

# CutBank

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Volume 1  
Issue 91 *CutBank* 91

Article 9

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Spring 2020

## Sanctum

Arya Samuelson

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### Recommended Citation

Samuelson, Arya (2020) "Sanctum," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 91 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss91/9>

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ARYA SAMUELSON

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## SANCTUM

### GIRL-BODY

**W**<sup>E</sup> SIT. We stand. We sit. We stand.

The synagogue trembles with darkness and fire.

I am five years old. My butt is sore and I'm bored. I dig my hands underneath my dress and trace fingers along my flesh where my underwear band presses marks. Reading the language of my body, though I don't realize it.

Everyone is singing now—the songs sound like grape juice, go down smooth, yet a darkness. Some man is standing at the front, pointing at an enormous scroll. We stand. The book is too heavy in my hands, want to fling my arms loose. My father points his finger to strange markings, flips my pages. A few weeks ago, he taught me to read *Go Dog Go*.

*Sit down, stand up, sit down, stand up.*

I don't want to stand when I am told to stand. I don't want to sit down. My

thighs press against the seat, resisting. My dad, or maybe my stepmother, grabs my hand and hoists me to standing on both feet. Something electric pinches my spine. I don't want to do anything they tell me I have to do. I don't want to keep moving and leaving and losing. I go back and forth between my mom's house, my dad's house, my mom's house, my dad's house. There is no home. I want to go—to my mother, to her body, to her voice like milk, but my dad and stepmom tell me not to trust her. Nobody can be trusted. Nobody can be loved all the way. My hand burns. I can't be loved all the way. I wriggle my hand free and sink back down. Close my eyes and grip the edges of my seat.

## TABLE

WITH MY DAD and stepmother, we celebrate Shabbat with glowing candlesticks, scarlet tablecloths, white flowers that drape open like lips. My stepmother, Marnie, hovers over the stovetop and I run to her, breathe into her apron—the garlic, onions, her French perfume. She shoos me away with her wrist, tells me to set the table.

At their table, there is a right place for the fork, knife, and spoon—though I usually forget what it is. Sometimes I place the silverware inside the wine glasses, or I bury the knives inside the napkins, which I hide inside the flower vase. When Marnie discovers what I've done, laughter cracks on her tongue, but her eyes glint hard as she places the silverware back where it is supposed to go.

The blessings tumble from my mouth as I strike a match and lean each candle into the flame. My dad taught me to memorize the blessings and I only remember the words when I say them really fast—a blur of sounds like seashells and coughing.

The lights dance on the yellow walls, casting a flickering circle of shadows around us. My father finishes his meal in minutes, yawns throughout the rest of dinner. Marnie eats deliberately, fawning over every bite, tells us a story about how this recipe came from a 97-year-old Jewish woman from

the Poland. Marnie was raised Catholic, but knows these things because she works for the *New York Times*. And I smile and laugh and eat everything on my plate. Beneath the table, I cradle little rocks in the shape of my mother. If I say aloud that I miss my mother, my stepmother will erupt into tears, push the table away, leaving me and my father blinking at each other. I cause explosions. Or I swallow the tiny rocks.

• • •

EVERY OTHER FRIDAY, I am at my mom's house, where Friday nights are like any other night. We never sit at the table. We balance the plates in our laps. There is Chinese food in bed. There are stained white sheets.

My mother is still finishing medical school, studying to be a psychiatrist, and she tells me stories of the foster children and veterans who are her patients. There is a boy my age, seven years old, who tried to burn down his family's house. *I wish I could adopt him*, she says. My stomach twists; I want all her love for myself. Two is safety, two is hand in hand, two is how love makes sense to me.

Talking with my mother is like a warm pool; we swim around each other. We flip through TV channels and I tell her everything I remember about my day, about the new girl I like, the girl I hate, my terrible teacher. She tells me how nervous she is about taking the medical boards and we scheme

revenge against her asshole supervisor.

