

# generation

JEWISHLIFE

\$12.00

SUBSCRIBE  
NOW & SAVE  
BONUS OFFER

## THE BEST & WORST OF JEWISH AUSTRALIA

A GUIDE TO WHAT WE  
LOVE AND HATE  
ABOUT OURSELVES



### THE WAR OF THE RABBIS

HOW KOSHER ARE OUR COURTS?

**YIDS ON WHEELS**  
born to be mild

**GEN X ANGST**  
drugs, partying and prozac

**CYBERSPACE ROMANCE**  
finding virtual love

ISSN 1038-9385



01

9 771038 938009

KISLEV 5760/VOLUME 8, NO.2/DECEMBER 1999

## TALK/

- 03 **Regeneration**  
58 **Profile**, Gaby Wenig raps with Elizabeth Wurtzel, Queen of Prozac  
76 **Tree of Life**, Debbie Miller discovers the virtues of Genesis  
80 **Monument**, Rivka Hartman remembers her dynamo mother, Dora Bialestock  
82 **Letter from Abroad**, Yvonne Shafir sends a postcard from Uzbekistan  
94 **Generations**, David Dann and Henry Maas on night-clubbing  
96 **My Room**, Josh Herslikowicz reveals what's under his bed  
97 **The Shimshons**, The next family episode by John Kron  
98 **Backpage**, Elliot Perlman's secret life

## WAILING WALLPAPER/

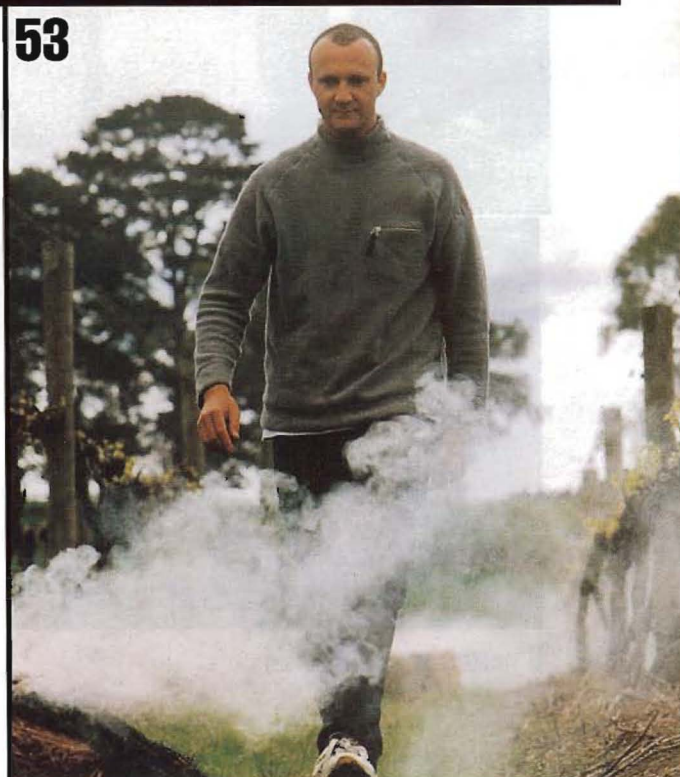
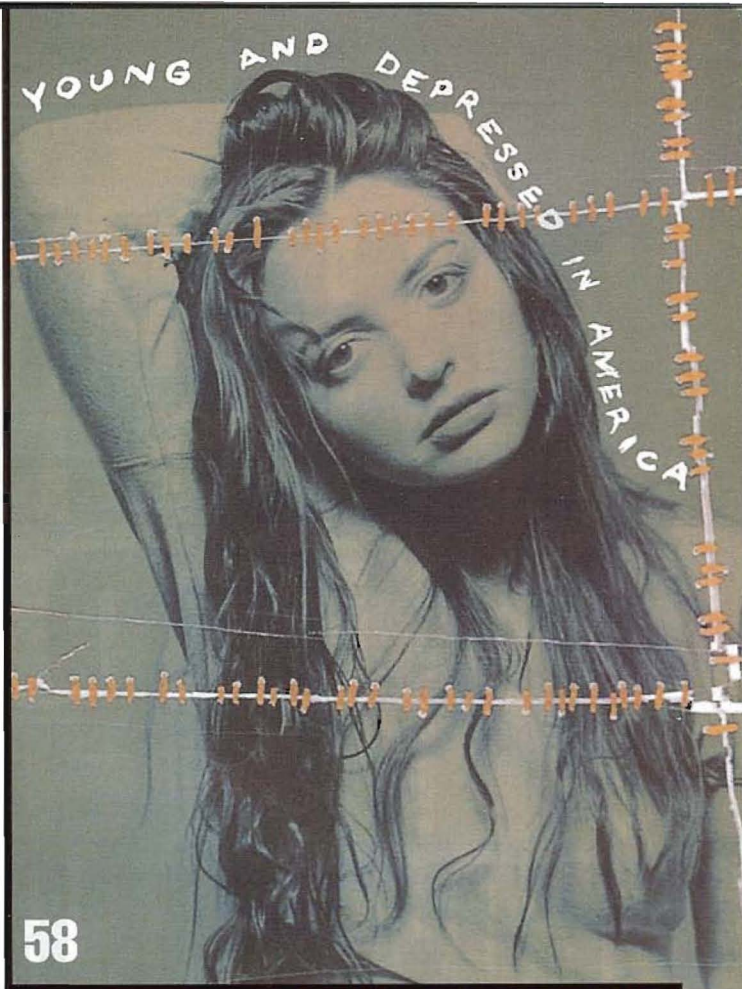
- 53 **Wine**, Can the Best be Kosher?  
56 **Food**, Cooking chicken paprika  
57 **Style**, A Box Full of Love

