost it history) with Augustus's granddaughter's adultery, for which she was also exiled. As a metropolitan man, Ovid suffered in far-flung Tomis and wrote many letters and pleas to his wife, counsel, and the Emperor himself, begging for pardon. However, Ovid remained in exile until his death in 17 C.E.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

An Imaginary Life resembles several of Malouf's other works with its poetic prose, exploration of humanity's relationship to nature, and unlikely relationships between people from different worlds. This is especially true in *Remembering Babylon*, which contrasts the European settlers' view of nature with the indigenous Aboriginal people's view. Just as Malouf reimagines the final days of the classical figure Ovid, in *Ransom*, Malouf retells the narrative of Homer's *Iliad* to explore reconciliation between the warrior Achilles and the grieving father Priam, whose son murdered Achilles's lover. Although *An Imaginary Life* is fictional, Malouf draws from Ovid's actual writings to shape his character and comment on his ideas. In Malouf's story, his fictional version of Ovid undergoes a powerful personal transformation, which he once refers to as a "metamorphosis." This refers directly to the actual Ovid's epic poetry volume *Metamorphoses*, where he explores a wide range of mythological stories through the lens of personal transformation. Malouf also uses his story to critique Ovid's frivolous lifestyle, which can be seen in the historical works *Amores*, a volume of erotic poetry, and *Ars amatoria*, Ovid's three-volume instructional poetry on how men should pursue women, and how women should keep their men. Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto*, which he wrote while in exile, provides a look at what the poet truly felt about his new life in Tomis.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** An Imaginary Life
- **When Written:** 1977
- **Where Written:** Sydney, Australia
- **When Published:** March 1978
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** The Roman Empire and its outlying territories, around 1 C.E.
- **Climax:** Ovid and the Child cross the River Ister.
- **Antagonist:** Ryzak's Mother / The Old Woman

- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Down Under. Although Australia is never mentioned in *An Imaginary Life*, several critics see the book as a reflection of European Australians' struggle to reconcile themselves to the natural world and Aboriginal way of life that they all but eradicated through their colonization of the continent.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Roman poet Ovid states that he used to see the Child—whom locals call the "wild boy"—when he was young himself. They spoke together in some unknown **language**. Even as Ovid got older, the Child stayed the same age. Ovid never told anyone else about the Child, and when Ovid grew into a man, the Child disappeared.

As an adult, Ovid lives in Tomis, a small village on the edge of the Roman Empire, leagues from anything like a city. He hates it. The landscape is barren and untamed; the village is sparse and colorless. None of the villagers speak Latin and Ovid cannot speak their language, which further isolates him. Ovid lives in exile under care of the village headman, Ryzak. Though he was once an important social figure in Rome, his rebellious poetry offended Emperor Augustus, who banished him to Tomis. One day, Ovid sees a lone red flower in the village and recognizes it as a poppy. The remembered name in his mind and the splash of color on the ground makes Ovid decide that he must "transform[]" himself in his new world.

Compared to Ryzak's power and toughness, Ovid thinks that he himself is weak and useless, made soft by his life of comfort and leisure. Ovid accompanies Ryzak and the other hunters to the birchwoods to hunt deer, though Ryzak has to teach him how to ride a horse without a saddle. Before they reach the birchwoods, the villagers visit their resting grounds, where generations of horsemen have been laid to rest. Ryzak shows Ovid how to honor the dead by riding through the funerary mounds, shouting and throwing grain as an offering. Although Ovid does not believe in **gods**, he feels a certain thrill during the ritual. When the hunters reach the birchwoods, a tracker points out a bare human footprint in the snow, alongside the deer tracks. Ryzak explains through hand signals that the prints belong to a "wild boy" whom the villagers have seen in the forest for the past two years. Ovid has many questions, but cannot ask any of them due to the language barrier. He spots the child in the underbrush and some hunters try to catch the boy, but they cannot. They hunt for the rest of the day and return to Tomis.

Winter comes and goes. Ovid finds the season dreadful, since everyone simply huddles in their huts for the long months until the snow begins to thaw, bracing against occasional raids from barbarian tribes. Ovid senses that the boy is the same Child he knew when he himself was a child, and presses Ryzak to send out a search party in the spring. The villagers are too busy working and acquiring food, however. In the fall, when the hunters return to the birchwoods, they find no sign of the Child. Ovid worries that he died in the previous harsh winter. Soon, it's winter again, and the season passes into spring. Ovid begins to understand some of the villagers' language and realizes that its form is very different from his native Latin. Latin divides and explains, while the villagers' language simply observes life as one unified thing and accepts it. That fall, in the birchwoods, Ovid spots the Child again. Ovid longs to meet him, but the other hunters seem afraid of the boy. At night, Ovid leaves a bowl of gruel out for the Child. He dreams that he is a pool of water in the dirt from which a deer and the Child drink. Meanwhile, the Child eats from Ovid's bowl—waking up and seeing this, Ovid hopes that the boy is now connected to the human world, having eaten from a man-made vessel.

Another year passes and Ovid grows strong, sturdy, and well-versed in the village language. He begins to appreciate the simplicity of life in Tomis and even the subtle range of colors in the landscape. With his new language, the world appears different. He plants a little **garden** of wildflowers near his hut. The women in the village think he is foolish, since flowers serve no utility for survival, and Ovid mourns the fact that the villagers have no concept of "play." That winter, Ovid convinces Ryzak to send a search party in the spring and bring the Child back to Tomis. When the winter thaws, riders catch the boy in the birchwoods and bring him back. He shrieks and howls until the shaman chants to him, setting the Child into a long, deep slumber.

For the first two weeks, the Child, though awake, lies passive in Ovid's hut. The villagers fear the boy, thinking that he possesses an animal spirit or perhaps is a werewolf. After two weeks, Ovid senses that the Child's intelligence is beginning to awaken. He watches curiously as Ovid writes with pen and ink, and even experiments himself with the tools. Ovid begins taking the Child out into the marshes, toward the **River Ister**, where he tries to teach the Child to make human sounds and the Child shows him how to make animal calls. Ovid notes that when the Child makes a bird call, he seems to *become* rather than merely imitate the bird in that moment. Thus, Ovid hopes that if the Child can form human words, he will become a man. The Child continues to teach Ovid about animals and plants. Ovid decides he will teach the Child the language of Tomis, which confirms in Ovid's mind that he will never return to Rome. He tries to understand the Child's way of thinking, of identifying himself with nature rather than thinking of himself separately from it, but he struggles to let go of his sense of self.

As the winter approaches, Ovid worries about the effect that it will have on the Child, since they will have to stay inside all winter with Ryzak and his family. Ryzak assures Ovid

everything will be alright, but Ryzak's mother, "the old woman," fears the Child and thinks he carries a demon. When the snow starts to fall and Ovid tries to bring the Child inside, the Child becomes hysterical, screaming and scratching at the walls until he exhausts himself and falls asleep. For weeks, the Child will not speak or move and only stares into the gloom. Ovid frets that they are losing any progress they made during the summer.

The Child develops a bad fever that causes him to convulse. He seems unaware of his surroundings. Ryzak's mother thinks it is the demon trying to emerge, perhaps looking for a new body to possess. She warns everyone to stay away from the Child and Ovid worries she will kill the boy if given the chance. Ovid watches over him for days on end as the Child grows weaker and continues to convulse. During a particularly bad seizure, Ryzak's daughter-in-law defies the old woman and helps Ovid care for the Child. The Child begins to recover, but Ryzak's grandson Lullo falls ill instead, and even the daughter-in-law (Lullo's mother) fears that the Child's demon has passed into her son. Ovid watches fearfully, thinking that if Lullo dies, both he and the Child will be in great danger. Lullo recovers after many days, but then Ryzak falls ill with fever instead. The old woman finds a set of small teeth marks on Ryzak's wrist, which she interprets as the place where the demon entered his body. Ryzak convulses as well, making sounds that sound inhuman, even to Ovid. To prevent the demon from taking control of Ryzak's spirit, the village elders decide to kill him themselves. During the process, which involves an elaborate ritual, Ovid takes the Child and flees Tomis, knowing that their lives are now in danger since the village blames the child for their leader's death.

Ovid and the Child cross the River Ister into the northern wilderness, where the barbarian tribes roam. Rather than mourning his loss of another home, Ovid feels as if he is fulfilling his destiny, embarking on the journey that will bring his final transformation. He and the Child travel for months with no destination, not even counting the days as they pass. The Child grows stronger now that he is back in the wilderness, and Ovid feels as if he now understands the unspoken language of nature that the Child tried to teach him. The universe seems interconnected and whole—Ovid senses that he himself is just one part of it, like a stalk of grass. Ovid can feel his body failing in old age. He is dying. However, as the Child cares for him in his last days, Ovid feels "unbearably happy" because the Child is now free. Ovid understands that by dying, he is returning to the earth from whence he came and being restored to nature so that his body can feed the soil. He feels timeless and "bodiless," complete.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ovid – Ovid is a Roman poet whom Emperor Augustus exiles to Tomis for his indecent writing and rejection of national virtues. Ovid initially hates Tomis for its barren landscapes and isolation. He longs for the sophistication of Latin speech and cultivated gardens. However, as Ovid gradually learns the villagers' language and customs, he grows from his hardship and learns to appreciate both the "stern nobility" of people in Tomis and the subtle beauty of untamed nature. When Ovid learns of a Child living amongst the deer in the wilderness, he is entranced by the boy and eventually convinces Ryzak to catch him and bring him back to the village. Ovid intends to teach the Child how to live in society and speak human language. However, as Ovid spends time with the Child, he discovers that the boy is more at home in the natural world than the man-made world. Moreover, the Child begins to teach Ovid about the "**true language**," an unstructured universal language that connects all things. Ovid has difficulty grasping this language, since it requires letting go of his sense of self, but feels as if he can touch the edges of it. When the village eventually becomes convinced that the Child carries a demon that kills Ryzak, Ovid realizes that they are no longer safe in Tomis. He takes the Child and the pair flee across the **River Ister**, making their way into the northern untamed lands. As Ovid leaves human society behind, he realizes that he is entering the final stage of his personal transformation. He begins to comprehend the true language and consequently realizes that he is part of a universal whole, one element in nature indistinct from any other. Ovid grows old and starts to die, but sees his physical death as another beginning since his body will return to the earth and nourish new life. Through that new life, he will live on.

The Child – The Child is a feral boy who grows up in the wilderness amongst the deer. The narrative reveals nothing about the Child's history or his true nature, though the story hints that he is not entirely human, since he can survive naked in harsh winters. Ovid feels as if he knew the boy when he himself was a young child, implying that the Child has not aged since then. However, the Child seems to age at a normal rate between the first time the adult Ovid sees the boy in the birchwoods outside Tomis and when Ryzak's hunters capture the Child and take him back to the village. The Child reacts poorly to life in Tomis and suffers from being enclosed in human society. Although the Child cannot speak any human language, he understands the universal "**true language**" that connects all things in nature together. As Ovid tries to teach the Child human language, the Child shares the true language with Ovid and shows him how to interact with nature by becoming a part of it. The Child adapts to life in Tomis during the summer, when he can still go into the forest, but when winter sets in he grows terribly ill and his spirit starts to fail. The old woman accuses the Child of carrying a demon from the forest, and he does trigger a series of illnesses, but the novel leaves it ambiguous as to what actually causes his, Lullo, and Ryzak's sickness. Regardless, the villagers' animosity toward

the Child causes Ovid to take the boy and flee into the wilderness across the **river**, and the Child's spirit returns to its former strength. He travels with Ovid and cares for him until the poet's death. Although the Child cannot speak and does not understand human society, the story presents him as an ideal human: he is both self-sufficient and playful, enjoying the environment around him. He embodies the true language and is united with nature, indistinguishable from the natural world.

Ryzak / The Headman / The Old Man – Ryzak is the leader of Tomis who shares his dwelling with Ovid. The stern and powerful Ryzak makes Ovid feel weak by comparison. Although Ovid initially thinks that Ryzak will eventually execute him, since he is technically Ovid's captor, he grows to see Ryzak as the closest friend he has ever had. Ryzak teaches Ovid skills like how to ride a horse without a saddle and how to honor the dead, and his stories reveal the way the villagers' language shapes their perception of the world around them. Although Ryzak does not understand Ovid's interest in the Child, Ryzak helps bring the boy back to Tomis and protects him from the old woman (Ryzak's mother), who is immediately hostile toward the Child. However, when the Child comes down with a fever that passes to Ryzak's grandson Lullo, all of the villagers (including Ryzak) suspects that the Child brought a demon with him into Tomis. After Lullo recovers, Ryzak is stricken with a mysterious illness that causes him to spasm and growl like an animal. The old woman finds teeth marks on Ryzak's wrist which she claims proves that a demon entered his body. After Ryzak falls into a coma, the elders of the village beat him to death so that his spirit will leave his body in a violent state, and thus be more difficult for other demons to take control of.

Ryzak's Mother / The Old Woman – The old woman is Ryzak's mother, and she lives in Ryzak's hut along with the young woman (Ryzak's daughter), Lullo (Ryzak's grandson), Ovid, and eventually the Child. Although the old woman doesn't have a significant role until late in the story, she ultimately becomes the only real antagonist in the narrative. The old woman uses her mysticism and spirituality to instill others with fear, thus wielding greater power than even Ryzak has as the village headman. The old woman is wary of the Child from the start and suspects that he carries a demon or a beastly spirit inside of him. When the Child develops a fever during the winter, the old woman believes it is the demon trying to escape from his body to steal someone else's soul. When the fever passes to Lullo, the old woman convinces both the young woman and Ryzak that the demon is real and that the Child is therefore a threat. Although Lullo recovers, when Ryzak falls ill, the old woman reveals a bite mark on his wrist, which she claims proves that the demon entered his body. She orchestrates the killing of Ryzak to fight the demon, which prompts Ovid and the Child to flee the village.

Ryzak's Daughter-in-Law / The Young Woman – The young woman is Ryzak's daughter-in-law, the former wife of his dead son. She is Lullo's mother. Because she is a foreigner and not blood-related to anyone in Tomis, the young woman is an outsider like Ovid, and the two of them become loose allies. When the Child falls ill, the young woman defies the old woman's warnings and helps Ovid care for him. However, when Lullo falls ill as well, the young woman believes that the Child brought a demon into their home and withdraws from both Ovid and the Child.

Lullo / Ryzak's Grandson – Lullo is Ryzak's grandson and the young woman's son. Although Ovid briefly teaches Lullo some Latin, when the **Child** joins the village, Ovid shifts his attention to the new boy. Lullo resents both Ovid and the Child because of this. When the Child comes down with a terrible fever during the winter, it passes to Lullo, leading the old woman to believe that the Child's demon is trying to steal Lullo's soul. However, Lullo recovers.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Village Shaman – The village shaman appears multiple times in the story to perform rituals, usually to appease the spirits in the forests or the **river**. The shaman represents Tomis's mythical beliefs.

Ovid's Brother – Ovid's older brother is pious and dutiful. He should have inherited the family estate, but dies when he is 18, leaving Ovid as the new heir.

Ovid's Father – Ovid's father owns the provincial farm where Ovid and his brother grow up. When Ovid's brother dies, his father washes that Ovid had died in his stead, and left his more dutiful brother to inherit the family estate.

