as though it too could be wished away
was any of this present
and how could this be
the magic solution to what you are in now
whatever has held you motionless
like this so long through the dark season
until now the women come out in navy blue
and the worms come out of the compost to die
it is the end of any season

you reading there so accurately
sitting not wanting to be disturbed
as you came from that holy land
what other signs of earth's dependency were upon you
what fixed sign at the crossroads
what lethargy in the avenues
where all is said in a whisper
what tone of voice among the hedges
what tone under the apple trees
the numbered land stretches away

and your house is built in tomorrow
but surely not before the examination
of what is right and will befall
not before the census
and the writing down of names

remember you are free to wander away
as from other times other scenes that were taking place
the history of someone who came too late
the time is ripe now and the adage
is hatching as the seasons change and tremble
it is finally as though that thing of monstrous interest
were happening in the sky
but the sun is setting and prevents you from seeing it

out of night the token emerges
its leaves like birds alighting all at once under a tree
taken up and shaken again
put down in weak rage
knowing as the brain does it can never come about
not here not yesterday in the past
only in the gap of today filling itself
as emptiness is distributed
in the idea of what time it is
when that time is already past

1975

Cynthia Ozick b. 1928

For Cynthia Ozick, literature is seductive: stories "arouse"; they "enchant"; they "transfigure." Ozick describes herself in "early young-womanhood" as "a worshipper of literature," drawn to the world of the imagination "with all the rigor and force and stunned ardor of religious belief." Yet the pleasure of attraction is tempered by danger: Adoration of art can become a form of idolatry—a kind of "aesthetic paganism" that for her is incompatible with Judaism because it betrays the biblical commandment against graven images. Art can also "tear away from humanity," and Ozick worries that the beauty of language can distract from art's moral function of judging and interpreting the world. These tensions—between art and idolatry, between aestheticism and moral seriousness, between the attraction of surfaces and the weight of history—lie at the heart of Ozick's fiction and essays. Indeed, Ozick is often considered a writer of oppositions, many of which are reflected in her efforts to translate what she calls a "Jewish sensibility" into the English language. "I suppose you might say that I am myself an oxymoron," she explains, "but in the life of story-writing, there are no boundaries."

Cynthia Ozick was born in New York City on April 17, 1928, to Russian Jewish immigrants, William and Celia Regelson Ozick. Her childhood was spent in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx, where her parents worked long hours to maintain a pharmacy during the Depression. She recalls these years as an idyllic time of reading and dreaming of writing; she also remembers being made to feel "hopelessly stupid" at school and being subjected to overt anti-Semitism. After graduating from Hunter High School, Ozick went on to complete a B.A. at New York University and an M.A. in English Literature at Ohio State University, where she wrote a thesis on the late novels of Henry James. James became a kind of obsession for her, both inspiring and inhibiting her burgeoning writing career. For nearly seven years she struggled to write a long, "philosophical" novel entitled Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, which she finally abandoned after writing 300,000 words. During this time, Ozick moved back to New York, married Bernard Hallote, and began working as an advertising copywriter. She also wrote short stories and labored for six more years on what became her first novel, Trust, published soon after the birth of her daughter Rachel in 1965. At this time, she also began the intensive study of Jewish philosophy, history, and literature that eventually transformed her writing.

Although slow to come into her own as a writer, Ozick is now prolific and widely acclaimed. She has been recognized through numerous awards and grants, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Strauss Livings grant, and the Jewish Book Council Award. Three of her essays have been republished in the annual collection of Best American Essays, five of her stories have been chosen to appear in Best American Short Stories, and three have received first prize in the O. Henry Prize Stories competition. Perhaps best known for her fiction and essays, Ozick also writes and translates poetry, and she has recently written a play based on two of her short stories, "The Shawl" (1981) and "Rosa" (1984) (later published together in a single volume).

In characteristically contradictory terms, Ozick has described herself—as a first-generation American Jew—to be "perfectly at home and yet perfectly insecure, perfectly acculturated and yet perfectly marginal." However, unlike many Jewish American writers who were the children of immigrants, Ozick does not
write about the sociological experiences of assimilation and subsequent generational conflict. Rather, her sense of being simultaneously inside and outside the dominant culture is manifested in a real faith in "the thesis of American pluralism," a pluralism that accommodates particularist and diverse impulses. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, one of Ozick's greatest contributions to American literature is her unwavering effort to remain "centrally Jewish" in her concerns by perpetuating the stories and histories of Jewish texts and traditions. "The Shawl," reprinted here, reflects Ozick's commitment to Jewish memory, as well as her long-standing fears about the dangers of artistic representation. Although many of Ozick's works address the historical and psychological consequences of the Holocaust, "The Shawl" is an exception: only here does she attempt to render life in the concentration camps directly. She has explained her reluctance to write fiction about the events of the Holocaust by insisting instead that "we ought to absorb the documents, the endless, endless data ... I want the documents to be enough; I don't want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can't not do it. It comes, it invades." The imaginative origin of "The Shawl" was, in fact, a historical text: the story evolved out of one evocative sentence in William Shirer's The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich about babies being thrown against electrified fences.