## SCRIBE/

- 64 **/POETRY**  
Jacob Rosenberg, God Is  
Joy Reid: One Tree, Cherries  
65 **/PROSE**  
David Swain, Salt of the Earth  
WINNER OF THE GENERATION/MANUEL GELMAN AWARD  
**/REVIEWS**  
68 **Author**, Deborah Mandie speaks to Dorothy Porter about the poet's muse  
72 **CD**, Sarah Mandie listens to Jewish Music of Israel, Iraq, and Turkey  
73 **Books**, Mark Baker recommends new books  
74 **Gen.Gap**, Lani Brayer scouts for new talent  
74 **Net**, Michelle Stein-Evers finds the right one

## COLUMNS/

- 85 Sally Berkovic, The Little Book of Shprintze  
86 Yvonne Fein, Songlines of Our Inheritance

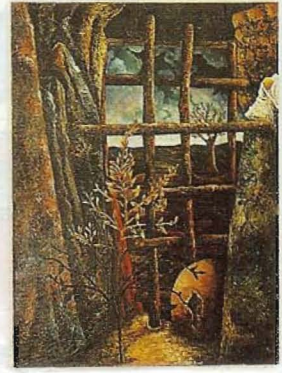


## SCRIBE/POETRY.

### One Tree

LILA JULIUS

There was only one tree, not two,  
for the knowledge of good and evil,  
packaged in every bite, a mixed blessing.  
In its shade I read between the lines,  
like an old woman, with no desire, listens  
To wind between the leaves.



*"Pierced Placed" Propped Up, (Triptych) 102 x 74.5cm - Rachel Rovay*



*"Wand Of Fire" 1991 (Acrylic Paint/Canvas) 122 x 92cm - Rachel Rovay*

### God Is

JACOB G. ROSENBERG

Darkness usurped  
the night  
there will be no more  
escapes

Outside dawn  
waits  
the cattle cage

Abraham carries Isaac  
on his hands  
(he is only five)

Where is the lamb  
father

God is.

**Generation mourns  
the passing of Mal  
Morgan, a poet and  
regular contributor**

*"Transformation" 1992 (Acrylic Paint/Canvas) 92 x 92cm - Rachel Rovay*

### Cherries

LILA JULIUS

My father sent me to the corner grocery  
with a dime  
to bring back cherries, a paper bagful.

We sat around the kitchen table.  
I popped them in my mouth, Dad split  
them  
with his thumbnail, said, 'You have to open  
every one,  
check for worms.'

I said, 'I don't want to be that kind of  
person.'  
'What kind?'  
You know, someone who goes through life  
being a cherry-worm-checker.

The next three he made me open  
had worms.



# The Salt of the Earth

INTERVIEW: DAVID SWAIN

**A**nd woe betide the boy who cannot learn these lines. Tonight. Word perfect if you please. Saint Matthew, chapter five, verse three to nine.' As Sir declaims the Sermon on the Mount his dagger finger stabs at rows of chests of fifty Cockney schoolboys in his charge.