Emperor Augustus – Emperor Augustus rules the Roman Empire and exiles Ovid to Tomis due to his inflammatory poetry.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SUFFERING AND PERSONAL GROWTH

David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* gives a fictional account of the Roman poet Ovid—a historical figure notorious for being the Roman Empire's most irreverent public personality—after he is exiled for his indecent poems. Though most of the details of the real-life Ovid's exile are lost to history, Malouf imagines what may have become of the infamous, hedonistic poet in his last years. In Malouf's story, Ovid is exiled to the tiny village of Tomis, a

humble settlement beyond the reaches of Roman civilization beset by long, brutal winters and constant raids from other tribes. Ovid eventually settles into his new home, but his relationship with the Child, a feral boy he finds in the forest—and whom the villagers believe carries a demon—forces him into exile once again. Despite Ovid's constant pains, his journey and hardships radically transform his character, demonstrating how difficult experiences can become the catalyst for personal growth.

Ovid initially hates his exile and the hard lifestyle it demands, demonstrating that challenging circumstances might not immediately appear as an opportunity for personal development. After Ovid's poetry and philosophy rile Emperor Augustus, Augustus banishes Ovid from Roman territory and sends him to live in Tomis, far beyond the edges of Roman society. The emperor places Ovid under the care of the village headman, Ryzak. Ryzak lets Ovid live with him, though Ovid suspects Ryzak may someday kill him to conclude his punishment. Ovid finds Tomis desolate and primitive, and considers the villagers to be "barbarians." He thinks the landscape is "empty" and barren, without life or human sophistication, and describes his first year as "terrible beyond description." He does not understand the villagers' language, which he thinks sounds "barbarous and guttural," and so becomes socially isolated as well. Ovid's only hope is that the Emperor will reverse his decision. Ovid writes letters to his attorney in Rome asking for mercy, indicating that his sole hope is that life will return to the way it once was. Nothing comes of these pleas. Ovid's pain and bitterness thus initially demonstrate how a suffering person may be overcome by their hardships and not immediately see opportunity for growth.

However, over several years, Ovid's difficult life in Tomis strengthens his character and helps him to appreciate other people and the land that they live in, demonstrating that hardship can develop and refine a person's character. Although Ovid scorned military service and duty for all of his life in Rome, the constant threat of raiders against Tomis's small population force Ovid to drill and practice fighting with the other men. His body and resolve grow stronger. He begins to almost enjoy the lifestyle, and thinks, "What a very different self has begun to emerge in me," indicating that the physical hardships, though they bring some pain, also make Ovid more resilient over the course of several years. Although Ovid initially looks down on the villagers as "relatively savage," after years of living together, he comes to regard Ryzak as "the closest friend I have ever had" and thinks it "strange that I have had to leave my own people to find him." This is particularly significant since Ryzak embodies duty and discipline, values that Ovid once detested. Ovid's new appreciation for Ryzak suggests that the hardship of living amid a different culture makes Ovid develop an ability to understand and appreciate all types of people—particularly those who challenge him to grow as an individual. Ovid even learns to appreciate the subtle beauty of nature. Though he once detested the barren landscape around Tomis, after several years he states, "I have even begun to find my eye delighted by the simple forms of this place, the narrower range of colors," indicating that years of exile in a relatively barren environment have taught him to appreciate the subtlety of nature. Ovid's deeper appreciation for work, for other people, and for subtle beauty all suggest that hardship can develop one's personal character.

In Ovid's reflections on his sufferings, he ultimately argues that hardships are the catalyst of personal transformation—opportunities that are essential for human growth and development, even though they bring pain with them. When the villagers become convinced that the Child carries a demonic spirit, the threat of violence forces Ovid to take him and flee north into the wilderness, beyond human society. Although Ovid once again must leave his home—since that is what Tomis becomes for him—he does not mourn the loss, but looks forward to the opportunity for new growth and challenge. As they trudge away from the village together, Ovid reflects, "What else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings, of settings out into the unknown, pushing off into the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become." Rather than dread oncoming hardships, Ovid's reflection suggests that one should lean into them, recognizing them as opportunities to further grow and develop one's character. Ovid argues that such challenges and subsequent growth are the essence of life. Ovid is eventually forced to flee Tomis when the villagers' superstition toward the Child manifests in violence. Although Ovid is an old man at this point, he asks, "What else is death but the refusal any longer to grow and suffer change?" Ovid's peaceful disposition and acceptance of hardship toward his final years—which will inevitably end in death during this second exile, without home or shelter—suggests that a life without suffering, and thus growth, is not a life worth living any longer.

Ovid's transition from a poet devoted to leisure and comfort to an old man leaning into pain and hardship marks a complete reversal of his core values, which reiterates how suffering can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth, rather than a meaningless hardship.

LANGUAGE, PERCEPTION, AND NATURE

When the Roman Emperor Augustus exiles the poet Ovid to a small remote village called Tomis, Ovid must learn to speak an entirely new language. Although Ovid initially finds the villagers to be barbaric and strange, as he slowly absorbs their language he begins to understand how they see the world, which contrasts drastically with his own worldview. After learning the village language, Ovid again learns a new "language" when he meets the Child, a feral boy who grew up in the wilderness alone, and who knows

how to speak to wild animals. As the Child teaches Ovid to understand this unstructured "**true language**," Ovid comes to see the natural world in an entirely different way. Through Ovid's journey, Malouf argues that one's language shapes one's perception of the nature, and that a universal language exists which could heal humanity's relationship to the natural world.

Although Ovid originally only speaks Latin, as he learns Tomis's language he discovers that each way of speaking results in an entirely different outlook, suggesting that one's language shapes their worldview. Ovid describes Latin as a "language for distinctions, every ending defines and divides." Latin is well-suited to describing "the rules of rhetoric, theorems, the facts of science, the facts of history, the theories of the philosophers." That is, Latin is an orderly, meticulous language that separates, organizes, and explains. As such, the precision and categorization inherent to Latin gives Ovid an analytical outlook toward the world around him. He thinks of himself as an individual being, and life as something to be organized, controlled, and explained. However, as Ovid learns the villagers' language, he realizes that their folklore is blunt and direct, "explain[ing] nothing, but speak[ing] straight out of the nightmare landscape of this place," which reflects their view of the world as "bare, cruel, terrible, comic," but without grander meaning. Rather than try to order and analyze the world, as Ovid's Latin does, the village language simply "presents the [...] raw life and unity of things." Through the perspective of the villagers' language, life is no longer something to control and explain, but something to accept and endure. Ovid reflects, "Seeing the world through this other tongue I see it differently. It is a different world." His original worldview markedly contrasts with the view that the villagers' language reveals to him. This suggests that different languages, varying in both form and structure, fundamentally alter one's worldview.

As Ovid learns the villagers' language, he begins to view his relationship to nature differently as well, suggesting that language shapes one's understanding of one's place in the natural world. The Latin language's tendency to separate and organize leads Ovid to initially see himself as superior to the natural world, and nature as something to be tamed. Ovid spends most of his pre-exile life in Roman cities, where nature is domesticated and controlled. He reflects that a sophisticated country like Italy with its "placid beauty" is a "created place" that humans shaped and mastered. In his mind, nature is only valuable or beautiful when a human being controls and cultivates it. Ovid's view of nature as something to be conquered and organized reflects Latin's propensity for categorizing and arranging ideas. By contrast, Tomis's language, with its tendency to simply observe and describe life rather than control it, leads the villagers to accept the harsh natural world around them. Rather than build cities and cultivate agriculture (ways of conquering nature) the villagers shape their lives according to nature's patterns: sleeping in winter, foraging in spring and summer, and hunting in autumn. Consequently, as Ovid understands the villagers' language, he internalizes their belief in cooperating with the natural world. Though he once hated the untouched, barren landscape around Tomis, he begins to recognize the subtle beauty of it. The contrasting views of humanity's relationship to the natural world reflects the different perceptions that each language creates. This further suggests, then, that a person's language shapes one's understanding of one's place in nature—whether one choose to submit oneself to it or to dominate it.

The Child teaches Ovid the "language" of nature and animals, which challenges Ovid's distinction between human beings and the natural world. Through this natural, unstructured language, Malouf suggests that a universal language exists which can help humanity rediscover their harmonious relationship with nature. The Child, who knows no human language, teaches Ovid how to speak to animals like birds, wolves, and insects. Ovid realizes that rather than just mimicking their calls, the Child, "in entering the mysterious life of its language, becomes, for a moment, the creature itself." Ovid sees that the Child does this with all of nature—when a storm blows in, the Child thinks "I am thundering," rather than that there is merely thunder in the sky. As opposed to the Latin-style distinction between oneself and the world, the Child's language leads him to view himself as indistinct from his natural environment. Eventually, Ovid begins to understand this "unstructured" language himself and realizes he is not an individual, separate from nature, but just a piece of it like the wind and the grass. Ovid reflects that this new language "is a gesture of reconciliation," since through it, he no longer thinks of himself as a separate being, or nature as something to dominate and control. He is one part of a whole, whose will return to the earth and decompose to feed the soil. Malouf thus extends his argument about language and perception to suggest that a natural universal language exists, and could reshape people's perspectives and teach them to view the world as a harmonious, interconnected whole. Ovid states, "We knew that language once. [...] We must discover it again," suggesting that this view of the world is inherent to humanity, but that the sophisticated language of society causes one to separate oneself from the natural world.

FRIVOLITY VS. PRACTICALITY

Before his exile, Ovid is a "metropolitan poet," a public figure and agitator who spurns Rome's culture of duty and nationalism. His life is carefree, colorful, and devoid of any responsibility. After Ovid is exiled to Tomis beyond the edges of Roman society, he finds that his formerly frivolous lifestyle leaves him utterly inept to live and operate in such a harsh environment. At the same time, Ovid recognizes that the villagers in Tomis err in the other direction, leading lives of such barren utility that they lead colorless,

joyless lives. Through Ovid's former frivolity and the villagers' extreme utilitarianism, David Malouf argues that neither creates a healthy life—rather, the ideal life is a balance of self-sufficiency and playfulness.

In exile, Ovid quickly realizes that his formerly frivolous lifestyle makes him ill-suited to the hardships of Tomis, whose villagers condemn such lightheartedness and rejection of responsibility. Before his exile, Ovid is one of Rome's leading poets and social figures. Since Rome enjoys a new era of peace and luxury and no longer needs to be so militaristic, Ovid calls for "no more civic virtues […]. No more patriotism. No more glorification of men at arms." Instead, Ovid argues that Rome is in its "age of play" and that life should be nothing more than "gay, anarchic, ephemeral, and […] fun." This indicates that Ovid's frivolity is only possible in a society that is unusually free of conflict or struggle. Ovid's former carefree life appears to be partially enabled by the fact that he is heir to a wealthy estate, which is maintained by slaves that his family owns. This suggests that Ovid's frivolity is enabled not only by Rome's peace, but also by his own lack of self-sufficiency, since everything he needs growing up is provided for him. He is only frivolous by being a burden on other people, suggesting that such a lifestyle is only possible when one burdens someone else. In Tomis, Ovid quickly realizes how ill-suited his comfortable life has made him for hard living: he is neither strong nor capable. Next to Ryzak, the village headman, who is "tough as [Ovid has] never been," Ovid feels "foolish" for his own lack of self-sufficiency. Even Ryzak seems embarrassed that he must show Ovid how to do simple things like ride a horse without a saddle so that he can hunt with the other men, suggesting that the villagers regard such skills as basic knowledge everyone must know. Although Ovid's former life was frivolous and untroubled, his struggle to survive in Tomis exposes his lack of self-sufficiency, suggesting that Ovid's carefree life rendered him soft and ill-equipped to take care of himself, operate in a challenging environment, or contribute to the village.

Although Ovid admires Ryzak's "stern nobility" and toughness, he recognizes that the villagers tend to be so utilitarian that they lead a joyless life, suggesting that just as one can be overly-frivolous and irresponsible, one can also be overly practical. Ovid has deep respect for Ryzak and his apparent power. Looking at Ryzak's strong body and severe demeanor, Ovid wonders, "What can I know of the forces that have made this man, this tamer of horses, whose animal nature he somehow takes into himself and gentles?" indicating that Ovid recognizes the necessity of such toughness for surviving in Tomis. However, when Ovid plants wildflowers next to his hut to make a small "**garden**" in an attempt to add some color and life to his surroundings, the village women think him "foolish beyond belief" for spending time and energy on something that cannot be eaten. Ovid realizes that everything in their world "exists purely for use," and though the women are capable seamstresses, nothing they make has any ornamental or aesthetic element. In Ovid's mind, the villagers are so practical that they lack any concept of "play," suggesting that one can be so tough and utilitarian that they are unable to appreciate and enjoy creativity, beauty, or pleasure. Although Ovid recognizes his own past frivolity, which made him weak, he argues that "to play is to be free," since one plays for no reason other than simple pleasure, to give flavor to life. The villagers' inability to play thus suggests that extreme utilitarianism leads to a hardy and self-sufficient but joyless and constrained life. Ovid thus condemns the villagers' ultra-utilitarian outlook, just as he condemns his own former frivolity.

David Malouf depicts the Child, the feral boy Ovid finds in the woods, as the ideal balance of frivolity and practicality, suggesting that the best life is one which complements self-sufficiency with joy and playfulness, allowing one to be both capable and free. The Child forages in the wilderness for food and survives on his own, thus embodying the same self-sufficiency and toughness as the villagers in Tomis. He survives the harsh environment and takes care of himself without burdening anyone else. At the same time, the Child plays in the snow, marvels at nature, and excitedly points out hidden animals in the forest to Ovid, demonstrating that he maintains his ability to play, enjoy life, and do things simply for pleasure. Although the Child is capable enough to survive on his own, he does not let his practicality take away his enjoyment of life. This mixture of self-sufficiency and ability to play makes the Child the freest character in the story, neither dependent on anyone else nor constrained by extreme utilitarianism. This ultimately suggests that the ideal life is one that balances toughness and self-sufficiency with enough frivolity to maintain one's ability to enjoy oneself and exercise one's own freedom.

CHILDHOOD, FATE, AND IDENTITY

Although the Roman Ovid is known as a sophisticated, "metropolitan poet," he spends his childhood on a rural farm, living a simple, happy life surrounded by nature. After his irreverent poems earn the ire of the Roman emperor, the government exiles Ovid to the remote village of Tomis, which resembles his childhood home in that it is simple, quiet, and surrounded by nature. As the years in exile pass, Ovid recalls his early years and considers how they shaped his fate of spending the last years of his life beyond Roman civilization. Ovid's reflections on fate suggest that the past, especially childhood, sets one on a certain, unavoidable trajectory to fulfill their true identity.

Ovid believes that his childhood experiences destine him for a simple lifestyle in close proximity to nature, suggesting that a person's early life shapes one's their fate, even though one may try to resist it. Ovid grows up on a farm, living a simple lifestyle close to nature with his father, brother, and family slaves.

Often, while his father is away, Ovid and his brother live in the farmhouses with the nurses, who raise them alongside their own children. Looking back as an adult, in exile, Ovid feels as if something "was being revealed" to him during this simple, happy life which should have shaped him to take up that lifestyle himself. Ovid's recollection of those years, feeling that they were leading him to become a particular person, suggests that a person's childhood shapes one's future, putting one on a particular trajectory through life.

Ovid's eventual exile out of Rome and into a simpler lifestyle in Tomis (despite his efforts to remain a sophisticated poet) suggests that one's fate, shaped by childhood, is inevitable. One must ultimately fulfill one's true destiny. In adulthood, Ovid runs from his childhood and becomes a man of the city, a "metropolitan poet." However, he recounts that at the height of his success, he feels "anxiety and some sense of disgust" at the contrast between his childhood and current identity. Rather than recognize that he is shaped by his simple and pleasant childhood, Ovid the poet sees himself as a "creature of my own impudent views and with no family behind me, no tribe, no country, no past of any kind." Ovid tries to reject the path that his childhood set before him by by "inventing a hundred false identities," suggesting that one may try to resist one's fate by constructing a new, alternate identity for oneself. Although Ovid tries to reject his fate, his exile from Rome ultimately fulfills that destiny by forcing him to live a quiet, simple life in Tomis, once again in close proximity to nature. As Ovid learns to accept his exile, he considers that life in Tomis is the inevitable result of his childhood, the fulfillment of the life from which he ran away. He says, "this place is the true destination I have been seeking, and that my life here, however painful, is my true fate, the one I have spent my whole existence trying to escape." That is, one's fate is inevitable, the natural and unavoidable result of one's childhood experiences.