In an extraordinarily compressed and almost incantatory prose, Ozick depicts such horrifyingly familiar images of Nazi brutality as forced marches, starvation, dehumanization, and murder, while nevertheless managing to convey her ambivalence about using metaphoric language to represent an experience that is nearly unimaginable. The story makes clear that speech itself is dangerous: despite Rosa's desire to hear her child's voice, Magda is safe only as long as she is mute. The consequence of her cry—the only dialogue in the story—is death. Through a series of paradoxical images that combine the fantastical and the realistic, Ozick demonstrates that in writing and thinking about the unnatural world of a death camp, all expectations must be subverted: here, a baby's first tooth is an "elfin tombstone"; a breast is a "dead volcano"; a starved belly is "fat, full and round"; and a shawl can be "magic," sheltering and nourishing a child as an extension of the mother's body. Yet neither motherhood nor magic can save lives here; that which protects is also that which causes death. By overturning the natural order and unsettling the reader's ability to "know," Ozick makes the powerful point that the "reality" of the Holocaust is fundamentally inaccessible and that conventional means of understanding simply do not apply.

Tresa Grauer  
University of Pennsylvania

The Shawl

Stella, cold, cold, the coldness of hell. How they walked on the roads together, Rosa with Magda curled up between sore breasts, Magda wound up in the shawl. Sometimes Stella carried Magda. But she was jealous of Magda. A thin girl of fourteen, too small, with thin breasts of her own, Stella wanted to be wrapped in a shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms. Magda took Rosa's nipple, and Rosa never stopped walking, a walking cradle. There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed. Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones.

Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone walking on the road, asleep, rocking by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms. Magda took Rosa's nipple, and Rosa never stopped walking, a walking cradle. There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed. Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones.

Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road. As if teetering on the tips of her fingers. She looked into Magda's face through a gap in the shawl: a squirrel in a nest, safe, no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawl's windings. The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa's bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa's coat. You could think she was one of their babies.

Rosa, floating, dreamed of giving Magda away in one of the villages. She could leave the line for a minute and push Magda into the hands of any woman on the side of the road. But if she moved out of line they might shoot. And even if she fled the line for half a second and pushed the shawl-bundle at a stranger, would the woman take it? She might be surprised, or afraid; she might drop the shawl, and Magda would fall out and strike her head and die. The little round head. Such a good child, she gave up screaming, and sucked now only for the taste of the drying nipple itself. The neat grip of the tiny gums. One mite of a tooth tip sticking up in the bottom gum, how shining, an elfin tombstone of white marble gleaming there. Without complaining, Magda relinquished Rosa's teats, first the left, then the right; both were cracked, not a sniff of milk. The duct-crevise extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole, so Magda took the corner of the shawl and milked it instead. She sucked and sucked, flooding threads with wetness. The shawl's good flavor, milk of linen.

It was a magic shawl, it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights. Magda did not die, she stayed alive, although very quiet. A peculiar smell, of cinnamon and almonds, lifted out of her mouth. She held her eyes open every moment, forgetting how to blink or nap, and Rosa and sometimes Stella studied their blueness. On the road they raised one burden of a leg after another and studied Magda's face. "Aryan," Stella said, in a voice grown as thin as a string, and Rosa thought how Stella gazed at Magda like a young cannibal. And the time that Stella said "Aryan," it sounded to Rosa as if Stella had really said "Let us devour her."

But Magda lived to walk. She lived that long, but she did not walk very well, partly because she was only fifteen months old, and partly because the spindles of her legs could not hold up her fat belly. It was fat with air, full and round. Rosa gave almost all her food to Magda, Stella gave nothing; Stella was ravenous, a growing child herself, but not growing much. Stella did not menstruate. Rosa did not menstruate. Rosa was ravenous, but also not; she learned from Magda how to drink the
taste of a finger in one's mouth. They were in a place without pity, all pity was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs.

Rosa knew Magda was going to die very soon; she should have been dead already, but she had been buried away deep inside the magic shawl, mistaken there for the shivering mound of Rosa's breasts; Rosa clung to the shawl as if it covered only herself. No one took it away from her. Magda was mute. She never cried. Rosa hid her in the barracks, under the shawl, but she knew that one day someone would inform; or one day someone, not even Stella, would steal Magda to eat her. When Magda began to walk Rosa knew that Magda was going to die very soon, something would happen. She was afraid to fall asleep; she slept with the weight of her thigh on Magda's body; she was afraid she would smother Magda under her thigh. The weight of Rosa was becoming less and less; Rosa and Stella were slowly turning into air.