She doesn't need to know about my other life. When I come back one weekend from my dad's house with a new pixie haircut, my mom's eyes glimmer dark, distant. Now secrets flit around my brain like fireflies. I don't tell her that Marnie and I papier-mâché mermaids, glued translucent stones onto tails, painted their bodies emerald. It's getting easier to tuck secrets into the folds of my belly and just keep smiling.

## ATONEMENT

IT IS YOM KIPPUR, the day of atonement, the holiest day of the year. The only day my mom's family goes to synagogue. It is also a school holiday and the girls in my class are eating pizza and hosting *Gilmore Girls* marathons. We just moved to this town a couple of months ago and I don't know these girls yet. I am nine years old—an age when every giggle exchanged, every whim of a free afternoon, fastens a tighter knot on friendship; when every absence means standing outside the joke, head tilted as if to laugh along.

I don't want to go to temple. I don't want to do anything I don't want to do. I throw all of my clothes onto the floor and scream, "It's so unfair!" Inside the car, I sob and punch the windows until my mother turns the car around. Which I knew she would. "How am I supposed to repent when you are being such a brat?" Her eyes flash at me and gone is her softness and then she falls into silence like a hot white fire. *I'm sorry*, I sing as a silly melody and I stroke her arm. *We can go back if you really, really want to*. She pries her arm away. I scream that I'm sorry. I need her forgiveness like I need her hand, like I need her voice reassuring me that everything will be okay. I dig into my thighs with my nails, rip out tufts of hair. Still she will not look at me, and that's how I know she is untouchable.

Defeated, I curl myself against the window and count telephone poles. Without her, I don't have anyone. But I don't say this. I learn about regret.

Dumb soft tongue. There is nothing I can say that will not hurt. My throat stings in its hollow cave. I scrape my gums with my nails.



## LES MISERABLES

I AM TEN years old and staying with my dad and Marnie for the summer in their country house, three hours away from my mother. One morning I accidentally X out Marnie's computer browser and her diary flashes on the screen in the form of a Microsoft Word document. I didn't go searching. It was left "open."

Maybe if I hadn't seen my name first thing, I wouldn't have kept reading.

Everyone's a character, the ugliest version of themselves. My dad, my mom, her friends, her brothers. But I'm the star. Her words sear into my brain like coals. My fingers flame as I scroll down and down and down. When I think it's over, it's not. There's always the day before and the day before and the day before. I have known Marnie my whole life. Her diary is hundreds of pages, infinitude of words. I don't know where my body is, except it is burning.

I am supposed to stay at my dad and stepmother's house four more weeks.

Warm milk midnights I tiptoe past doors that breathe, down creaking stairs into the kitchen where the landline phone is stationed. I am not allowed to call my mother. I call my mother. Her voice is soft with sleep, but she shakes it off like a horse shaking out its mane. "I can't sleep," I tell her. "Can

you warm some milk?" she asks. The pot is simmering, I say. *Sigh*. Hers, mine. I have made her promise not to come pick me up.

Driving in the car, my dad says, "I've noticed you listen to *Les Miserables* a lot." "Yeah," I say. "So?" "So, I'm worried about you." He sounds like Worried Dad from a TV sitcom. His voice squeaks when he says *you*. "I'm fine," I say. "Do you miss your mom?" he asks. I put on my headphones. "One Day More," the cast of *Les Miz* declares. I want them to win the war more than I want anything else, even though of course they won't. My dad says something, then says it louder, but I don't hear him. Parks the car and I bolt. Through the door, over the dogs, up the stairs, past their bedroom, into mine with the rosebud sheets, onto my bed. I listen to my favorite, "On my Own." *Now I'm all alone again*. Plugged ears, closed eyes, just the music and me. No, just the music.

## JOKE

AT OUR WEEKLY Monday dinners at the local diner, my dad and I scream at each other across the table. *I never want to see Marnie again.* We rattle the booth. *You hurt her just as much as she hurt you,* he yells. The manager asks us to lower our voices, so we just eat our soups in silence.