More than than just inevitable, however, Ovid regards his life in exile as his "second chance" to "become at last the one you intended to be," suggesting that a person's fate leads one to embrace one's real identity and be who one truly is. This idea is mirrored in the Child's journey as well. Ovid initially fears that, since the Child has grown up in the forest alone and feral, he has no childhood or ancestry to tell him who to be. However, in Ovid's final days, he sees the Child walking away from him and from human society to return to the wilderness where the Child is happy and free. The sight makes Ovid "unbearably happy," implying that the Child's rightful place is in the wilderness, where he came from and where he can be who he truly is. Ovid's joy at fulfilling his own destiny, embracing his own identity, and seeing the Child do the same suggests that the greatest fulfillment in life comes from one accepting who one is and where one comes from, following the course that fate lays for each individual. Although David Malouf never specifies what force draws a person along toward their fate, he presents it as a nonetheless powerful force in one's life and the key to one's personal fulfillment.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TRUE LANGUAGE

The "true language" is the natural, unstructured language that the Child teaches to Ovid, representing a naturalistic worldview that sees the universe as one large, interconnected whole. Although Ovid refers it as a "language," the true language is not actually an audible way of speaking, but a way of interacting with and understanding the natural world which shows a person that he or she is not distinct from nature but a part of it, indistinguishable from the rest. Although Ovid remembers knowing this language as a young boy, one of his first glimpses of it as an adult is when the Child shows him how to call to the animals in the forest. Rather than simply mimicking bird calls, the Child shapes his face like the bird's beak and "becomes" the bird itself, perceiving no distinction between himself and the plants and animals around him.

As the Child teaches Ovid about the natural world, Ovid begins to understand this true language himself. He wants to "let the universe in," and senses that the true language reconciles him to the world around him. Ovid tries to eliminate his sense of self and conceptualize himself as one with the world around him, though he struggles to let go of his own individualism. However, when Ovid and the Child flee Tomis and cross the **River Ister** into the northern lands, thus abandoning human society forever, Ovid finally grasps the true language and understand that he is only one element in the whole of creation. Ovid's separation from human civilization and sophisticated Latin language—which encourages him to separate himself from the world around him—enables him to realize his connection to the universe. In this way, the true language more broadly represents humanity's oneness with the rest of the universe. In his final days, Ovid faces his impending death with the perspective, which the true language grants him, that his body will break down and feed the soil, and he will thus live on in the new organisms fed by his remains.

THE GODS

The gods represent transcendence from an individualist mindset and acceptance of the naturalistic worldview that the **true language** imparts. Ovid lives most of his life as a rationalist and a skeptic, resisting belief in any gods that might demand more of him than his preferred

frivolous lifestyle. However, Ovid always feels a part of him is drawn toward such belief. When Ovid arrives in Tomis, he dreams that the gods that look like horsemen meet him on the **river** and swirl around him, begging him to believe. Although Ovid refers to these beings as "gods" in the moment, as he gradually comes to understand the unity of all things, he realizes that his gods are not classical deities. Rather, they are the animals and the plants that surround him, that give him sustenance and will take their sustenance from his body after he dies. As such, the gods that approach Ovid in his dream are not asking for devotion to a deity, but rather asking him to accept the transcendent reality that he is just one organism in the vast sea of nature, a single element in the universe, interconnected and interchangeable with all others. Although this understanding of the gods does not involve a particular afterlife, Ovid feels that he still lives on after death as his body decomposes and rejoins the natural world. In Ovid's final moments, when he knows he is dying, he feels that he both "ascends" and "lowers" himself into the ground simultaneously. As his body breaks down, he places himself in "the hands of the gods."

THE RIVER ISTER

The River Ister symbolizes the boundary between phases of life and understanding, which one must pass through to achieve personal transformation. Ovid dreams that the **gods** meet him on the river, signifying his potential to enter into a new phase of life and undergo a personal transformation that will radically alter his perspective. Although Ovid does not cross the river in the dream, when he and the Child must flee Tomis for their lives, Ovid instinctively heads for the river, which he has always felt is the "final boundary of [his] life, waiting to be crossed" before his final transformation can take place. Ovid and the Child cross the frozen river in the dark, and when they are midway across, can see neither the shore they left from or the shore they are going to. The river feels as if it could be endless, symbolizing the way that their transition, and the suffering it involves, briefly feels as if it will never end. However, when Ovid and the Child reach the other side and cross into the northern lands, they enter a new world and state of being. Ovid finally grasps the **true language** of the universe for the first time and internalizes the new perspective it offers. As Ovid and the Child travel onward, Ovid stops counting the days or thinking about where they will go, since the "river is far behind them," signifying that they have made their choice and crossed into their new lives—there is no going back.

OVID'S GARDEN

The garden of wildflowers that Ovid plants outside of his hut is a minor symbol that represents playfulness as a healthy form of frivolity. Although Ovid lets go of his frivolous past while living in Tomis, he still plants a patch of flowers to add color and life to the drab village. Villagers in Tomis are entirely practical—the village women think Ovid's garden is a foolish waste of time since flowers are not edible, nor do they possess any utility that aids survival. To Ovid, this suggests that the villagers have no concept of play whatsoever. They are so utilitarian and hardy that they lead joyless, colorless lives. Nevertheless, Ovid hopes that the women will someday be enticed by the beautiful flowers and enjoy them. Thus, the garden represent a "subversive" act of playfulness that challenges the villagers' severe practicality, without preventing Ovid from being productive or straying into the frivolity that defined his past life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *An Imaginary Life* published in 1996.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Must it all be like this from now on? Will I have to learn everything all over again like a child? Discovering the world as a small child does, through the senses, but with all things deprived of the special magic of their names in my own tongue?

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In the first year of Ovid's exile in Tomis, he cannot understand the villagers' language and none of the villagers speak Latin, which immediately establishes communication barriers as a prominent theme in the book. Ovid quickly discovers that he has difficulty identifying simple things, like seeds, without their Latin names. His dependence on Latin shapes his view of the world around him, leading him to view himself as separate from his environment, and nature as something that is only valuable when cultivated and shaped by human hands. As Ovid eventually realizes, this perspective is useless in Tomis's rugged landscape, where the villagers exist at nature's mercy and whims. Ovid's lack of language makes him weak, almost childish, breaking down his former persona as a sophisticated intellectual. This period of Ovid's helplessness and speechlessness is critical to his personal development, since it prepares him to eventually let go of his Latin-influenced understanding of

the world. Ovid can only relearn the world around him and take on the perspective of new languages after essentially becoming a child once again, losing his sense of superiority and control and starting from scratch in learning Tomis's language.

> I stood silent in the center of the plain and [the horsemen] began to wheel in great circles about me, uttering cries—not of malice I thought, but of mourning. *Let us into your world*, they seemed to be saying. *Let us cross into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe.*

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

One night, Ovid dreams that he walks onto the river and sees horsemen ride down to him out of the sky, which he recognizes as the gods he does not believe in. The river symbolizes suffering and the boundary between one state of being and another, which Ovid must ultimately cross to achieve his personal transformation. However, in this early stage, Ovid sees the river as something that keeps the foreign tribes at bay, reflecting the way that he also wants to keep the gods or any belief in transcendence out of his life. Notably, Ovid's struggle against the gods in the story is ultimately not against divinity, but against a transcendent understanding of the natural world, a worldview in which all things are unified and he is only one minor being amidst a sea of interconnected life. Although, in this scene, Ovid understands the horsemen as gods, his resistance is not to divine beings, but any transcendent view of the world that contradicts his individualistic and rationalist perspective.

> After a century of war in which whole families had destroyed one another in the name of patriotism, we were at peace. I stepped right into it—an age of soft, self-indulgent muddle, of sophisticated impudence, when we all seemed to have broken out of bounds at last into an enlightenment so great that there was no longer any need for belief.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Ovid reflects on his career in Rome as an advocate for the frivolous, "ephemeral" lifestyle. Ovid's recognition that the country's carefree age was directly preceded by a century of war suggests that his own disdain for concepts like patriotism, honor, and duty, arise in part from a rejection of that warring culture. While this unusual era of peace enables Ovid's frivolity, the violence that preceded it encourages his rejection of national virtues as well. Ovid's encouragement of pleasure over duty is certainly irresponsible, the result of spoiled generation born to wealth and peace. However, it also seems to carry a certain element of fear, a suspicion that if Ovid and his contemporaries were to resurrect their ancestors' notions of patriotism, such virtues may lead them back into another bloody war. Although Ovid's former life still appears needlessly frivolous, recognizing the underlying fear makes such behavior seem reactionary as well. Rather than simple hedonism, Ovid's call for frivolity appears to be a subliminal effort to prevent such war and violence from reoccurring.

> Do you think Italy—or whatever land it is you now inhabit—is a place given you by the gods, readymade in all its placid beauty? It is not. It is a created place.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Ovid reflects on Tomis's barren landscape, which he finds ugly, and remarks that a place only becomes beautiful when human beings make it so. Through this attitude, it's clear that Ovid's early opinion of Tomis is a direct result of his Latin worldview. Since, as Ovid later states, Latin is a language that naturally divides and organizes ideas, Ovid learns to see himself as an individual distinct from and superior to untamed nature. His statement that no land is "readymade" to be beautiful implies that nature has no value, aesthetic or otherwise, unless it is first cultivated by human hands. That is, untouched nature possesses no value

of its own. This viewpoint embodies Ovid's opinion that human beings are chief among all creatures, and that sophisticated, cultivating societies (like Rome) are superior to those who simply live alongside nature without shaping or dominating it (like Tomis). Ovid and his Latin worldview thus possess a certain self-superiority over other creatures and even other human cultures, a perspective that is extremely arrogant and condescending toward others.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ My life has been so frivolous. Brought up to believe in my own nerves, in restlessness, variety, change; educated entirely out of books, living always in a state of soft security, able to pamper myself, to drift about in a cloud of tender feelings, and with comfortable notions of my own intelligence, sociability, kindness, good breeding; moved by nothing I couldn't give a name to, believing in nothing I couldn't see.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), Ryzak / The Headman / The Old Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Ovid compares his own weakness with Ryzak's tough demeanor and hard features, and reflects on how different their lives must have been. This moment marks the beginning of Ovid's recognition of his own frivolity, how wasted and sheltered his life has been thus far. Ovid's statement that he disbelieved anything he could not name or see comes at the end of his long list of self-criticisms. This suggests that his skepticism, like his arrogance or physical weakness, is born out of a sheltered life. In the safe confines of Roman civilization, Ovid was never challenged with anything he could not understand and thus had no need for mysticism or mythology. Moreover, since the gods represent transcendence, the security of life in the Roman state seems to buffer Ovid from truly grappling with his own true place or purpose in the universe. Additionally, although Ovid's brother died of illness, Ovid's rejection of any concept of belief or transcendence suggests that he never reckoned with his own mortality. Since his life was never endangered in Rome, it seems he never needed to consider death or the afterlife.

❝ Of the the two of us it is my brother who should have survived. I am the frivolous one, who will achieve nothing in the world. It is my brother who would have saved the last of our lands, won important public office, done all a good son can be expected to do in the way of piety toward his family gods. I know this is true and feel my life, my whole body's weight in the saddle, as a burden.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), Ovid's Father, Ovid's Brother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Ovid thinks back to his brother's funeral, when he realizes both he and his father wish that Ovid had died in his brother's place. Beyond laying bare some of Ovid's long-held wounds, what is most significant in this passage is Ovid's outright recognition that his frivolity makes him a burden on other people. Ovid's lifestyle in Rome seems only possible because of his family's wealth (and use of slaves) and the fact that past generations fought and died to produce Rome's current peaceful era. Ovid's frivolity thus appears not only useless, but actually selfish, since he capitalizes on what others provided for him without contributing any value to society in return. This selfishness and burden on others reappears in Ovid's first years in exile, when the villagers must provide for him while Ovid, without language, skills, or strength, cannot contribute anything to the village. Ovid's inability or unwillingness to give back to the communities he lives makes it clear that such wanton frivolity should be condemned, as it serves no purpose beyond ephemeral pleasure.

❝ Does the boy watch all this, I wonder? And what does he make of it? What species does he think he might belong to? Does he recognize his own?

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Village Shaman, The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

While Ovid watches Tomis's shaman perform a hunting ceremony in the birchwoods, he wonders if the Child, whom he's just seen for the first time, watches them through the trees. Ovid's pondering whether the Child recognizes that he is human implies that humans are unique among all the animals and organisms in the forest. This reflects Ovid's perception of human beings as special and distinct, wholly separate from the rest of nature. Ironically, Ovid correctly guesses that the Child does not understand his own humanity, but wrongly assumes that he can teach the Child to see himself as human, rather than the Child teaching Ovid to see himself as indistinct from nature. On the contrary, the Child's lack of distinction between himself and every other being in the forest makes him special. It provides the first example of the "true language" that Ovid will gradually come to understand—that is, the worldview in which humans understand themselves as one with nature. The Child's lack of distinction thus foreshadows Ovid's own feeling that he becomes "bodiless," another element of the landscape and life around him.

> As a Roman citizen of the knightly order, the descendant of a whole line of warriors, with the law and the flower of Roman civilization to protect against barbarians, I scoffed at such old-fashioned notions as duty, patriotism, the military virtues. And here I was, aged fifty, standing on guard at the very edge of the known world.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

During the winter, Ovid is called to take his turn standing guard on the wall, defending Tomis against barbarian raiders from the north. Ovid's sudden military service is ironic, since he's spent his entire life until this point rejecting anything to do with warfare or nationalism. However, his unwilling entrance into his ancestral warrior tradition plays into the story's theme of fate and identity. In a sense, Ovid seemed destined by his Roman lineage and childhood to become a statesmen or a soldier, but he rejects that life to become the sophisticated metropolitan poet instead. Although Ovid forged a new identity for himself that rejected such values, his unintentional return to a hard, militaristic life suggests that one's fate is nearly inevitable, and that every individual will eventually be called to fulfill their true identity. Although being a soldier is not Ovid's final destiny or transformation, it represents a hard shift from the values and lifestyle he espoused for most of his adult life. Ovid's early rejection of the very values and sacrifices that allowed him to live in a peaceful age suggests that his own frivolity is also hypocritical, enjoying the benefits of peace without working to provide it for anyone else.

> The old man's stories are fabulous beyond anything I have retold from the Greeks; but savage, a form of extravagant play that explains nothing, but speaks straight out of the nightmare landscape of this place and my dream journeys across it [...] I begin to see briefly, in snatches, how this old man, my friend, might see the world. It is astonishing. Bare, cruel, terrible, comic.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), Ryzak / The Headman / The Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

As Ovid learn the villagers' language, he realizes that it's entirely different than Latin. The villagers' language is more direct, even crude, and simply presents the world as it is. Ovid's observation that their folklore "explains nothing" suggests that unlike Latin, which tends to analyze and critique, the village language simply observes reality and accepts it. Even though the villagers believe in spirits, their language and worldview does not seek grander meaning to the world beyond its simple realities of life and death. This lack of analysis parallels Tomis's lack of agriculture or cultivation. While the Latin language cultivates ideas and the Roman people cultivate the landscapes around them through agriculture and architecture, Tomis's language and people seem content to simply observe and accept, adapting themselves to nature rather than nature to themselves. The parallel between language structure and behavior suggests that one's language shapes one's perception of the world, which in turn guides the way that one interacts with the environment.