Swenetsky's heart goes out to Jesus Christ: long wavy hair, a beard, a gentle face, not like Sir who's grim. 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.' Does that include Swenetsky? He might win the earth, but if he did, what would he do with it? Sir's threat, his 'woe betide' does not distress him much. He

likes the words they have to learn.

Beatitudes are declarations, so Sir says, of blessedness. The words don't rhyme but they invade his head. They stir him up. Suppose, he wonders, he is told to stand tomorrow, say those lines out loud, what then? It could be scary showing off, but what if he astounds the class and pleases Sir?

Isadore Swenetsky, eight years old, squints through wonky glasses from a back row desk, a desk for two in which he sits

alone. His steel-nibbed pen lies in a groove beside an inkwell snug in its appointed hole.

Sir names the monitors who pour the ink, who strut and swank to clean the blackboard, light the gas with tapers, and perform as spies reporting an offence. Boys can be caned for impudence, for talking, passing notes.

In class he's not been chosen up to now; no monitor, no sportsman, not a spy; known mostly for a name they can't pronounce: Old Swetsky! Petsky! Old Pot and Pansky! First names are never used but if they were, if he could share a joke against himself, he'd ask them a riddle: when is a door (Isadore) not a door? When it's a-jar. It's from a comic: Chips or Tiny Tim.

Outside the playground gates he scans the page of Matthew's gospel written out by hand in copperplate by Sir who ran it off with pad and roller, one for every boy. He

reads: 'Ye are the salt of the earth but if the salt have lost his savour wherewith shall it be salted?' And for years he thinks unsavoured salt refers to loss of joy, and not the fall from grace of the elect. The bible and Shakespeare: two lucky dips of clever thoughts in memorable words.

In Hatfield Street, Swenetsky passes knots of jokey men in caps and scarves. They drag on Woodbines or, with Rizlas, roll their own. They're on the dole. It's nineteen thirty one; the Great Depression. Miners march from Wales across the breadth of England, rain or shine, to force attention from an

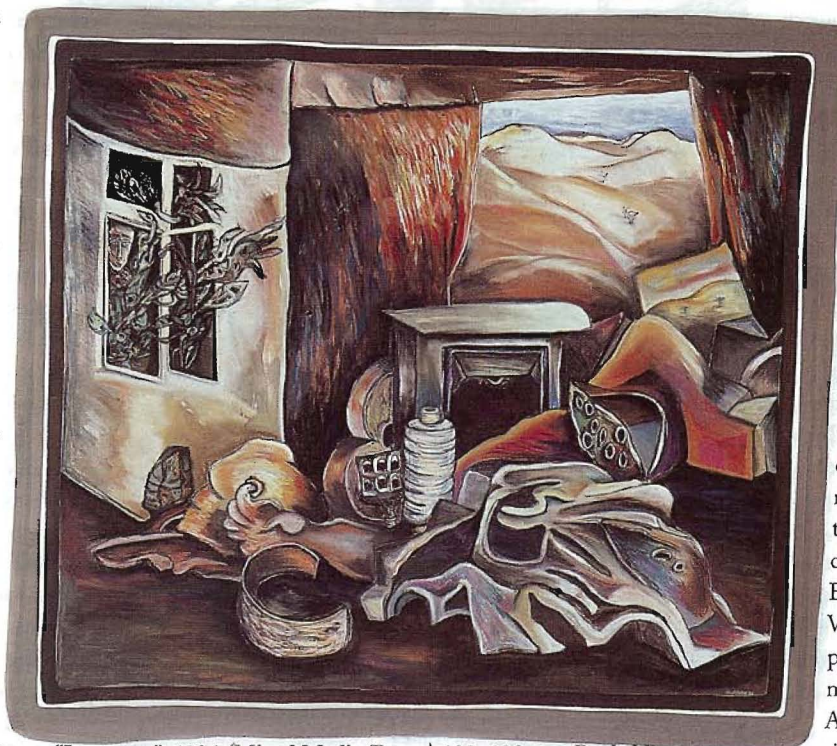
unjust land for being out of work, for being poor, for pit-disasters, coaldust in their lungs. Men fierce and pale and sunken-eyed and proud who carry banners saying: WE WANT BREAD. When they stop singing, life is in their boots; the crunch of hobnails marching through the brain. Supporters cheer them through Blackfriars Road to Westminster, the place where leaders meet.