A couple of months later, I spend an entire Friday in the guidance counselor's office. I call my dad five times. *There is no way in hell that I am driving with you,* and I slam down the phone. My father shows up at school anyway, wrests me from the counselor's office, and suddenly I am in the car. I claw at the windows, beat them with my fists. The doors are locked. My father's friend is strapped into the passenger seat, his curly hair peeking through the gap in the seat rest, facing straight ahead. Saying nothing at all. We are parked outside the high school just as students are stampeding out the front entrance, and we must have been there for a while, because one of them has called the police. An officer knocks at the window. We emerge from the car and the officer asks me, "Is this your father?" When I say yes, he lets us both go. My dad and I amble down the street and he makes a joke about the whole thing. Then he turns to me and asks, "Will you still come upstate with me?" That isn't the joke.

## DOORS

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD, my father lives on a kibbutz, eats pomegranates. He dropped out of college after five days of orientation and moved from suburban New York to Israel. It is 1969 and men over eighteen years old are drafted for the war every day, but his secular suburban life feels so far away—the seven frozen meals on rotation, the house where nobody makes a sound. He is immersed in a world of new tongues. In Israel, he kisses girls and debates politics in Hebrew and writes fiery articles calling for Palestinian liberation. In this foreign land, he discovers a belonging that transcends geography. When he returns to the United States, he co-creates a Holocaust studies department at his college and works as an editor for Jewish literature and biblical theory for the next twenty years.

I can't picture my father without his dark full-faced beard. Ideally, he is scribbling at his desk, surrounded by bookshelves. It's not religion he loves; it's ideas. I still picture him this way, even though he shaved his beard when I was five years old because Marnie preferred him smooth. In my baby photos, his teeth gleam through his grizzly beard as he cradles me.

He wanted me to believe Judaism was an open door, welcoming me. He read me Bible stories, offered me Shabbat. He wanted me to feel like I could find family anywhere in the world. But he had opened the door to my stepmother. He had shut the door to my mother. I spat out the

little knowledge I had learned and dropped out of Hebrew school after six months. I plucked the stories from my skin. I shut my own doors. I claimed that nothing about Judaism attracted or appealed to me. The hinges rusted over. Doors became walls.

## SPLIT / NATURALLY

WHEN PEOPLE SEE me with my mother for the first time, they gush that I look just like her and it's true that we both have dark, curly hair; we both smile into the same side of our face. We emphasize with the same adamant hand gestures. But my mom rolls her eyes. "You should see her with her father." What she means is that I have my father's soft double chins, his skin that turns golden in summer and green in winter, and the same terrible temper. She laughs and there is an edge only I detect.

In her laughter, I hear: "This child is not mine." Her unsaid words cave my chest. I want to belong only to her. The only one who loves me. I hear her say, "I cannot save her." I've inherited his face, his gifts, his impatience, his anger. I am not fully hers and she is not fully mine; she is splitting us apart. The public-me smiles and rolls her eyes back. "She always says that," I sneer, like a typical teenager. She is splitting me apart.

• • •

It's WINTER BREAK, junior year of college. I come to Western Massachusetts armed with sweaters, long underwear, and mantras. Cheek pressed against the icy window, I have spent the entire five-hour bus ride rehearsing my sincere, easy smile, breathing into the space across my shoulder blades, convincing myself this visit will be different. I haven't seen my dad in a year

and a half.

When I get off the bus, he comes walking towards me, arms outstretched. “Hold on,” I say, “Let me get my bags first.” He hovers next to me while the driver passes me my bag and I grab for the handle, lift it up. “Now can I get my hug?” he asks. “Um, sure,” I say and put the bag back down. He presses me against his dark coat, my chin jutting into his chest, his keys jabbing at my belly. These are the only moments we ever touch. I remember my mantra and I relax into it, let my hands soften against the wool of his coat.