> I lie in the dark of the forest waiting for the moon. And softly, nearby, there are footsteps. A deer. The animal's face leads toward me. I am filled with tenderness for it. Its tongue touches the surface of me, lapping a little. It takes part of me into itself, but I do not feel at all diminished.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

While Ovid and the hunters are in the birchwoods again, after seeing the Child for the first time in two years, Ovid dreams that he is a pool of water on the forest floor. He fears his own vulnerability, that a wolf may come devour him, but instead a deer drinks from him. Ovid's dream foreshadows his struggle to relinquish his sense of self and instead conceptualize himself as just another part of nature. Ovid's fear of being consumed represents his fear of losing his sense of self, his "I," and thus becoming nothing. However, the deer represents the true potential of such a perspective. When the deer drinks from Ovid's pool, Ovid feels that he has become part of the deer without losing any of his own life or energy. The deer shares his essence, rather than stealing it away, and Ovid gains a new source of life by becoming part of the deer. This both foreshadows Ovid's eventual sense of joining nature, becoming a part of it, while also suggesting that in such a state of existence, one does not die nor disappear, but contributes to the lives of other beings. In this way, rather than disappearing, one lives on in different forms, in all the beings that took life from it.

> I have stopped finding fault with creation and have learned to accept it. We have some power in us that knows its own ends. It is that that drives us on to what we must finally become. We have only to conceive of the possibility and somehow the spirit works in us to make it actual. This is the true meaning of transformation.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After several years, Ovid accepts his exiled life in Tomis and stops pining for the world he left behind. His decision to accept "creation" or the natural state of the world, rather than to criticize the village and the natural world for their lack of cultivation, marks a major transition in Ovid's character and worldview. Ovid's shift in attitude coincides with his strengthening grasp of Tomis's language, which again suggests that the villagers' language provides him with the perspective to appreciate the world he lives in. The villagers' language, which observes and accepts reality rather than trying to explain it, allows Ovid to observe and accept nature as well, appreciating its subtler form of beauty rather than critiquing it. Ovid senses that this power to change emanates from inside a person and pushes them to become who they truly are, suggesting that radical personal transformation is possible. It also implies that such transformation is somehow tied to an individual's fate, as if one's subconscious continually pushes one in a certain direction, to seek out experiences that will transform and shape an individual into who they need to be.

> For these people it is a new concept, play. How can I make them understand that till I came here it was the only thing I knew? Everything I ever valued before this was valuable only because it was useless, because time spent upon it was not demanded but freely given, because to play is to be free. Free is not a word that exists, I think, in their language.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Although Ovid drills with Tomis's soldiers, rides with the hunters, and has largely given up his frivolous ways, he plants a small garden of wildflowers next to his hut to bring some color into the village. The village women think this is foolish, since the flowers cannot be eaten or used for survival. Ovid's flowers symbolize a healthy frivolity, a level of play that relieves some of the drudgery of life and adds beauty and fun. While Ovid's past life was so frivolous as to burden those around him, his cultivation of a little garden is a small practice that does not consume necessary time or space, thus representing frivolity contained to a healthy degree. While the villagers are hardy and practical, the women's belief that anything without a direct utility is a waste of time suggests that their practicality is taken to an unhealthy extreme. Since Ovid believes that playing is an act

of freedom, the village women's inability to play suggests that they lead joyless, constrained lives. Although they are productive and well-suited to surviving a harsh environment, such a joyless life may not be worth living. Just as the book condemns Ovid's former excessive frivolity, it also condemns the village women's severe practicality, thus suggesting that the proper balance lies somewhere between the two extremes.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ He is not at all beautiful, as I had imagined the Child must be. But I am filled with a tenderness, an immense pity for him, a need to free him into some clearer body, that is like a pain in my own.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

After the hunters fulfill Ovid's request and capture the Child, returning him to Tomis, Ovid watches as the Child lies passive and silent for weeks. Ovid's "pity" for the Child and feeling that he must save him from his feral state is rather condescending. Ovid's concern does not account for the Child's will, but only what Ovid thinks is best for him: that is, conforming to human society. Ovid's expectation that the Child should be "beautiful" suggests that he still views the boy through his Latin-shaped societal lens, including its aesthetic preferences. Although he believes his desires match the Child's best interests, they seem instead to serve his own purposes. Ovid's condescending desire to rescue the boy from his present state is ironic, since it is ultimately the Child who helps Ovid to transform and relinquish his confining sense of self, to join himself with nature. However, Ovid's present attitude reflects the habit (reinforced by his Latin language) of asserting oneself onto the surrounding environment, and attempting to reshape it to one's own liking.

❝ All that will tie him to us, a new life, is invisibly there, he must feel it: the web of feeling that is this room, the strings—curiosity, a need to find out the usefulness to him of all these objects that surround him, and the way they define and illuminate the uses of his own body—these are the threads that hold him now, and along which his mind must travel to discover how he is connected to us.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

After several weeks of keeping the Child tied up in his hut, Ovid decides to cut the boy's bonds, since he thinks that curiosity about human society will keep the Child in the village. For all his self-awareness, Ovid describes the trappings of human society as if they were chains holding the Child down, bonds that will not let him escape even if he desires to do so. This suggests that human society—though it can be a good thing and produce tools, knowledge, community, and so on—represents a form of entrapment. The tools and technology go from becoming useful to becoming necessary, and eventually one loses one's ability to survive without them. The fact that Ovid needed to keep the Child tied, like an animal or a prisoner, so he would not immediately flee suggests that human society may not provide enough benefits for someone like the Child to stay when he is already perfectly capable of surviving on his own in the wild. For people like the Child, free of society and capable of taking care of himself, human civilization seems to hold no appeal until a person becomes dependent on society for survival. This suggests that society is less a choice than a cage.

❝ I too know all the boundary stones of our land, but to me they mean something different. They are where the world begins. Beyond them lies Rome and all the known world that we Romans have power over. Out there, beyond the boundary stones, the mystery begins.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), Ovid's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Ovid reflects on how, for his brother, the edges of their family's land marks the end of the world. For Ovid, however, the edge marks the beginning. Ovid makes this statement to reflect on the difference between his dutiful brother and frivolous self. His brother's world, his life's focus, is the range of their family estate and his duty to uphold their family's honor. Ovid's brother accepts the fate and identity that his family gives to him. Meanwhile, Ovid's sense that his world begins beyond the boundary stones suggests that he disregards family and duty, but sees his individual fulfillment occurring out in the world, in the cities. While this reveals the root of Ovid's frivolous life as an adult, it also foreshadows his exile to Tomis and subsequent exile to the northern lands as well. Since Ovid rejects his home and duty to his family, he does not truly discover who he is until he lives in Tomis, in exile, where hardships and rugged nature and language reframe his perception of life. When Ovid must flee Tomis, he recognizes this as another chance to grow his character and perspective yet again. Thus, Ovid's childhood feeling that the world begins at their farm's boundary foreshadows the very end of his life, when Ovid feels the fulfillment of his destiny is to endlessly press outward, farther from Roman society, to test himself and rediscover who he truly is.

> All this world is alive for [the Child]. It is his sphere of knowledge, a kind of library of forms that he has observed and committed to memory, another language whose hieroglyphs he can interpret and read.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Ovid walks through the marshes and woods with the Child, he realizes that the Child possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of nature, as if it is a language he can read, speak, and hear. This is the first time that Ovid recognizes that the Child, though feral and lacking any behaviors associated with human society, possesses his own depth of intelligence. Additionally, this is the moment Ovid recognizes that the Child's unspoken language, which he later refers to as the "true language," is rooted in his deep understanding of plants and animals. This realization establishes that the true language as not a conventional way of speaking with structured forms and audible words, but rather a way of existing in nature, understanding it and interacting with it. The true language is thus not a pattern of speech, but is its own kind of dialogue in the sense that the Child interprets what he sees and hears as if he were reading, and then responds accordingly or even speaks back through animal calls.

> Slowly I begin the final metamorphosis. I must drive out my old self and let the universe in. The creatures will come creeping back—not as gods transmogrified, but as themselves. Beaked, furred, fanged, tusked, clawed, hooved, snouted, they will settle in us, re-entering their old lives deep in our consciousness. And after them, the plants, also themselves.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

As Ovid spends time with the Child and begins to grasp the "true language" that unites human beings with nature, he feels that he is on the edge of rejoining the universe and recognizing the interconnectedness of all things. Ovid's conscious decision to chase after the true language and let go of his sense of self represents the first stage of his final transformation. Significantly, Ovid establishes in this statement that the gods, whom he has been resisting and thinking about for the entire story, are not gods in the divine sense, but represent a transcendent understanding of nature. The gods and nature thus offer life after death by taking one's body, repurposing its components, and transforming it into new life through the soil. This redefining of the gods reaches back through Ovid's earlier narrative and changes the meaning of several scenes. This is especially true for Ovid's prior dream of meeting the gods on the River Ister. In that instance, he was not speaking with the Roman deities, but with nature as a transcendent whole. When those gods asked him to believe and let them into his life, Ovid was not resisting Mars or some other deity, but resisting the concept that he is merely a single element of a greater whole. Now, Ovid realizes that he is merely one facet of the universal ecosystem, indivisible from the rest.

> The language I am speaking of now, that I am almost speaking, is a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation. We knew that language once. I spoke it in my childhood. We must discover it again.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

As Ovid spends more time with the Child and feels that he is coming closer to grasping the "true language" of the natural world, he reflects on how this language changes his overall perspective. The notion that the true language reconciles Ovid to his environment radically contrasts with his native Latin, which taught Ovid to see himself as distinct from and even superior to the world around him. Ovid's sense that all people knew the true language at some point, as children, implies that this true language actually exists beyond the bounds of the narrative. It suggests that this universal way of understanding one's place in the universe is inherent to human beings and is present until society and sophisticated language drives it out and teaches people to see themselves as individuals. Ovid's feeling that humanity must rediscover this true language suggests that it is the key to reconnecting human beings to the natural world.

Author David Malouf, who is Australian, seems to be influenced by Australia's Aboriginal people in his descriptions of the Child's natural language. The Child and his true language represents a lifestyle similar to that of Australian Aboriginal people, who did not dominate the natural environment but lived in harmony with it. However, this lifestyle largely came to an end when European settlers, like the Latin-speaking Romans, arrived and dominated the land, shaping it to their own tastes.

> All these weeks I have been following my own plan for the Child, and have never for one moment thought of him as anything but a creature of my own will, a figure in my dream. Now, as he kneels in the snow, howling, tearing his face with his nails, I have a vision of his utter separateness that terrifies me. I have no notion of what pain he is suffering, what deep sense of loss and deprivation his cries articulate.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

As winter sets in, the Child wants to stay outside in the snow, but Ovid tries to force him into their hut. The Child becomes hysterical, howling and scratching at himself and trying to climb the village walls. As Ovid watches the Child mourn his enclosure and separation from nature, he realizes that he dehumanized the Child and did not regard him as a being with his own will and intelligence. Ovid's treatment of the Child—as figure to bend and shape to his will—parallels his Latin attitude toward nature, seeing it as something to dominate and control, rather than respect. This suggests that the worldview formed by Latin-based languages leads people to see the world around them—whether plants, animals, or other people—as something to dominate. This realization suggests that part of Ovid's final task, his self-described "metamorphosis," is to recognize both the Child and the natural world as entities with their own wills. Just as the Child does not want to be dominated and controlled, neither should Ovid assume that nature wants to be shaped to his particular tastes.

Chapter 4 Quotes

> If I thought we might find [the Child] in the spring, I would let him go. But that is impossible. Having brought him in among us there is no way back. Already, in the warmth of the room, he is losing his capacity to withstand cold. [...] Out there he would freeze. Whatever his secret was, I have taken it from him.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Although the Child inexplicably used to survive the winters naked and alone in the wild (perhaps by hibernating like an animal), Ovid realizes that wintering in the huts, away from the cold, has so weakened the Child that he can no longer survive outside. Although the Child's unnatural ability to withstand cold winters is never explained, his transition from hardiness to weakness represents an inversion of Ovid's own journey. Where Ovid experiences true hardship for the first time in Tomis and grows stronger because of it, the Child experiences protection from the natural elements

for the first time and becomes vulnerable. This suggests that just as suffering can strengthen a person, comfort and safety can actively weaken them. From the Child's perspective, this suggests that human society actually weakens its members by protecting them from danger and nature. Although they survive as a group, each member of that society becomes even more vulnerable individually. Human society, while not inherently wrong, thus seems to be an enabling force in people lives, rather than a strengthening one.

❝ What else should life be but a continual series of beginnings, of painful setting out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become [...] What else is death but the refusal any longer to grow and suffer change?

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 135-136

Explanation and Analysis

After Ovid and the Child flee the village together, they make their way toward the River Ister to cross into the unknown territory in the north. Rather than mourn the loss of his second home, Ovid sees their flight as the opportunity to grow through suffering yet again. His reflection suggests that growth and change, through hardship, is the essential meaning of life; foregoing change is akin to dying. Significantly, this suggests that Ovid's life in Rome, in which he did not change but rested in comfort for decades, constituted a form of early death. He lived and indulged in pleasures, but his spirit languished. On the other hand, Ovid's view of life as a series of new beginnings implies that, in his view of himself as one element in the whole of nature, he will live forever. When Ovid dies and his body goes into the ground, he will decompose and feed the soil, which will in turn produce new life. Fitting with Ovid's view of the gods as representations of the nature, the afterlife becomes the process through which one's body absorbs back into the natural world to become the components of a new being.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ The days pass, and I cease to count them. The river is far behind us. [...] I no longer ask myself what we are making for. The notion of a destination no longer seems necessary to me. It has been swallowed up in the immensity of this landscape, as the days have been swallowed up by the sense I now have of a life that stretches beyond measurable time.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

As Ovid and the Child wander farther and farther into the wilderness, away from Tomis and human civilization, Ovid stops tracking time or thinking of their journey as having some destination. The river being "far behind them" suggests that together, they have transitioned into this new world and state of being. Ovid and the Child's method of travel seems more animalistic than human, like cows grazing along the countryside. For Ovid, this lack of timekeeping or destination signify that he has almost entirely shed his former individualistic worldview and human ideals, exchanging them for the naturalistic life shaped by the "true language" of the universe and humanity's unity with nature. Ovid's sense that his life extends beyond time suggests that he no longer sees his life as the time during which his physical body continues to function. Rather, he views his life as indistinct from the continuous existence of the natural world. That is, when his body dies, he will live on through the soil in which his remains decompose, in the grass that grows from that soil, and in the animals that take sustenance from the grass. In this sense, Ovid has effectively relinquished the notion that he is separate from the world around him, and is moving toward a universal sense of existence.

❝ From here I ascend, or lower myself, grain by grain, into the hands of the gods.

Related Characters: Ovid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Ovid knows he is dying, that he has already taken his last steps. Ovid's statement that he both "ascends" and "lower[s]" himself ironically suggests that he achieves transcendence by dissolving into the ground. As his body decomposes, he will feed back into the ecosystem, into nature, and live on in all the organisms that repurpose his matter. By doing so, Ovid reflects that he gives himself back to the gods, reiterating that he considers the universe to be its own form of transcendent entity. Ovid's willingness to give himself up to the gods signifies the end of his lifelong skepticism. By understanding the "true language" of the universe and reconciling himself to nature, Ovid can finally believe in gods, in transcendence, in a non-ephemeral way of existing that he has always denied. For Ovid, his death—his "final metamorphosis"—also resolves his inability to believe.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Ovid recalls that he first sees the Child when he is three or four years old. They play together by the olive trees on Ovid's family farm and speak in a language only they can understand. Even as Ovid grows older, the Child remains the same age. Ovid knows the child is a "wild boy" and wonders if he is the same one that the goatherds speak fearfully of, the boy raised by wolves who becomes a wolf himself when the moon is full. The goatherds believe such werewolves live secretly among men.