Are miners poor in spirit? Are they blessed? Is heaven's kingdom what they really want or would they settle for a better earth?

What local women shoppers want is fruit. Dole Voucher Rules allow a shillingsworth of carrots, spuds and soup greens once a week. They get round Sam, Swenetsky's dad, who breaks the law and brightens hearts and shopping bags with oranges, bananas, tangerines. He's not the mythic 'Sam, Sam the dirty old man' who 'washed his face in a frying pan.' This Sam's a decent bloke. Above his shop, the sign says: SAMUELS - FRUITERER & GREENGROCER. He hopes that SAMUELS will help to ward off curiosity.

As for the slogan on his horse-drawn cart, in fairground letters, red and gold, it reads: YOUR CUSTOM KIND FAVOUR & ESTEEM ARE ALWAYS RESPECTFULLY SOLICITED. With luck, this keeps hostility at bay.

Past the fruit stalls on the pavement where Sam and wife



"Juxtapose" 1986 (Mixed Media/Paper) 100x100cm - Rachel Rovay

serve customers, then through the shop, across the sawdust-sprinkled floor, upstairs into the best front room, hurries the young reciter to rehearse his lines. He takes a chair to stand on from its setting at the table, round, with lion's legs and paws, so he can see the way he looks and speaks, performing in the mirror on the wall.

His mother follows from below to feed her children first before Sam shuts the shop. Her daughter's also home from Hatfield Street, the girls' department of Swenetsky's school.

At home they call Swenetsky, Sonny, not Isadore, the name of Sam's dead father, but Isadore's a mouthful, so they say, and Sonny's easier, an extra card to deal and shuffle in the naming game.

Sonny's mother hears him saying: 'Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.' 'What's all that?' She's harsh. 'Saint Mathew,' Sonny says. 'Beatitudes. It's homework for tomorrow. Sir says we've got to learn it. If we don't we'll get the cane, Sir says.' He fibs a bit. He senses something wrong. 'But Matthew comes from the New Testament. Cane shmane. You haven't got to learn that stuff. That's about Jesus Christ, but you're a Jew. You tell that teacher what I said. He can't make you learn New Testament. You're a Jew. Have I got to go and see him myself?'

A double jolt. His mum turn up at school? It isn't done. He'd never live it down. And Jew. The word hits hard, a body blow. He hasn't lived the life it represents. A Jew to him means foreign sights and sounds; a tourist's view of bent old men with beards; fat women fishing pickles from barrels in street markets; East End crowds; small boxes with rolled-up prayers inside, fixed near doors; of Grandma's words of Yiddish to his mum and dad, and theirs to her; of dressing up (new shoes, a pink frilled shirt and velvet shorts) to be a pageboy for a Jewish bride; a cantor's heartleap songs in synagogue; but these things are exotic, background, strange. No Jewishness has taken place at home, no rituals, no books, no Sabbath meals. Why then this onslaught from an angry mum? Not only is he instantly a Jew who must behave like one whatever that may be, but what a time to break the news: For if he does what he is told to do by mum, he'll miss a chance to make a hit, to be the best reciter in the class, to claim attention like the men from Wales. But if he doesn't do

what Sir demands, he might be made to 'fetch the Cane and Book'.