His grip around me loosens. “Let me look at you,” he says, and there are his eyes peering at me. My throat flames and I turn my head away. Am I supposed to stand there while he just *looks* at me? Does he want me to smile, pose, twirl? I’m certain other fathers don’t make such a big deal out of looking at their daughters. They look at them, just like they talk to them. Naturally. What is he looking at? What is he looking for?

“Let’s just go to your car. It’s really cold,” I say. We trudge through the parking lot, a thick silence between us. I glance over at him. He’s heavier than the last time and his face is pricked from his razor. Tiny hardened red spots on his cheek. I don’t want him to look at me, but I don’t want to look at him either.

## NORMAL

THERE IS ONLY one photograph—a polaroid—of my dad, mom, and me all together. I am one month old and balancing on my dad's lap. They are both smiling hard—him through his full-faced beard his next wife wouldn't let him keep; her through lips stained dark red, a color more provocative than any she wore again. Their knees are touching. And me in the middle of it all, triple-chinned, face drooping to one side. An infant not knowing this would never again be normal.



## ROSH HASHANAH

IT HAS ALWAYS made sense in my body that Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is an autumn holiday. September brings the sharpening edges of night, the bite of cool in the air, the leaves so colorful it's like they are celebrating. I feel the light slipping away and I want to cling to it. How personal, how intimate these changes feel. The wind stirs and I shiver with longing for warmth, safety. I want to come home.

On the rare occasions I attend synagogue as an adult, I go on Rosh Hashanah. The time of apples and honey and shofars and new beginnings. The only joyful Jewish holiday I know about.

But every year when the rabbi instructs us to stand, my body clenches at this order from an authority I have no reason to trust. Though everybody in the room has risen, nothing inside of me wants to join them. Or maybe, no part of me knows how. I drag the others down, a rock in their current. When I start to sing what some might call a prayer, I can only hear my own voice—the others have blended into something weak and distant. The unity is broken, if there was ever the illusion it existed, and it is so familiar, this below place, this separating myself from others with my body. The weight of their shadows hovering; I stiffen my back against them. I wish I could rise weightless and join the stream of melody. I want to be like water, but I was born a stupid rock. When the rabbi says to sit down, and the others

come back to my level, come back to me, pride drips down my back. Next time they stand I promise myself I'll have the courage, but when given the chance, I remain a boulder. I'll try again next year, I vow. Without moving, I melt deeper into the seat. I become molten.

## SYNAGOGICAL CHANTS, PRAGUE, 1960\*

HE FEELS FOR his grief like a rope, like vines of ivy. He digs into himself and tears it from its roots, hoists it upwards through his stomach, ribcage, chest, threads it through his throat. It seems impossible that he knows where he is going, except that when he arrives, his voice is the force of sun colliding against earth and it knocks me backwards, splits my chest open. He howls in the shape of God.

I don't know where these sounds live inside my body. His music wrests all that is hidden, buried in the dark of us. His throat a tunnel between inner and outer. *Revelation*. My throat is where the world closes.

When his voice surges, I hear the history of a people who have always longed for home. I hear the depth of grief, a black glittering tar where we lose ourselves, which is why we do not touch it. We fear we will never emerge. But he plunges into grief and thrusts it into the light—a fountain. Head falls backward, black of the throat to the sky.

I am writing my way to an open throat. A body unafraid of its own transformation. One day, I will feel my wildness and I will not break.

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\**Inspired by recording performed by Cantor Shalom Katz*

## CALIFORNIA

THIS ROSH HASHANA, far from family, I try again. The GPS barks directions as I navigate the most circuitous route imaginable between Oakland and Berkeley. I ascend and descend mountains, passing manicured hilltop enclaves, golf courses, and vistas that remind me of Grecian cliffs. My first time driving in five years, my hands wobble on the wheel and the cars on the freeway parallel to me whip past faster than I can even form words.