Ovid's recollection of a mysterious language between him and the Child, as well as the goatherds' fear that any "wild boy" would be a werewolf, suggest that the Child is somehow different from ordinary humans, and perhaps that does really does have some kind of "wild" connection with nature.

When Ovid grows into a man, the Child disappears. Ovid tells no one of his former playmate, not even his brother. However, he feels certain he will see the Child again, but does not know whether he will be a boy or a man. Ovid feels silly for believing in such fancy, since he is otherwise a skeptic.

The fact that the Child does not age implies that he is either imaginary or supernatural in some way. Meanwhile, Ovid's skepticism and rationalism sets him distinctly apart from the Child as someone firmly grounded in human society rather than in nature.

CHAPTER 1

The desolate nature of Ovid's new home shows him new "perspectives." Winter lasts eight months, and little grows even in the summer. The land feels barren, devoid of cultivated gardens or places created for enjoyment. Ovid lives in exile in an isolated village called Tomis, consisting of a hundred wooden huts with stables in the lower portions and living areas built above, where families huddle together for entire winters. He lives with the village headman and the headman's elderly mother, daughter-in-law, and grandson. Ovid thinks these people are "barbarian[s]," but they are kind enough, largely ignoring his presence.

Ovid's opinion that the landscape looks desolate and the villagers are barbaric—even though they share their home with him—demonstrates his disdain for his new environment. The long, hard winters and meager plant growth in summer suggests that in Tomis, nature is a powerful, dominating force which will require a different lifestyle than Ovid led in Rome.

Tomis is so remote that there is nowhere for Ovid to escape to, so the villagers allow him to wander. He does not stray too far from them, since "savages" from other tribes often raid the village. All of Tomis is an "armed camp." As an aging man, unsuited to their harsh lives, Ovid feels that he is the least useful among them. He cannot speak their language and none of them speak Latin. Ovid has not spoken with anyone in over a year, so he is effectively "rendered dumb." Often he talks to himself or shouts at the wild in his own tongue just to remember the words.

Ovid's inability to speak with the other villagers establishes language and communication as a central conflict in the story, as Ovid is not only exiled away from his homeland but entirely isolated from his new community. Meanwhile, the constant danger of foreign raiders parallels the danger of Tomis's severe winters. Together, this threatening environment contrasts with the Ovid's idyllic childhood in Rome.

Ovid finds his life in Tomis "terrible beyond description." At night, he dreams that he wanders into the wilderness and frantically digs in the earth, looking for his own grave—the grave of *Publius Ovidius Naso*, "Roman of the equestrian order, poet." As he writes his narrative, Ovid reflects that he is writing to no one in particular. At best, this letter will be read by someone 1,000 years after the Roman Empire falls, after it no longer has the power to "silence" him. Ovid asks the reader if his legacy, his writing, somehow survived, and if thus he himself survived.

Ovid's dreams of digging for his own grave nods to Ovid's belief in fate, since it seems to suggest that he believes he'll die in the wilderness. It also seems that some part of him may yearn for such a death, though he does not realize it yet. Ovid's reflection on his writing only being read far in the future seems to refer to the historical Ovid's Epistulae ex Ponto, *which he wrote during his real-life exile in Tomis and through which he endures in the modern reader's mind.*

Ovid writes at night by candlelight while spiders crawl over him. He wonders if the spiders have their own language, and thinks that learning it would be no more trouble than learning the "barbarous guttural tongue" of his captors in Tomis. Ovid begins to recognize repeated sounds within the villagers' language, but understands none of it. He reflects that Roman law cast him out of "society" into the world of those not yet "fully human," since these villagers have not submitted themselves to Roman society and civilization. He longs to hear the sophistication of Latin, which he regards as the perfect language. He longs to know the spiders' language, and thinks that he would write his *New Metamorphoses* in it, if only he could understand.

Ovid's theory that spiders speak their own language suggests that, perhaps due to Ovid's childhood bond with the wild Child and the strange language they shared, he believes that nature holds untold potential and an entirely separate realm of communication. Additionally, Ovid's thought that he could write his New Metamorphoses *foreshadows the way that language will come to fundamentally change Ovid's view of himself and of nature, constituting his own metamorphosis. Meanwhile, Ovid's belief that Latin is the ultimate language reveals his prejudice against less urbanized, more primitive lifestyles.*

In the village language, Ovid can recognize the tone and mood of words, but no more. Although the village women grind seeds Ovid might recognize the Latin names of, he cannot discern one from the other even by taste, removed from the context of Roman cooking. He wonders if he will have to relearn the world like a child, "with all things deprived of the special magic of the names in my own tongue."

Ovid's inability to recognize seeds without their Latin names suggests that one's language greatly impacts one's perception of the surrounding world. His feeling of being a child and needing to relearn the world positions him to embark on his aforementioned metamorphic journey to rediscover the world.

Ovid thinks there is little to Tomis aside from the huts, separated by narrow paths made of mud and compacted dung. There are a few swaths of grain outside the village walls, which the women occasionally harvest. To one side flows a **river**. When it is thawed, as it presently is, the villagers can wander freely. However, when the river freezes, everyone must remain within the Tomis's walls because raiders ride across the frozen river to plunder the village. Compared to the raiders, whom Ovid fears but has not yet seen, he thinks Tomis's people are only "relatively savage."

The village's simplicity and the fact that their only crop exists outside their walls indicates that Tomis is not an agrarian community—they do not farm or cultivate. The river symbolizes boundaries throughout the story, either between one literal place and another or between one way of understanding of the world and another.

One night, Ovid dreams that he walks onto the **river**. Horsemen ride out of the sky, whom Ovid recognizes as all the **gods** he does not believe in. They implore him to let them cross his river and enter. They ask him to "believe." Ovid starts awake and speaks a word in a language he does not know. He feels that something in the wilderness is waiting for him.

In Ovid's dream, the river represents the boundary he must cross between rational skepticism and belief in the mystical natural world. Waking up speaking a word in an unknown language suggests that Ovid is on the cusp of new knowledge, a new way of seeing the world.

Ovid remarks that he is called Naso "because of the nose." In Rome, he has a nose for what will find a large audience. Ovid grows up in the Augustan Age, when all wars have ceased and Roman society has grown "soft." As a poet, he helps form the new "national style," which is a rejection of patriotism, militarism, and belief in the **gods**, who no longer seem necessary. Emperor Augustus created a society that was "orderly" but "dull." In response, Ovid advocates for a society that is "ephemeral" and "fun" and that throws off all sense of duty. Augustus despises Ovid for this and exiles him to Tomis, winning the battle between them. However, Ovid knows that beneath one of the Emperor's family's porticos, people are having sex as an act of "public defiance," because Ovid made it a symbolic act in one of his poems.

The exact reason for the historical Ovid's exile is unknown, though in one writing Ovid said that it was partially due to his work Ars armatoria, *a guide to romance and sex that many Romans found indecent. In the story, Ovid's "national style" embodies frivolity, especially since it actively rejects duty and responsibility. Ovid can only build such a belief in an era of unusual peace and luxury, which suggests that such frivolous, even hedonistic living is only viable for certain privileged individuals. Peace and luxury thus seem to enable a frivolous lifestyle.*

Despite his symbolic antagonism, all Ovid can do in exile is rage at his imposed silence. He wanders the empty countryside shouting, hoping his words will somehow make their way to Rome. He reflects that the landscape one feels was "given" by the **gods**, "ready-made in all its placid beauty," is in fact only made by men. When one feels the presence of gods in such a place, it is because one summons them out of one's own consciousness. Ovid thinks such gods are certainly felt, but "have to be recognized to become real." Such gods are neither purely external nor purely internal, but arise from the relationship between people and their surrounding environments.

Ovid's belief that all beauty, even natural beauty, is man-made suggests that in his Latin worldview, something is only valuable if human hands shape it. This establishes Ovid as antagonistic toward unmade, unrefined nature, since it does not bear the human mark. Ovid's changing relationship to nature parallels his changing attitude toward languages, forming one of the main thematic arcs in the story.

Ovid imagines that all creatures can dream new realities for themselves, into which they are then able to enter. The stone imagines itself alive and becomes a toad. The toad imagines itself flying like a bird and takes to the skies, even while still a toad. Ovid remarks, "Our bodies are not final," but moving from form to form, until men become **gods**. He imagines the end of all things, "the earth transfigured and the gods walking upon it." Ovid can imagine this progress because he presently sits amidst the "unmade earth," so far fallen from the civilization he once knew.

Ovid's narration is full of mysticism—even to the point of becoming abstract—but evokes the idea of metamorphosis and personal transformation. The "unmade earth" represents not only nature's potential, but Ovid's own potential to grow and change. His belief that "our bodies are not final" foreshadows his eventual epiphany that his death is merely the process through which he changes forms, from living human to fertile soil.

Even in the "utter desolation" of Tomis, Ovid sees the potential for growth. While walking, he spots a scarlet poppy. The bright red is the first real color he's seen in months. When Ovid speaks the word "scarlet" he is so overjoyed that he dances—which he finds absurd, since his friends know him as a "cynical metropolitan poet"—and feels as if, by speaking the word, he has brought the color back "into being," as if he is "making the spring." Ovid's mind is filled with flowers, and he thinks that just by naming them, he can cause each in turn to appear in the wilderness and open their colors. Ovid feels a renewed sense of purpose, as if his whole life until this point was only wasted time. He decides he will be "transformed."

Ovid's feeling that he brings flowers into existence by imagining and naming them is not literal. Instead, it suggests that language so heavily influences one's perception of reality that it helps one to see things they otherwise would not. Ovid does not create flowers out of thin air when he names them, but he does bring them to the forefront of his mind, so that he can see and appreciate them in nature. Without language, those flowers remain minor and largely unnoticeable variations in the landscape, not beautiful objects worthy of admiration.

CHAPTER 2

Ovid sits with the headman and his family in the main room of their hut. The headman's mother never joins them. They have eaten dinner and, in the free hour before sleep, the daughter-in-law sews strips of animal hide together. The headman repairs a fishing net, telling his grandson a story while he works. Ovid cannot understand the words, but believes he recognizes the "tune" of it, as if he'd heard it long ago from one of his family's slaves.

Although neither Latin or the villagers' language is universally understood, Ovid's sense of the story's "tune" and arc suggests that some similarity exists between them, since they are both vessels that human beings use to communicate shared ideas and emotions.

Ovid thinks of the headman as "old," but realizes they are probably the same age, not quite 50. He tries to imagine the headman's life, year by year paralleling his own, but he cannot. The headman is tough and strong like Ovid has never been, with a "stern nobility." Compared to the hardships that must have produced such a man, Ovid feels that his life "has been so frivolous." For all his years he's pampered himself, learned from books, rejected anything that he could not understand, and believed in no **gods**. By contrast, the headman moves slowly and powerfully, and seems to embody a gentle but almost animal nature, like the spirits of the horses he tames. Tomorrow, Ovid will accompany a group into the birchwoods to hunt deer.

Ovid's recognition of his own frivolity and weakness signifies a budding self-awareness and personal growth. Initially, Ovid viewed himself as sophisticated and superior, and the headman and his people as barbaric. Ovid's recognition that the headman possesses a certain "nobility" while he himself feels pampered and weak, indicates that he is beginning to recognize the value of a harder yet simpler lifestyle. Once again, it seems Ovid's frivolity was enabled by his luxurious and peaceful lifestyle in Rome, and that such frivolity could not develop in a place like Tomis.

In the morning, Ovid and others gather in the village square and eat a thin soup with curds for breakfast. Hunters armed with bows, as well as the village shaman, arrive. The headman then arrives and greets each man, woman, and child in turn. They begin their ceremony, forming a silent circle while a boy receives a handful of curds, which he carries into the center of the circle. In the midst of the ceremony, Ovid thinks the boy seems more like a "conductor of dark forces" than a person. The shaman leads everyone in singing while the boy walks slowly and throws the curds into the fire. The circle breaks. People talk and laugh as they prepare for their journey. The headman, embarrassed, shows Ovid how to ride a horse without a saddle while the other men politely look away.

Ovid's rational skepticism sharply contrasts with the villagers' superstitious mysticism. However, Ovid's feeling that the boy becomes a "conductor of dark forces" suggests that Ovid finds himself drawn into the spectacle of belief. Like his frivolity, Ovid's skepticism seems to be a result of his privileged and comfortable lifestyle, where he never depended upon nature for survival or faced any serious threats. Additionally, the headman's embarrassment at having to teach Ovid how to ride demonstrates how Ovid's frivolous past makes him ill-suited to his new environment, lacking basic skills.

Ovid and the other horsemen leave the village, crossing the frosty landscape until they reach a sparse forest by mid-morning. They climb a large hill and reach a circular clearing on a plateau, containing roughly 100 funerary mounds. The skeleton of a horse and rider sits on each, impaled on a long pole, which is the customary way to lay a horseman to rest. The headman unshoulders a sack full of grain and leads his riders weaving among the mounds, shouting and throwing grain onto the graves. He returns and shows Ovid how to shout like them, giving him grain to throw as well. As he rides and shouts, Ovid feels as if the breath he expels carries his fear with it, removing it from himself. Although he still considers himself a "Roman and a poet," Ovid feels a new sense of freedom as the breaths leave his body.

Ovid's participation in the funerary procession, which honors the spirits of the dead (thus contradicting his skeptical disbelief in superstition) signifies yet another step in his personal transformation. Ovid not only participates in the life of the village, but takes courage from their mystic rituals, indicating that his skepticism is beginning to loosen. He allows himself to believe, to a degree, in the villagers' spirituality. However, Ovid's sense that he is still a "Roman and a poet" suggests that he is resisting abandonment of his former identity as a sophisticated intellectual.

As Ovid rides back down the hill, following the headman's path, he recalls his older brother's funeral, decades before. On that day, as Ovid rides next to his father, he realizes that both he and his father wish Ovid had died instead, since his brother was the dutiful one and would have made a better heir to the estate. He finds it strange that, 30 years later, he should be riding with "barbarians" beyond the reach of the Roman law and Roman state to which his father was so committed. Although Ovid performed the funeral rites at his father's funeral as well, they did not feel significant until this day. Ovid thinks he is finally "free" to begin preparing for his own eventual death.

Ovid's contemplation of both his brother and father's deaths, which feel unresolved until this moment, suggests that his modern skepticism and frivolity prevent him from truly reckoning with his grief. Since Ovid links frivolous living with an utter disregard for gods or spirituality, it appears that his skepticism keeps him so focused on fleeting pleasures that he cannot process bigger issues like death and loss.

Ovid and the hunters reach the birchwoods at midday. They climb down and lead their horses on foot, following the group's tracker as he points out a wolf in her den and bear tracks in the frost. Among the bear tracks are also small human footprints, which shocks Ovid, though none of the others seem surprised. The headman explains, through hand signs, that they first started seeing these footprints two seasons ago. They belong to a "wild boy" who lives with the deer. Ovid is full of questions, but cannot ask any of them because of the language barrier. By the spacing between the footprints, Ovid reckons the child can keep pace with the deer. They are bare, indicating that the child is naked.