Magda was quiet, but her eyes were horribly alive, like blue tigers. She watched. Sometimes she laughed—it seemed a laugh, but how could it be? Magda had never seen anyone laugh. Still, Magda laughed at her shawl when the wind blew its corners, the bad wind with pieces of black in it, that made Stella's and Rosa's eyes tear. Magda's eyes were always clear and fearless. She watched like a tiger. She guarded her shawl. No one could touch it; only Rosa could touch it. Stella was not allowed. The shawl was Magda's own baby, her pet, her little sister. She tangled herself up with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the taste of a finger in one's mouth. They were in a place without pity, all pity was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs.

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Then Stella took the shawl away and made Magda die.

Afterward Stella said: "I was cold."

And afterward she was always cold, always. The cold went into her heart: Rosa saw that Stella's heart was cold, Magda flopped onward with her little pencil legs scribbling this way and that, in search of the shawl; the pencils faltered at the barricades opening, where the light began. Rosa saw and pursued. But already Magda was in the square outside the barracks, in the jolly light. It was the roll-call arena. Every morning Rosa had to conceal Magda under the shawl against a wall of the barracks and go out and stand in the arena with Stella and hundreds of others, sometimes for hours, and Magda, deserted, was quiet under the shawl, sucking on her corner. Every day Magda was silent, and so did not die. Rosa saw that today Magda was going to die, and at the same time a fearful joy ran in Rosa's two palms, her fingers were on fire, she was astonished, febrile. Magda, in the sunlight, swaying on her pencil legs, was howling. Ever since the drying up of Rosa's nipples, ever since Magda's last scream on the road, Magda had been devoid of any syllable; Magda was a mute. Rosa believed that something had gone wrong with her vocal cords, with her windpipe, with the cave of her larynx; Magda was defective, without a voice; perhaps she was deaf; there might be something amiss with her intelligence; Magda was dumb. Even the laugh that came when the ash-stippled wind made a clown out of Magda's shawl was only the air-blowed showing of her teeth. Even when the lice, head lice and body lice, crazed her so that she became as wild as one of the big rats that plundered the barracks at daybreak looking for carrion, she rubbed and scratched and kicked and bit and rolled without a whimper. But now Magda's mouth was spilling a long viscous rope of clamor.

"Maamaa—"

It was the first noise Magda had ever sent out from her throat since the drying up of Rosa's nipples.

"Maamaa . . . aaa!"

Again! Magda was wavering in the perilous sunlight of the arena, scribbling on such pitiful little bent shins. Rosa saw. She saw that Magda was grieving for the loss of her shawl, she saw that Magda was going to die. A tide of commands hampered in Rosa's nipples: Fetch, get, bring! But she did not know which to go after first, Magda or the shawl. If she jumped out into the arena to snatch Magda up, the howling would not stop, because Magda would still not have the shawl; but if she ran back into the barracks to find the shawl, and if she found it, and if she came after Magda holding it and shaking it, then she would get Magda back, Magda would put the shawl in her mouth and turn dumb again.

Rosa entered the dark. It was easy to discover the shawl. Stella was heaped under it, asleep in her thin bones. Rosa tore the shawl free and flew—she could fly, she was only air—into the arena. The sunheat murmured of another life, of butterflies in summer. The light was placid, mellow. On the other side of the steel fence, far away, there were green meadows speckled with dandelions and deep-colored violets; beyond them, even farther, innocent tiger lilies, tall, lifting their orange bonnets. In the barracks they spoke of "flowers," of "rain": excrement, thick turd-braids, and the slow stinking maroon waterfall that slunk down from the upper bunks, the stink mixed with a bitter fatty floating smoke that greased Rosa's skin. She stood for an instant at the margin of the arena. Sometimes the electricity inside the fence would seem to hum; even Stella said it was only an imagining, but Rosa heard real sounds in the wire; grizzly sad voices. The farther she was from the fence, the more clearly the voices crowded at her. The lamenting voices strummed so convincingly, so passionately, it was impossible to suspect them of being phantoms. The voices told her to hold up the shawl, high; the voices told her to shake it, to whip with it, to unfurl it like a flag. Rosa lifted, shook, whipped, unfurled. Far off, very far, Magda leaned across her air-fed belly, reaching out with the rods of her arms. She was high up, elevated, riding someone's shoulder. But the shoulder that carried Magda was not coming toward Rosa and the shawl, it was drifting away, the speck of Magda was moving more and more into the smoky distance. Above the shoulder a helmet glinted. The light tapped the helmet and sparkled it into a goblet. Below the helmet a black body like a domino and a pair of black boots hurled themselves in the direction of the electrified fence. The electric voices began to chatter wildly. "Maamaa, maamaamaa," they all hummed together. How far Magda was from Rosa now, across the whole square, past a dozen barracks, all the way on the other side! She was no bigger than a moth.

All at once Magda was swimming through the air. The whole of Magda traveled through lightness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine. And the moment Magda's feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms slapped against the fence, the steel voices went mad in their growling, urging Rosa to run and run to the spot where Magda had fallen from her flight against the electrified fence; but of course Rosa did not obey them. She only stood, because if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot; so she took Magda's shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf's screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva; and Rosa drank Magda's shawl until it dried.