One month ago, I moved from New York City to California to begin graduate school. I have no friends or family here. I rely on my GPS to guide me to the grocery store, the gas station. I wake up in the mornings and lie in bed, waiting for my body to rise into shapes and carry the day along.

It doesn't feel like autumn. The leaves are still perky-green. The sun is somehow both warming and cold—like a lover's hand on your shoulder, when you can feel their thoughts are elsewhere. The light is silvery, instead of golden, and immaculate in a way I don't have language for.

I come to temple this year because I seek family. Because I am searching for the friendships that will bring this foreign place into focus. Because I want to believe belonging transcends geography, transcends the family I've been born into. Because it is a new year and I have a new life.

There are two simultaneous services held in the same building and I choose to attend the wilder one: a radical reform congregation advertising poetry and interfaith music and singing. Because it's California, the service is outdoors and held underneath a white tent in the backyard. I am early, which I had not planned to be, so I lean against a tree and survey the space. There is a playground and children are running all around, screeching their shofars. A picnic table displaying organic grape juice and biodegradable cups. I go back-and-forth between texting and resolving to be present. I don't know where to look, so I pull my phone back out. Why did I come here alone? The still-green leaves twinkle in the wind and people are greeting and embracing each other and I keep brushing my hair behind my ear. Everyone is part of a family. Keep leaning against the tree.

I accidentally catch eyes with a woman in her sixties, who, as it turns out, is visiting from New York City. Hearing this is such a relief my lungs expand like wings. "I'm from New York, too!" I exclaim, fingertips tingling. Her eyes slant narrow. "Oh," she says. I ask her which neighborhood, and she says SoHo, which suggests to me that she is very wealthy. We stand silently and I remember how difficult it can be to talk to New Yorkers about New York, how the city offers only the illusion of inhabiting a world in common. We shift from foot to foot. I keep touching my chin, tracing my hand along my collarbone.

The rabbi begins the service with: "Who knows how to say 'happy new year'?"

in Hebrew?” She waits too many seconds, eyes bulging. “*Sha-na to-vah.*” She sounds out the syllables with space in-between like we are children, and something inside me splits, like crossed eyes refusing to focus. The cantor strums a guitar and she smiles blissfully, as if she is breathing in chocolate. But her voice is so weak it is inaudible, drowned by the sludge of voices that disagree on pitch. I grip the underbellies of my thighs. I surrender to the gray chaos, until I can’t even hear myself, I can’t feel my own edges, and this is what scares me.

*Don’t leave, don’t leave, don’t leave.* I scrape at my legs, I push down my thighs. *Don’t leave, don’t leave, don’t*—and then I am heel-toeing my way to the end of the aisle, scurrying past the back rows of congregants. I don’t even realize I’ve left until I’m no longer where I was. Until my face looms in the bathroom mirror. Eyes hot and vacant and shiny and too angry to cry. I bite the flesh of my hands and I watch myself do it.

When I push the bathroom door open, the hallway floods with singing from the other congregation—white waves of music like their robes. There is a center and it pierces through me. I am jolted into stillness.

Their music washes my thoughts away. I stand for a long time, until I finally sit in one of the chairs set up on the patio, where nobody else can see me, where I can leave when I want to.

There is a leader to the music and she is far away and I can be far away and still hear how she is the leader. My shoulders release like waterfalls. The music is so beautiful and so simple. I do not know the words, but I can make those sounds. I open my throat as I listen to the others; the melody finds and travels its way through me. Singing breaks me open.

I walk to the back of the synagogue and sit in the very last row, joining the other voices. And when the rabbi says to rise, I rise like a leaf in the wind, and when the rabbi says to sit, it is like a sigh, and when we all sigh, it is like landing on earth after flying over it. Our wings rest. I sing and I let myself be carried. I let myself be held. Bodies in synchronicity and I am one of them. Are they my family? No, they are strangers, and I let them show me the way.