The hunters' image of a "wild boy" recalls the goatherds' belief in such a creature, as well as Ovid's childhood memories of his secret friend. The fact that the child is naked, despite the cold weather, suggests that he is somehow different from humans, since a normal child could not survive naked in such conditions. Additionally, Ovid's estimation that the child can keep pace with the deer suggests that the boy is extraordinarily fit and strong.

Ovid touches the footprint, imagining that in doing so he can summon the child in his mind. Looking up, he sees the boy crouched some distance away in the woods, watching them. Oddly, Ovid feels as if he recognizes him. Ovid points and shouts. The boy flees. Some of the hunters try to chase after him on horseback, but come back empty-handed. Ovid wonders briefly if he truly saw the boy or was simply imagining the Child he once played with. For the rest of the afternoon, the hunters weave their horses slowly through the wood, killing one deer. Ovid wonders what they would do if they ever managed to catch the boy.

Ovid does not consider what they would do with Child until after they fail to catch him, suggesting that he does not have any plan beyond the desire to possess the boy. This appears grossly self-interested, since Ovid never wonders whether the boy actually wants *to be caught.*

They make camp in the evening. Ovid gathers firewood while another butchers the deer they've killed, gathering the entrails and some of the blood in a hollow gourd. Ovid thinks about the wild boy, whom he starts to regard as "the Child," and thinks that the Child's survival in such a harsh wilderness is more breathtaking than any fantasy he himself wrote in his poems. Ovid hugs his knees and talks to himself in Latin, until he realizes this makes the other hunters nervous. With no shared language between them, Ovid thinks the only thing that connects him to these other men is their shared "likeness of humanity."

Although Ovid still does not share a language with the other villagers, his sense of their "shared likeness" indicates a growing appreciation for them. The people he once thought of as barbarians now feel like comrades, indicating that Ovid is developing an ability to appreciate people different from himself. Although Ovid decides that the boy in the forest is the same Child he knew when he was young, the author intentionally leaves the validity of this vague, since Ovid's childhood friend did not age, while this current "wild boy" does.

Ovid watches the shaman perform his ceremony, arranging several small items around himself in a circle as he chants in a high-pitched voice. The young hunter who shot the deer approaches with the gourd filled with blood, marks the shaman's forehead with it, then pours it around the circle. After the ceremony, all of the men set about eating the kill and building shelters for the night. While Ovid sleeps, he dreams that some creature approaches him, a wolf or perhaps the Child, and some inner part of himself rises to meet it. He wakes, but no one is near him, so he sleeps again until dawn.

The creature approaching Ovid represents nature, which comes near him but does not consume or attack him. The inner part of Ovid that tries to meet the creature seems to be the same part of himself that communed with the "wild boy" during Ovid's childhood— a part that implicitly understands his true relationship to nature.

Soon after, winter arrives, and Ovid finds the season "terrible beyond belief." Freezing winds whip through the village for seven months. Everyone in Tomis spends most of their time huddled inside in a semi-conscious state, as if they are animals hibernating. Ovid thinks constantly about the Child in the wilderness and wonders how he could survive such harsh weather. He waits anxiously for spring, when he hopes to convince the headman—whom he now calls Ryzak—to send a search party out for the Child. However, for now he keeps his plan a secret. Ovid knows that the Child is the same "wild boy" from his own childhood.

The villagers' lifestyle closely parallels the natural world: they hibernate in winter and hunt or forage when the weather allows. This contrasts with the sophisticated cities that Ovid knows, where agriculture and modern building allow human beings to keep out the cold and carry on with daily life. Meanwhile, Ovid finally uses Ryzak's name rather than referring to him as the headman, which reflects his growing perception of Ryzak as an person, rather than just a figure amidst his exile.

Tomis receives word that hundreds of Dacian horsemen sacked a town to the north, and within days they ride across the frozen **river** to assault Tomis as well. All the men in Tomis, including Ovid, stand on the palisade walls armed with lances to defend against the attack. Ovid finds it ironic that he, a descendent of warriors and knights in imperialist Rome, spent his whole life deriding ideas like "duty" and "patriotism." Now, at 50 years old, he stands to defend a small village "at the edge of the world." When the Dacians attack, they spend all night riding circles around the walled village, shooting poison arrows into it. Eventually they ride away, moving onto the next village. "And now it is spring," narrates Ovid.

Once again, Ovid's former frivolous lifestyle seems enabled by Rome's unusual era of peace and prosperity. Now that Ovid lives in a dangerous environment, he must commit himself to more difficult tasks such as defending one's home. Ovid's inability to maintain his former carefree lifestyle in Tomis suggests that frivolity is an unsustainable way to live. As soon as one loses their privileged position or their society moves away from peacetime, one is forced to adopt a more practical philosophy.

Ovid has now attained enough of Tomis's language to communicate simple ideas. He presses Ryzak to send a search party out for the Child, Ryzak is reticent, though won't say why. Ovid wonders if the villagers' superstition extends to the Child as well, if they believe him to be some sort of **god** or spiritual creature. Ovid simply wants to know that the Child survived the winter, and perhaps someday to bring him back to live in Tomis. However, the seasonal rituals of spring and summer, especially fishing, take up all their time until autumn arrives.

Ovid and the villagers' contrasting responses to the Child reflects the difference in their respective worldviews. The villagers suspect that the Child is some sort of supernatural spirit or demon, reflecting their belief in the mystical forces of nature. Ovid merely worries about the Child surviving the harsh winter, indicating that he thinks of the Child as a human rather than a spiritual being, reflecting his rational skepticism.

The hunters make another journey to the birchwoods. Ovid longs to see some evidence of the Child, but rain washes away all tracks and they leave without seeing any sign of him. Ovid is crushed by disappointment and fears that the Child won't survive the winters, or that he himself won't survive unless he knows the Child is alive.

Ovid's feeling that he won't survive if the Child does not suggests that he senses the "wild boy" is somehow crucial to his own personal growth and ability to adapt to life in Tomis.

Another winter passes into another spring. Ovid understands the "crude tongue" of Tomis now. He teaches Ryzak's grandson bits of Latin, though the boy takes little interest in it. Ovid listens to Ryzak tell his stories and notes how different they are from Greek stories. Ryzak's language is frank, abrupt, and cruel, speaking plainly and directly about the nature of life in their harsh environment. Compared to Ryzak, Ovid feels his own stories and language are over-embellished and fanciful. Ryzak seems gentle though dignified by his stern strength, while Ovid feels like an undignified "hysterical old woman" by contrast.

The frankness of Ryzak's stories suggests that, within the frame of their language, the villagers simply observe and accept their life and its hardships, rather than analyze or explain them with philosophy or aesthetics. Ovid's feeling that he is fanciful and "hysterical" next to Ryzak suggests that Latin's sophisticatio, feels excessive and out of place in the straightforward brutality of life in Tomis.

The year passes into autumn. Ovid spots the Child among the birchwoods. He appears while Ovid sits with the other hunters, sipping gruel from their cups. The Child is older and taller now, perhaps 11 or 12 years old. Ovid and the hunters freeze. Ovid realizes the hunters are terrified by the child, even though they are fearless in the face of mortal danger and raiding horsemen. Ovid only fears that the Child will flee again. That night, Ovid leaves a bowl of gruel sitting out. The bowl is empty by morning. Ovid knows the Child must be seeking them out while they search for him, and wonders if the "wild boy" now recognizes his similarity to these strangers in his woods. Ryzak thinks Ovid's obsession with the Child is foolish, perhaps even dangerous.

Although the villagers believe the Child is not a normal human—and the narrative doesn't confirm or deny this—the fact that the Child is older and taller suggests that he has normal biological functions despite his unusual lifestyle and affinity for wildlife. Ovid and the hunters' differing responses to the Child again typifies their respective view of the world. The hunters are physically capable, but fear things they do not understand, such as the Child. Ovid, by contrast, fears physical dangers like the raiding tribes, but tends to ignore spirits and anything he does not understand.

The next day, the hunters kill five or six deer and spend the rest of the day butchering and preserving the meat. At night, Ovid sets out another bowl of gruel, determined to wait awake all night to see the Child. He falls asleep. He dreams that he and the other hunters are watching the Child, but they are all stones and mushrooms rather than humans. Ovid dreams that he is a pool of water in the dirt, part of the landscape, and fears his vulnerability. A deer approaches and drinks cautiously from him, and Ovid feels "tenderness" as the deer drinks him in and makes him a part of itself. He fears that a wolf may come and consume all of him. Instead, the Child approaches and drinks from Ovid.

Ovid's dream of being a pool of water that a deer drinks from suggests that he is gradually becoming one with nature and interconnected with everything else in the universe. The vulnerability Ovid feels as a pool of water represents his fear of losing his sense of self as something separate from his surroundings, while the tenderness he feels as the deer nourishes itself with him represents the emotional reward of embracing his unity with nature. Further, the Child's approach to the pool of water suggests that he will be integral in leading Ovid to this view of himself and the world.

Ovid wakes in the dark. He sees the Child putting down the soup bowl Ovid left for him, unsure of whether to run back to nature or stay in the human world. The Child has eaten food made by humans, entered into their realm. As Ovid and the Child stare at each other, Ovid feels they have communicated in a "**language** beyond tongues." The Child edges away into the darkness, but Ovid believes that next year, the Child will seek them out.

The Child's choice to stay with or run from the humans foreshadows his choice of remaining in human society or rejecting it for a more naturalistic life. This is the first formal mention of the "language beyond tongues," the universal, unstructured language that the story suggests exists and unites all living things.

The next year passes. Ovid grows strong and sturdy and embraces his life in Tomis. He goes on long walks and examines every living thing he can find, enjoying the village's wildness rather than criticizing it for its lack of human development. Ovid feels as if he is being transformed and entering into his new self. Ryzak is now the closest friend Ovid has ever had. He teaches Ovid more about Tomis and how the villagers' different customs fit together, and Ovid thinks the interplay is a "kind of poetry." He starts collecting wildflower seeds and planting a simple **garden** near his hut.

Ovid's personal growth is a direct result of living in the harsh environment of Tomis. More than physical strength, Ovid grows in his ability to appreciate nature and form relationships with other people. The direct connection between Ovid's suffering and personal growth suggests that hardships, though painful, strengthen and refine a person's character.

Ovid drills with the village soldiers and marvels at what a change has come over him. He is fluent in Tomis's language and begins to see how one's language influences one's perception of the world. Latin focuses on distinction, categorizing all the things of the world differently. The village language, by contrast, embraces "the raw life and unity of things," and Ovid reckons that by learning their language, he now sees a "different world" than the one he always knew. He appreciates the "narrower range of colors" and severe aesthetic of his new home. Spring is no longer just the blooming of flowers and leaves, but the time when his own spirit begins to thaw and "loosen and flow again, reflecting the world."

Ovid's sense that a new language presents a new world suggests that the structure of each language affects the speaker's perception of the world around them. Ovid's realization that the village language teaches him to see the unity of life—viewing spring as the time when his spirit thaws, like the landscape—lays the groundwork for the story's argument that learning a new language can bring about a perspective change and teach people to see the world differently.

Over the winter, Ovid convinces Ryzak to bring the Child back to the village next time they see him. Ryzak asks the shaman for assurance that whatever nature spirits raised the child will not haunt them for stealing him away. Ovid argues that the Child is merely a boy, and Ryzak claims to agree, so as to seem as sensible as Ovid. Secretly, Ovid believes the Child is more than an "ordinary boy."

Ryzak desires to emulate Ovid, just as Ovid desires to emulate Ryzak. This suggests that not only is the difference between them educational for Ovid, revealing an alternative way of life, it is also educational for Ryzak, presenting a more rationalistic and modern way of living that he finds intriguing.

Ovid's **garden** of wildflowers blooms in the spring and he spends time tending and feeding them, making them stronger. The women in the village think he is a fool, wasting his time on something that has no utility. The women don't wear ornaments or jewelry; everything they do and make serves a purpose. Ovid regards his flowers as his sole form of "play," but realizes this concept is entirely foreign to the villagers. While play and frivolity were the mainstays of Ovid's former life, the villagers have no concept of something being free of utility, ungoverned by "its own nature." Ovid thinks, "My little flowerpots are as subversive here as my poems were in Rome." He imagines they will bring change, that someday one of the women will stop to smell them and see that she enjoys them.

Ovid's garden represents playfulness as the healthy form of frivolity. Although the village women are hardy and good at survival, their practicality robs them of their ability to enjoy life, thus condemning severe utilitarianism. Although Ovid gives up his former utterly frivolous lifestyle, the small practice of planting flowers remains an important way for Ovid to recognize beauty and foster a sense of enjoyment. Ovid's playful flowers don't stop him from doing his duty or being productive, but add a touch of beauty to his work instead, thus representing a healthy balance of playfulness and practicality.

Summer ends and the hunters go searching for the Child in autumn. Ovid remarks that he is too cowardly to participate in the capture. The men chase the Child through the birchwoods on horseback until they exhaust and corner him. He looks terrified. When they take the Child, he kicks and bites so they have to bind him, and he lets out an inhuman howl.

Ovid's inability to participate in capturing the Child—since doing so seems ruthless, even if it is Ovid's own idea—and the trauma it seems to cause the boy suggests that bringing the Child into human society may not be a good idea after all.

No one can touch the Child without him shrieking and thrashing, so they leave him bound beneath a tree while the shaman performs a ritual and sings. Ovid thinks the shaman's voice quiets the Child, as if it draws out the his "wildness." When the shaman finishes, the Child sleeps for several days straight while Ryzak carries him back to Tomis, slung across his horse like a deer. The villagers watch in awe as the hunters bring the Child into the village. "It is all to begin," narrates Ovid.

The image of Ryzak carrying the Child like a deer they've just slain reflects the inhumanity of stealing the Child away from his home to bring him back to Tomis. Just as the hunters shoot a deer to feed themselves, Ovid's request to capture the Child seems more for his own interests than the boy's.

CHAPTER 3

Ovid wonders if he made some grave mistake in bringing the Child to Tomis. The Child lies in a hut all day, passively, doing nothing. He whimpers but never cries, which Ovid thinks would at least make him seem like the little boy he is. The Child seems to have no sense of self-awareness or shame. Even when Ovid has to wash him after he soils himself, the Child accepts everything with a "passivity" that Ovid finds disturbing, as if they have already killed his spirit.

Ovid only realizes that taking the Child out of the wilderness may have been a mistake after he does it. This suggests that before the villagers caught the Child, Ovid never once considered that perhaps he would be better off in the wilderness, away from human society and all of its ills.

The Child has toughened feet and a thin line of hair down his spine. Although Ovid does not find this unusual, the village women take it as a sign that the Child has a bestial spirit, and they refuse to come near him. Ryzak's grandson, Lullo, spreads the rumor that the Child is covered in hair and has hooves. Ovid hoped that Lullo would take an interest in the Child, since they are nearly the same age, but Lullo seems to loathe him. Lullo fears, as the village women and shaman do, that the Child is a "sleepwalker," a person whose spirit can leave his or her sleeping body to possess the body of another person.

The villagers' superstitious fear of spirits seems to reflect their belief that they exist at the mercy of nature and must abide by its seasons and changes. Ovid, on the other hand, comes from a Latin-speaking culture in which people believe they must dominate and control nature. This explains why Ovid doesn't fear beastly spirits, since most of his life has been lived independent of nature and its forces.

Ovid spends hours sitting with the Child in the darkness of the hut, watching him. He seems to have none of the spirit he possessed in the wilderness, when Ovid felt they communicated without words. He is ugly, rather than beautiful as Ovid imagined the Child would be. Even so, Ovid feels a tender sympathy for for the boy and a need to "free him into some clearer body" and restore his human spirit. Ovid is not sure how to proceed. The first step ought to be showing the Child kindness, though the villagers have already ruined that approach. Ovid realizes that this task will fall only to him, since the women will not touch the Child and Lullo should be kept away from him.