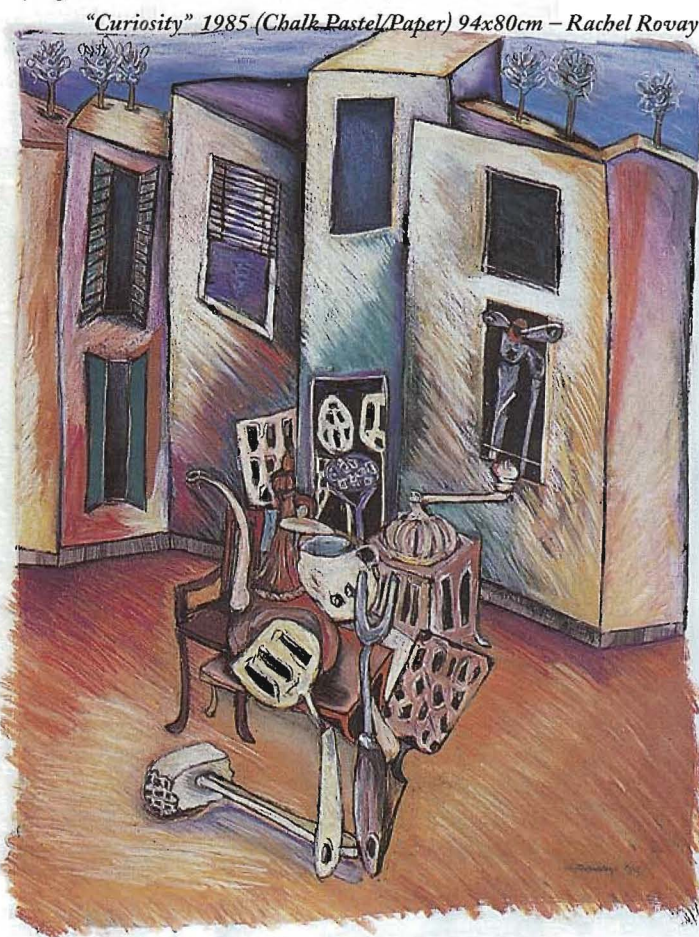
It will take time to understand his mum, her anger, how it springs from discontent in shaking off a troubled Russian past and thankless task as mother-surrogate for five young sisters and a younger boy. She marries late; gives birth at thirty-six; rejects the ghetto, moving out and up the social line, that well-trod migrant path; gets anglicised; works hard with Sam among the gentiles. Yet in this new neighbourhood she still hears anti-Jewish taunts. They hurt. Should she have given up the trappings of her faith? Transmission is the mother's job. Sonny has touched a sore spot, has exposed the private struggle with her Jewishness she'd like to overcome. 'You are a Jew!' she shouts. But is she shouting at herself?

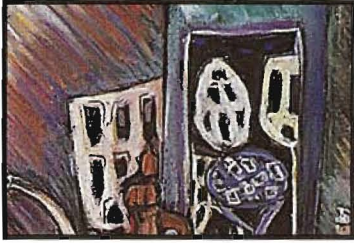
Her son is now officially a Jew. No declaration this, of blessedness, but more an act of rage than love or pride. She sends him on a journey but without advice, instruction. Angrily she ties a new label on an empty suitcase but doesn't tell him where to go or how. A fuse is lit. It sizzles through his life.

A second revelation on this night of nights - the origin of Sonny's name - from Jolson's heartbreak ballad of the day: 'When there are grey skies, I don't mind those grey skies, you make them blue, Sonny Boy'. He sings on gramophone, wireless, stage and screen. Al Jolson on his knees, arms stretched out wide, white gloves, white blubbermouth, pop eyes, black face, pleading for Mammy on her sickbed not to die: 'I'd walk a million miles for one of your smiles

Ma-a-ammy.' Half the world sheds tears. In sentimentalising sons and mums perhaps his songs allow them to enjoy in fiction what they don't express in fact.

Swenetsky's not sure how, but feels that he might stand to gain between his mum and Sir. He doesn't know exactly what he wants; it's not an object like the rocking-horse he wanted once when he was four years old in a Mixed Infants class where kids were made to sleep each afternoon on stretcher beds, and he resisted, crying for the horse; red saddle, silver stirrups, polished reins, Miss Francis smiled, said yes and helped him on; and there he rode in triumph, high above the rest, obediently prone. He'd scored a coronation, crowned in the playground game of 'I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascal.' Dethroned since then, Swenetsky seeks





**'I'd walk a million miles for one of your smiles Ma-a-ammy.' Half the world sheds tears. In sentimentalising sons and mums perhaps his songs allow them to enjoy in fiction what they don't express in fact.**

another way to shine.

After the night of nights, the day of days. Surprise. Sir's mood is good. He wants to hear how many verses they recall. He will reward the boy who memorises most and speaks it best with no mistakes. So far, they mutter, stumble, hating to recite. Now it's Swenetsky's turn. He's learnt a lot, not seven verses, three to nine, but more, right up to verse fourteen: 'Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.' Swenetsky's light is flickering. He feels he's on an hill; somehow he knows he doesn't want to hide. 'Sir, me mum says that I haven't got to learn it, Sir. Jews don't do New Testament, so I didn't do it. I'm a Jew, Sir.'

The world stands still for an eternity of seconds, long enough for a rising murmur of 'Eh!' that unique sound of kids in London schools, of incredulity; long enough for the gas mantles to give an extra pop; and long enough for Sir to be confounded, purse his lips and say: 'I see. Hmm. Very well. Sit down. Next boy.' And long enough to change an eight-year-old who has emerged from nowhere to become a special case, distinctive, who can now oppose the rules, defy authority, as symbolised by Sir, and still survive.

Now come the shocks of winter. Since the spring, Swenetsky's disconcerting claim has tapped the buried folklore of the boys. They leap with glee, encircle him in playground gangs: 'And God said unto Moses, All Jews shall have long noses. Except for Aaron, he shall have a square'un.' His nose is neither long nor square, but flattish like his mum's, though later, changes and becomes like dad's. But nasal facts are not allowed to spoil a raucous comedy routine. It's fun. 'Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Jews sold his wife for a pair of shoes.' Nonsense, yet intriguing. Swenetsky would quite like to join the gang himself and sing their songs. His Jewishness is like a brand new coat that doesn't fit; he's acting out a role. Derision - can it outweigh disregard? Can persecution be a source of pride?

With Lilian, what's happening at school is worse. She cries. She's being victimised. 'I know I passed the tests. I'm always top. Those other girls, all four, have always come below me in exams. Some teachers talk about the Jews. I bet my funny name has stopped me going to the grammar school. It isn't fair. I'm never going back.'

His mum and dad confer. He hears new words: discrimination; antisemites; goy. His mum, embittered, curses Lilian's school: 'A black year on their heads, a cholera, the teachers should be six feet underground.' She calls on God to help. 'Oy vay iz mir'. The primitive refrain: O woe is me. Her storms of anger blast the house for days, then peter out. They seem to have a plan. They don't say what it is. He waits for news but hearing nothing, puts it out of mind. He's now aware of jealousy, resents his sister taking over centre stage.

She relegates his drama to the wings.

Swenetsky joins the public library in Waterloo along Blackfriars Road. He feels important, trusted with four books: The Holy Bible, so he can look up the Old Testament, suitable for Jews; Tom Brown's Schooldays; The Big Book of Verse; and A Hundred Things a Boy can Make and Do.

Sidelined, he seeks support in borrowed books: constructs a rolling tank with cotton reel, an inch of candle, matchsticks, rubber band. Wound up, it trundles over table tops, climbs plates, and powers on relentlessly. He reads how young David beats Goliath, how strong is Samson even when he's blind; the deeds of prophets, warriors and kings. He skips the lists of who begat who when, and is dismayed by God, a nagging voice, who threatens, boasts, insists that He's The One And Only Proper God all must obey. His anger booms and rumbles from the skies.

Swenetsky finds 'The Windmill' in his book of verse, and learns it off by heart. It's him, of course, or rather, how he'd like to be: 'Behold, a giant am I! Aloft here in my tower, With my granite jaws, I devour The maize, the wheat and the rye, And grind them into flour.' Grind. That's good.

If Sir's the biggest windmill in the class, the Head must be the nearest thing to God who makes the wind that turns the windmills round. He rarely enters classrooms; when he does, someone's been up to no good. Something's wrong. Sir stands. Boys fold their arms. Gas mantles pop. 'There is a lucky little boy in this room today. A very lucky little boy. Stand up Isadore Swenetsky. Ah, there you are. Listen very carefully. From now on, now, this minute on my watch (it's from his waistcoat pocket on a chain) this boy will no longer be Isadore Swenetsky. This boy will now be known as Harry Swan. Well now, Harry Swan, write your new name on your pencil-box. Let me see. We'll soon get used to it. Won't we Harry Swan? Won't we lad? New Harry says, 'Yessir.'

New Harry's just as puzzled as the class. An unbelieving 'eh' begins to rise, but stifled while the Head is in the room. This name that's just been handed down by God; it must have come from mum and dad at home, but no-one told him how or when or why.

The Head leaves Harry to a shaken world. He's stunned. What should he think or feel or do? What price a toy tank if it stops, unwound? What price young David with no sling or stone? What price a windmill when the wind has dropped?

In Hatfield Street, a second fuse is lit, and like the first, it sets off ancient themes of exile; shades of the diaspora; bobbing and weaving for two thousand years. ♣

*'The Salt of the Earth' is the winner of the 1999 Manuel Gelman Memorial Prize for Literature. David Swain is a freelance writer and cartoonist*