Ovid's desire to bring the Child from his natural state into human society, as well as his expectation that the Child should be beautiful rather than ugly, indicates that Ovid still views the world from his Latin-based perspective. Despite Ovid's years in Tomis, he is clearly still influenced by traditional aesthetics and the belief that it's more important for the Child to live in human society than to be free and happy.


Weeks pass. Ovid lives in the same room with the Child, and the Child grows accustomed to his presence. The boy eats less timidly. Ovid begins to feel some sense of connection between them again. Normally, when Ovid bathes the Child, the boy does not seem to recognize that it is his body being touched. One day, however, he places his fingertip on the back of Ovid's hand, feeling its texture. He withdraws it quickly. Ovid finds the encounter almost unnerving, and wonders if the Child has any real awareness of the shape and form of his own body.

The Child seems to lack self-awareness about his own body, which suggests that he doesn't have the distinctive sense of self common to human beings. His mind appears to be dissociated from his body. When the Child touches the back of Ovid's hand and then withdraws, the action signals his first steps toward recognizing his body as an extension of himself, of his conscious mind. Essentially, he becomes self-aware for the first time.


Within two weeks, Ovid senses an awakening intelligence in the Child. He starts to grow restless and watches curiously while Ovid writes on parchment. Ovid realizes that the Child experiments with his ink and parchment whenever he leaves the room, even trying to drink it. One day, Ovid steps out of the hut but watches from the doorway as the Child dips the stylus in the ink and scratches a line on the parchment, sticking his tongue out in concentration. The sight of such human striving brings tears to Ovid's eyes—the "wild boy" is entering human tradition and society. Ovid leaves the Child untied from then on, sensing that he is now bound to the village and his fellow humans. Ovid leaves a colored ball for the Child to discover and possess as his own.

Drawing on paper represents another step in the Child's developing self-awareness. Making a line on paper indicates that the Child is learning to project himself onto his environment by altering it, implying that he has some notion of himself to project. Possessing the ball represents yet another step toward self-awareness, since the Child must have an idea of himself before he can call something his own. Ovid thinks that these are markers of human society, suggesting that self-awareness, an individual's sense that he or she is distinct from the rest of the world, is an innately human trait.


As Ovid reflects on how to help the Child, he finds himself reliving memories of his own childhood. As a "cynical metropolitan poet," Ovid eliminated his childhood and his family's rural farm from memory since they felt discordant with his adult identity. Now those images and sensations flood back, more vivid than ever. Ovid remembers playing with his brother and the slaves' children, while the servants tend and bathe them. His mother is ill, so the nurses raise Ovid and his brother, caring for them and telling them stories about woodland spirits and demons. The memories bring new clarity and tenderness, and Ovid realizes that he wasted such a childhood by becoming a man of the city, while his brother "went another way, to death."

Ovid's feeling that he wasted his childhood experiences by going to the city suggests that his childhood set him on a kind of fated trajectory toward a certain lifestyle, which he refused to follow. Broadly, this suggests that one's early years shape the rest of their life, forming the person that they ought to become. However, Ovid's act of pushing such a childhood out of his mind to take on his "metropolitan" persona suggests that one may resist their fate and strive to become someone else.

Ovid thinks about the days before his brother died. When his brother is 18, he falls seriously ill. Ovid sits by his side for hours at a time, nursing him. His brother is pious and dutiful, and Ovid secretly respects and envies him for it. However, Ovid accepts his "role as the frivolous one" and teases his brother, rather than emulating him. One evening, since his brother is ill, Ovid must perform a religious ceremony in his brother's place. In his heart, Ovid feels that if he even momentarily feels sincere about the ritual, then it will be a sign to the **gods** (that he claims not to believe in) that he is replacing his brother, and his brother will die.

Ovid's feeling that he must play his "role as the frivolous one" suggests that forces like fate or societal expectations can both positively and negatively impact a person, since these factors prevent Ovid from following his better impulses. His sense that believing in gods or rituals will kill his brother suggests that some part of him does believe, since if the gods truly don't exist, Ovid would have nothing to fear.

Ovid goes out to the boundary stones of the farm, which for his brother mark the edges of the world, but for Ovid mark the beginning of it. He finds his father, who already completed his part of the ritual and gives Ovid a handful of ash and beanstalks to carry while leaping over heaps of straw. Ovid runs down the length of the field and, for only a moment, feels the joy of the ritual, of participating in the life of the farm. He realizes too late that he let belief take root in his mind—he killed his brother. Ovid feels guilty as he walks away from the field, back toward the house. He hears the mourning cries. Stooping to the ground, he covers himself in dirt, subconsciously "atoning for [the] moment of belief."

Ovid and his brother's differing feelings about the boundary stones' meaning suggests two different perspectives: Ovid's brother sees his world as his family, community, and the life he was born to, while Ovid sees his world as all that he can experience once he escapes his family and home environment. Ovid's brother accepts his fate and identity, while Ovid tries to run from it. Ovid's shame over killing his brother suggests that this childhood guilt fuels his rational skepticism as an adult, demonstrating how early experiences shape one's behavior for years to come.

Ovid reflects that one tries to hide from such moments for the rest of one's life. He "killed something in [him]self on that night and tried to cover it with earth." Ovid longs to speak to his father one last time, to tell him that he finally accepts where he came from. Ovid is "home." Ovid wonders whether the Child will ever know who he should be since he doesn't know where he came from. Or perhaps "not knowing make[s] him free."

Ovid's wish to tell his father that he accepts who he is suggests that Ovid not only killed his spiritual belief when his brother died, but also his sense of identity, derived from where he grew up and the family that raised him. Ovid's fear that the Child won't know who to be suggests that knowing one's past is critical to understanding the present, but may also entrap them into a particular pattern or identity.

Each morning, Ovid takes the Child out to the marshy land near the **river**, where they will not run into anyone else from the village. The boy carries the colored ball, his single possession, with him everywhere. Ovid tries to teach the Child how to speak, and in return the Child teaches him how to call out animal sounds. The Child can produce them so accurately that Ovid thinks he sees him transformed though the **language**, as if the Child briefly becomes "the creature itself." Ovid sees that the Child produces the noises by contorting his face to imitate the shape of the animal, which helps him to understand how they make their call.

The Child's love for the colored ball suggests that he now grasps the human concept of possession, for better or worse. Ovid's feeling that the Child becomes whatever creature whose call he makes hints at the idea that there is no real distinction between one being and another. To speak like a bird, the Child believes that he is the bird itself. This suggests that the language of nature involves extreme empathy, since such communication requires imagining oneself as someone else.

To teach the Child human sounds, Ovid puts the Child's fingers against his own throat to feel the vibrations that human words make. Soon, the Child can imitate the vibrations himself. Ovid feels that when the Child makes a bird's call, he is not simply mimicking but "being the bird." Thus, by teaching the Child human sounds, Ovid hopes that he will become a man. "Speech is the essential," Ovid believes. As the Child learns to make the vibrations that form words, he discovers his throat. As he learns to use his nostrils to make intonations, he discovers his nose. The boy discovers the features of his own face and then compares them to Ovid's face, confirming for himself that they share their human likeness.

Ovid's hope that by speaking human words, the Child will himself become human suggests that language is at the core of a person's being and sense of self. This fits with Ovid's early observation that the world looks different through Latin than it does through the language of Tomis. Within this frame, one's language defines the way one sees oneself and relates to the surrounding world.

Ovid teaches the Child to throw and catch the colored ball. The Child learns to smile on his own. As they walk, the Child uses hand signals to teach Ovid about all the different footprints and plants and insects in the forest. Ovid sees that this is the Child's world, his "library" of knowledge stored over years in the same way that Ovid stores poems, philosophy, and laws. The Child leads Ovid into his natural world and his mind, but Ovid does not know how he will lead the Child into his own theoretical world.

Although Ovid set out to teach the Child his language, the Child is actually more of a teacher for Ovid, since his natural knowledge seems more relatable to life in Tomis than Ovid's theoretical knowledge and poetry. Ovid's recognition that nature is the Child's "library" indicates that the Child is not any less intelligent or educated than Ovid, he merely possesses a different kind of information.

Ovid decides he will teach the Child the language of Tomis, rather than Latin. In doing so, he knows he is deciding never to return to Rome. He will continue to write letters of petition to his attorney, asking for his exile to be absolved, but only because this is what society expects of him as an exile. Even if the Empire pardons him, he will not return. Ovid feels as if this life, in the wilderness beyond Roman society, is his true life, the one for which his childhood destined him. This is the life he tried to hide from with all his constructed identities and accomplishments. He belongs here.

Ovid's choice to teach the Child the village language rather than Latin suggests that Latin, in its divisive and analytical nature, is less beneficial for life in Tomis. Additionally, Ovid's decision to never return to Rome signifies his personal growth, since it suggests that he sees Tomis as his permanent home now. That decision also signifies that Ovid has accepted his fate and chosen to embrace his true identity.

Ovid does not precisely know when his personal transformation began. The more he works with the Child, the more his own childhood appears to him, clearer than a memory, as if he is reliving it. Ovid realizes that the Child teaches him as much as he teaches the Child. They are moving in opposite directions along the same course. The Child envisions himself as the landscape and animals around him, struggling to maintain an idea of his individual self. Ovid is only an individual, and struggles to abandon his sense of self like the Child does. When it rains, Ovid tries to imitate the Child and think, "I am raining," but his fear of losing his sense of self makes him panic. Ovid keeps trying, considering it his "final metamorphosis." He wants to "let the universe in."

Ovid's desire to see himself as a part of the natural world conflicts with his desire to maintain his individualistic sense of self. This not only represents a conflict between two perspectives, but between the languages that form those perspectives. Latin, as a language that distinguishes and categorizes things, encourages Ovid to view himself as utterly distinct from the world. The Child's natural language, by contrast, encourages the view that everything in the world is a unified whole, indistinguishable from one another.

As Ovid teaches the Child to form human words, the Child teaches Ovid to make bird sounds. Ovid thinks the Child is the better teacher. Sometimes the boy catches a bird and gives it to Ovid to hold in his hands, to feel, to imagine that he is the bird itself and share its being. Ovid closes his eyes, imagines growing a beak and wings, and makes small "piping" sounds. He thinks back to the days when he wished to know the language of the spiders and believes he is now getting close to it. The "**true language**" is that silence with which Ovid communicated with the Child in the forest, and during his own childhood. He no longer feels exiled from Rome, but from the universe itself and its universal language. Latin divides and distinguishes, but the Child's language reconciles and unifies all things together.

Ovid's ability to envision himself as the bird and make small "piping" calls suggests that he is beginning to understand the "true language." Although this universal language remains a nebulous concept, the author suggests the "true language" exists by extending his argument that language shapes perception. The true language, presenting the universe as a reconciled whole, is simply an extension of the village language which points to the "unity of things," as opposed to Latin, which divides and distinguishes.

The air grows colder as the seasons change. The Child still prefers to be naked in the marsh, but seems to slow, as if he will soon hibernate like all the other animals in the woods. The villagers fortify Tomis for the winter, since soon the barbarians will ride across the frozen **river** and attack once again. Children bring the animals into the stockades. Soon, everyone will be huddled together in their winter huts. Ovid worries about the effect this will have on the Child, since they will have to share a room with the rest of Ryzak's family. All year, Ovid and the Child have kept to themselves as much as possible, living in a ground-floor room.

The Child's slowness suggests that he truly did hibernate in winters past, surviving by taking cover underground. The villagers' preparations for winter parallel the preparation that many animals go through before winter as they stock up on food, make themselves a shelter, and prepare to lay dormant for most of the season. This reflects the villagers' lifestyle which exists in tandem with nature, rather than trying to resist or control it.

Ovid shares his concern with Ryzak, but Ryzak assures him that the women will leave the Child alone. Ovid fears he is wrong, and suspects Ryzak wields less real authority than he pretends to. As a man, Ryzak embodies the law, but his mother embodies the dark spirits of the forest and the moonlight. There is a sense of power about her and the other older women that even Ryzak seems to fear.

This passage briefly explores gender as a minor motif, arguing that although men wield formal power through legal authority, women compensate by wielding greater, hidden power through their mysticism and spirituality. In this sense, the different spheres that men and women occupy in Tomis is similar to the difference between Ovid's more formal and sophisticated Latin versus the mysticism of the Child's language.

Ryzak's mother, "the old woman," remains antagonistic toward Ovid and the Child, though she will not practice witchcraft directly against them. Lullo, too, resents not only the Child, but Ovid, since Lullo is no longer the center of Ovid's attention. Lullo's mother—who is a foreigner, and whose husband, Ryzak's son, is dead—fears the old woman as well, and so loosely allies herself with Ovid. In the close confines of winter, tensions within the household run high.

Ovid's listing of crisscrossing tensions within the household hints that the winter indoors will be full of conflict. Although Ryzak's mother hasn't had a significant role in the story until now, she represents the only true antagonist in the story. This reiterates the old woman's power, since she dominates her entire family through fear and witchcraft.

The air feels still. The Child is restless all day, unable to focus, as if his something just beyond perception requires his attention. Ovid recognizes that the boy is often sensitive to changes in the weather. It will snow today, after three weeks of expectant waiting.

The Child's self-identification with nature appears to attune him to the weather patterns as well, since he himself changes as the seasons change.

Ovid wakes in the night and realizes that the Child is not in the hut with them. He finds the Child outside, standing under the falling snow, naked, letting it fall on his skin and rubbing it against his body, almost trance-like. When the Child notices Ovid, he whoops and shouts and frolics in the snow, bringing some to show Ovid. Ovid realizes that even naked in the cold, the Child's body radiates heat. Ovid tries to bring the Child inside, but the boy begins howling like he did on the day the hunters captured him in the birchwoods.

The Child's playfulness suggests that although he is far from frivolous, he maintains his ability to play and enjoy life, unlike the village women. Since Ovid argues that playing is a mark of freedom, the Child is arguably the freest character in the story, both self-sufficient (unlike Ovid) and joyful (unlike the villagers).

When Ovid insists that the Child come inside, the boy lashes out and runs to the village walls, screaming and scratching at the wood as if he wants to climb it. He scratches at his own face. Ovid and Ryzak look on, saddened, while Lullo shakes with fear. Ovid feels heavy with guilt and a sense of the separation between him and the Child, since he cannot understand what it is that the Child is grieving. Eventually, the Child exhausts himself and lays on the ground, sobbing. Ovid carries him inside and sits next to him until the Child cries himself to sleep. In the morning, the Child never completely awakens and doesn't seem to remember the night's events.

The Child's negative reaction to Ovid trying to bring him inside suggests that the Child will never be suited to the confines of human society, where he must live within walls and shelters. This negatively argues that human civilization is itself a form of entrapment that separates human beings from the natural world. However, Ovid, conditioned by his Latin language, seems unable to comprehend this.

CHAPTER 4

Winter sets in. Even in his fifth year, Ovid is not used to the long months of enclosure. Everyone spends all day and all night silently huddled together in huts, listening to the wind. Ovid writes a little by candlelight, but it is difficult to keep the flame burning. He and others sleep often throughout the day and always feel "thick-headed," barely awake. Ovid estimates he spends 12 to 15 hours of each day asleep. The days pass quickly and blur together, marked only by his night shift standing guard on the wall, which comes every five days.

Ovid's depiction of winter in Tomis evokes animals hibernating for winter, sleeping in caves underground. This reiterates how the lives of people in Tomis parallel the natural world, sleeping when it sleeps and waking when it wakes. Although Ovid still does not relish the winter, he no longer seems to hate it has he did in his first years, suggesting that his hard life in Tomis has taught him to simply endure his sufferings, rather than rage against them.

The Child sits staring into the gloom for hours on end, unmoving and unspeaking. He barely interacts, and Ovid fears they will lose the progress they've made together. When Ovid makes a bird call, the Child acts hysterical, making animal noises and trying to throw himself out the high window. Ryzak's mother, the old woman, watches the Child at all hours and seems afraid that he truly is a beast in child form, and that his spirit will leave his current body and possess another. Indeed, Ovid senses that often the Child's mind is not with him, but away, traveling the winter landscapes. Ovid wishes he could let the Child return to the woods, but knows that he would not survive anymore. His hardiness has left him, and he shivers against the cold like any other human being, newly "vulnerable."

Opposite to Ovid, who finds himself strengthened by life in Tomis, the Child's time amidst human society weakens him. Whereas suffering can strengthen a person and lead to personal growth, the Child's newfound vulnerability suggests that comfort and protection can degrade a person and make them less durable than they once were. Ovid's wish that he could set the Child free in the woods suggests that he finally realizes he has made a grave error and hurt the Child, rather than helping him.

The Child comes down with a bad fever and his body alternates between freezing and burning. Ovid suspects that the boy is experiencing what it means to be cold for the first time. He thinks of his lost brother and what it will feel like if the Child dies as well. The old woman refuses to help, since she believes that the fever is a result of the Child's demon struggling to break free of his body. Lullo's mother, the young woman, is sympathetic at first and gives the Child food and water, but the old woman convinces her that the Child's beastly spirit might break free and occupy her own son instead, so she starts to keep her distance.

The Child experiencing cold for the first time in his life suggests that without human self-awareness of his physical body, he did not feel any particular sensation. In the case of survival, human self-awareness thus seems a weakness, rather than the mark of an advanced being. When the Child was not aware of himself, he could endure the cold, harsh winters without feeling pain.

Despite the young woman's fear, when Ovid cries for help in the middle of the night, the young woman helps care for the Child. Ovid has been watching him for five days straight, and his body is nearly failing in exhaustion. He begins to fall back asleep while the young woman cares for the Child during his feverish spasms. In the midst of one, while his tongue lolls, the Child involuntarily speaks his first word in the village tongue. This mark of humanity excites Ovid, but terrifies both the young woman and the old woman, who take it as a sign that the Child's demon has "snatched away another soul" and taken the place of Lullo.

Ovid and the women's reactions to the Child's speech contrast with each other, reiterating the effect that one's worldview can have on their perception. To Ovid's skeptical mind, the stray word is merely an indication that language is taking root in the Child's brain. However, to the women, steeped in mysticism and spiritual belief, the stray word is proof that a soul-stealing demon is in their midst.

The old woman curses Lullo's mother for exposing him to danger, setting her into a panic. The old woman strips Lullo's clothes off, looking for a mark where the demon entered his body. By the time Ryzak enters, within an hour, Lullo already shows signs of fever. Although Ovid would otherwise be pleased by the Child's grasp of a human word, he realizes they are now both in grave danger. He wonders how Lullo managed to catch the same fever, and suspects that the boy's fear somehow weakened his body, making him more susceptible to the disease.

Ovid believes that gods exist in people's imaginations, and thus exert an influence over people's lives whether or not they actually exist. Similarly, whether or not the demon exists, the old woman's perception that there is a demon in their midst exerts a very real influence over the household and presents a real danger to both Ovid and the Child.

Lullo's mother accepts the old woman's suspicion that the Child passed his illness on to Lullo, weakening his body so as to steal his spirit. The Child recovers and grows stronger while Lullo sinks further into his fever dreams, and even Ryzak becomes suspicious of the Child. Ovid fears that the suspicion will turn to violence if Ryzak's grandson dies, first directed at the Child and then at Ovid himself when he tries to protect the boy. However, after five days, Lullo recovers, and the house is at peace for the first time in more than a week. Everyone falls asleep.

The fact that both Ryzak and his daughter-in-law, who both like Ovid, suspect that the Child did carry a demon demonstrates how prevalent superstition is among the people in Tomis. This underscores the power Ryzak's mother wields through fear, since seemingly everyone in the village is frightened of the spiritual world.

Winter nears its end and the snow begins to melt away, allowing Ovid and the Child the chance to move around a bit and sit with the animals below. In the wake of the fevers, Ryzak lost his control of the household; the old woman now reigns. She claims "her magic" saved Lullo's life and Ryzak must agree, since he himself had no solution for the illness. Ovid senses that the old woman has long craved this opportunity to usurp her son, to take control away from him.

Ryzak submits to his mother's "magic" since he was unable to cure Lullo's fever. This suggests that the old woman's mysticism is particularly potent since it provides answers to problems that sheer willpower cannot solve. However, the old woman's move for power suggests that this mysticism is as much a weapon as a true conviction.

The old woman orders Ryzak to catch a wild puppy for her to sacrifice at the next full moon. She keeps it in the house for 10 days, next to the Child. The boy finds its fearful whimpering torturous and Ovid suspects the old woman intended to hurt the him, as if this is somehow the start of her "exorcism of the Child." The Child grows more restless each day, but Ovid does not know if this is due to the puppy, the coming full moon, or the Child's sense of his own captivity.

The old woman overpowers Ryzak and then intentionally tortures the Child with the puppy's whimpering. Such behavior establishes her as a truly malicious figure and the novel's sole antagonist. Where the raiders from the north seem impersonal, like another force of nature, the old woman's actions are personal and villainous.

On the night of the full moon, the old woman leads all of the village women out to their special clearing, where men are not permitted, to perform the "offices of the moon," the embodiment of "women's power." Ryzak, sitting with Ovid in the village, seems ill at ease while they are gone. Even after the women return, the Child does not sleep all night. Ovid thinks the air feels strange.

The village women's participation in the "offices of the moon" suggests that they, too, wield mystical power over men. Although the men have the formal authority and physical strength, women still rule through fear.

In the morning, Ovid hears raspy breathing. Ryzak fell ill during the night and appears gray. Animal-like growls rise from his throat. The old woman checks under his clothes and finds what she was looking for: small teeth marks on his wrist, where the beast's spirit entered Ryzak's body. She shrieks, realizing that her ritual of the night before failed, and "wail[s] for the dead."

Although everything surrounding the fevers appeared as superstition thus far, the teeth marks on Ryzak's wrist are real. This either indicates that the Child's demon is real, or that the old woman made the bite marks on Ryzak's wrist to increase her power and usurp him.

Ryzak's mouth foams, and his limbs spasm and contort. Even to Ovid it seems like an animal is taking over Ryzak's form. The shaman arrives but immediately flees, claiming that Ryzak is too far gone. The old woman declares that the Child's demon has finally left him to take another soul. After five days, Ryzak does not die, but lays still in a coma. Everyone in the hut, even Ovid, sits motionless and terrified, looking for indicators that the demon is moving around the room. The Child holds tight to Ovid.

As with the teeth marks, Ryzak's terrible illness is very real. Although the narrative leaves the issue shrouded in mystery, the two possible explanations of Ryzak's illness are that the demon is real, or that Ryzak's own mother both bit his wrist and somehow poisoned him in order to increase the village's superstition and usurp Ryzak's authority.

Ovid recalls that the rest of the day feels like a dream. He and the Child leave the house and hide in their small summer hut. The village women enter in their place and perform a ritual by burning mind-altering herbs and striking stones against each other, making noise to distract the demons while Ryzak dies. The elders enter and beat Ryzak to death, so that his spirit will be stirred to violence and rise, too fearsome for other dark spirits to try to claim it.

The elders' belief that Ryzak must be beat to death demonstrates how deep the villagers' mystical beliefs are. Although the villagers accept the world rather than philosophize or analyze it like Romans do, their belief in nature's power is still shrouded with mysticism.

When Ryzak dies, the ritual ceases, replaced by the long moaning of Ryzak's mother and daughter-in-law. The village elders spend the next hours dancing and drinking themselves into a stupor to distract the demons, while the women prepare Ryzak's body for burial. In the midst of all of this, Ovid realizes he and the Child must flee—Ryzak was their only protection in the village, and now he is gone.

Although Ovid grew to appreciate his life in Tomis, the sudden threat he feels from the other villagers suggests that he remains an outsider, someone whom the others may quickly turn on as a scapegoat for their problems. Ovid's flight from Tomis represents his second exile.

Ovid wakes the Child and takes him away from Tomis, heading toward the **river**. When they pass the marshes, the Child joyfully thinks they are returning to their lessons. When Ovid sternly leads him on, the child senses the gravity of his mood. Ovid hopes to cross the frozen river, two or three days ahead of them, and flee into the north. He thinks of all his dreams of crossing the river to dig his own grave, or to meet the **gods** in the form of horsemen. Ovid is going into the "unknown," into the "clear path of my fate." He feels it's fitting that life should be a "continual series of beginnings," since death is no more than the "refusal to […] grow and suffer change."

Ovid's response to his second exile greatly differs from his first, demonstrating the extent of his personal transformation. Where his first exile from Rome felt like a crushing blow, Ovid treats this new exile and suffering as yet another opportunity to develop and extend himself. His reflection that death is the "refusal" to grow suggests that suffering and growth are essential to life. Additionally, Ovid regards this exodus into the wilderness as the fulfillment of his ultimate destiny, rather than a tragic disruption of his life and career.

Ovid and the Child make their way to the **River Ister**, which Ovid has always somehow considered to be the "final boundary" between him and his "true life." He finds it strange that his easy childhood and "metropolitan" adulthood should lead to this crossing into the unknown. Ovid and the Child reach the frozen river while it is dark and set across. Halfway, they can see neither the shore behind them nor the shore in front of them, and Ovid imagines that the far side of the river may not actually exist, that all beyond it is only an illusion. However, they manage to reach the other side of the River Ister, and Ovid feels they are stepping into a new world.

As Ovid notes, the River Ister represents the boundary between one state of being and another. Particularly, the Ister here represents the painful transition from a known world into an unknown world. The river thus symbolizes suffering necessary for personal growth. Ovid's feeling, midway across the river, that nothing exists at either shore implies that in the midst of suffering, one cannot always see the good that will come of it. Regardless, one must carry on until one emerge from the struggle.

CHAPTER 5

Ovid and the Child move beyond the **River Ister** into an endless grassland. Although once the flat emptiness around Tomis bothered Ovid, now the wide expanse "feeds the spirit" and feels like freedom. Though Ovid is tired, he feels "lighter" and imagines he sees himself and the Child from a great distance overhead, where their physical fatigue seems only a minor discomfort. Evening falls and shadows stretch down from the hills. When the cold wind blows from the north, Ovid and the Child duck below the chest-high grass. When warm blows from the south, it feels like spring.

Having crossed the Ister and symbolically transitioned from one phase of life to the next, Ovid's view of himself and the Child from far overhead suggests that he has a new perspective on their suffering. Viewed from above, his weary, aching body feels like a minor irritation rather than a great burden, since Ovid can now see the majesty of their new world as they press further into it.

Ovid realizes they've entered "the Child's world at last." The Child runs excitedly about, digging roots, finding eggs, showing Ovid all the ways to forage and survive. Ovid stops keeping track of the days as they pass, since the **river** is "far behind" them. Sometimes they see horsemen in the far distance, but they never approach. Occasionally, Ovid wakes at night to the sound of nearby wolves, but the Child growls in such a way that wards them off. Ovid no longer considers what their destination will be, nor does he feel the need for one. He wonders if this is how the village shaman feels when he goes into a trance and wanders the earth without his body.

Ovid's sense that they no longer need to count the days because the Ister is "far behind" suggests that he is so far into this new phase of life and state of being, that there is no going back. Ovid and the Child have suffered and survived and grown together, and are now fully committed to this new way of life. The river, and any chance to return to their lifestyles in Tomis, are long gone. For the Child, this transition into the wilderness seems to restore his spirit.

Ovid wonders who the Child truly is, whether he is the boy they found in the birchwoods or the same Child he knew during his own childhood. He wonders if the Child did not discover him in the midst of his exile, not the other way around. Ovid and the Child travel together in silence without using "formal" language, yet Ovid feels all the time they are constantly in dialogue, responding to the landscape around them as if their simple thoughts pass from one mind to the other. Ovid feels as if he is becoming "bodiless," part of the landscape and the sky.

The story returns to its idea of an unstructured, universal language that connects all things. Ovid's sense that he becomes "bodiless" suggests that, like the Child, he is letting go of his distinctive sense of self. Rather than separate himself from nature, he perceives himself as yet another element of nature. This unification with the natural world also seems to be a unification with the Child, since Ovid feels they can now pass unspoken thoughts back and forth between them.

Ovid feels that the earth is closer to him than it has ever been, even though he will soon leave it behind. He lies on the ground and stares at the roots of grass. Ovid smells the soil and intuitively knows what it is composed of, as if it is an extension of himself. He wonders if he will take root in his sleep and join the earth. The thought comforts Ovid. It will be his way to continue existing. Between his body and the earth, he finds "unity and commerce." He is entering his own metamorphosis.

Ovid's admiration of the roots of grass signify a complete transition away from his Latin manner of perceiving the world. In Latin, Ovid perceived himself as separate from the natural world and despised any nature that was not cultivated or touched. His new perception of himself as one with the environment suggests his growing understanding of the Child's "true language" completely changes the way he sees himself, especially in relation to the natural world.

The Child seems free in this wilderness, as if his being expands and he is "lighter." He takes care of Ovid, foraging food and feeding him, just as Ovid once cared for the Child. Ovid no longer fears what damage he wrought on the Child by dragging him into the "world of men." He can sense that the Child yearns to travel further, to press into the expanse of territory. Ovid wonders what gives the Child purpose. Despite the Child's impatience, he exhibits a "tender kinship" that Ovid would never have thought possible. Looking at the Child, Ovid feels that the boy belongs to another world entirely—perhaps the villagers were right to believe the Child was a "foundling of the **gods**," more than human.

Ovid's recognition that the Child comes from another world indicates that he no longer believes human society is the best thing for the boy. This, too, represents a radical shift in Ovid's perception of the world. Within his Latin framework, Ovid considered human civilization to be the most noble and pure thing imaginable, while untamed nature was reprehensible. Now, Ovid sees that untamed nature is beautiful and pure, while human civilization breeds corruption and sickness.

Ovid grows so weak that the Child must chew his food for him, breaking down the tough roots before feeding it to the old man. Ovid realizes one day that he has taken his last steps, though the Child doesn't yet see it, and simply leaves him to forage as usual. Ovid imagines that he both "ascend[s]" and "lowers [him]self" into the **gods**' hands, in the place he'd often dreamt about. Looking back, he considers that every event in his life has led him to "this place and no other."

Although Ovid makes no mention of time anymore, his failing body suggests that he and the Child wander the grasslands for months. Ovid's new perspective that he is one with the nature gives him comfort in the face of death. This suggests that by rediscovering the "true language" and relinquishing one's sense of individual self, death no longer represents a final ending, but merely a transition into a new state of being.

Ovid looks back on his life and feels that he is simultaneously three years old and 60. In both places, the Child is present. Ovid watches him forage for snails in a stream, happy and content and "free." Rather than call out to him, Ovid just watches the Child walk further and further away. He feels "unbearably happy," three years old and 60 and six all at once. He states finally, "I am there."

Again, the Child's true nature as either a human boy or a mystical being is left pointedly unclear. Regardless, the Child becomes the new center of Ovid's world and teaches him the "true language" that frees Ovid from his sense of self. This is particularly significant for Ovid, who lived most of his life frivolously and self-indulgently, the center of his own universe. Ovid's happiness and sense of presence suggests that, having moved past that life, he finally feels fulfilled.

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