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Orsus

A short story on weavings, language, and distance
by Victoria Cleverby

She was beginning to get annoyed. Whenever she asked her partner about their relationship status, he said they were soulmates. She had repeatedly pointed out the absurdity of his answer, as she knew he disagreed with the concept of a soul. He had no patience with such discussions and said, of course, there is no such thing as a soul; there is only a body. She then reminded him that his argument wasn't obvious. Especially not historically. She told him about how in ancient Egypt there had been a belief that an individual was made up of 9 physical and spiritual elements. Like Khat the physical body, Ka the life force that gives energy to the physical body, and Ba the aspect that makes up the personality. He just laughed, told her there was no Ba to be found anywhere in him.

But she knew there was Ba in his life. It stared at her every morning in the bathroom – his set of creme, toners, and moisturizers. BHA was the acronym of Beta Hydroxy Acid. And although she knew it was pronounced B-H-A, she always read it as Ba. One past morning when she'd been combing her hair and he was washing his face, she'd explained to him the linguistic concept of lexical differentiation, which suggests that when a language has multiple words for a single concept, it reflects the culture's focus on its nuances. When the ancient Egyptian language had many words for the aspects that make up an individual, modern Swedish has very few. She thought, but was only guessing, that the ancient Egyptians didn't have as many words for acids to make your face glow, as the containers and boxes on her partner's shelf had. She, on the other hand, was more interested in the Ba as in the aspect that makes up the personality, rather than the Ba of Beta Hydroxy Acid. She had just come out of a period of about a year when she had been utterly obsessed with ancient Egyptian culture. Now she had moved on, or at least moved forward in history. At the moment, her thoughts centered around the Adamic language.

Some Jewish and Christian traditions speak of an Adamic language present at the beginning, where words and things were fully united. Like in Genesis when God creates light. God speaks, and in the exact moment the word "light" is spoken, light is created. What caught her interest was how a creation story like this makes the word the origin of the

Universe. She also saw a description of a state in time where the correspondence between words and objects was absolute. The Adamic language was said to convey knowledge in such a direct way that its speakers directly knew and understood everything. It was unclear if it had ever existed, but the myth said the Adamic language was lost when humanity was expelled from the Garden of Eden.

She made her living as a textile artist. She recently emerged from a project on how various cultures have used the weave as a metaphor for the universe. Like the Navajo culture, where Spider Woman is described as weaving both the world and its inhabitants, or the Hindu culture, which explains how Brahma is the superior God from which all worlds are woven as warp and weft. Even Einstein, through his general theory of relativity, likened space-time to a weave forming the foundation of the Universe. Currently, she was occupied by an artistic research project. Her topic was language, and her research question pondered the relationship between creation and separation, and what she could learn about it if she explored it through textiles.

Her interest regarding the relationship between separation and creation had begun a few months earlier when she'd read an article about biblical interpretation. The article described how a minority of biblical scholars for almost a decade had been questioning the translation of the first line of Genesis that in Hebrew read: "בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ" (bereshit

bara Elohim et hashamayim ve et ha eretz) which in English was translated as "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth". It was the word ברא (bara) they argued should be translated as "separation" or "cutting" rather than created. This had made her very curious, not so much about the whole sentence as about the word ברא (bara). If there in Hebrew were possible to derive creation and separation from the same word, then the two concepts would need to have some kind of relationship to each other. This tickled her interest as an artist working with creation all day; How was separation part of that process?

She had decided to explore the question through her own making. She knew that a biblical scholar interested in understanding the word ברא (bara) wouldn't view ברא (bara) in solitude. Instead, they would look at the word in relation to the surrounding words making up the sentence. The scholar would also look at all the different places in the Hebrew Bible where the word ברא (bara) was found and then compare and contrast the meaning of each sentence. So she decided that her method should be similar, seen from a language point of view. To understand more about ברא (bara), she was not just going to explore ברא (bara), she was going to perform it. She was going to use cutting as her method of separation since the word ברא (bara) also could be translated as "cutting". The action of cutting was to be made on a weave, a piece of textile. To her, this was a kind of etymological humor as the word text is derived from the root textere, meaning to weave.

One day over dinner, she told her partner about her new project. He didn't say it out loud, but she could see by how he looked at her that something was bothering him. He had a keen interest in debating, so he pointed out that the prevalent view of language today, used by most linguists, is the idea that any language is a set of arbitrary but conventionally agreed upon words or "signs", that are linked together by a purely formal system of syntactic and grammatical rules. Language understood like this becomes a way of representing things and events in the perceived world. But it doesn't acknowledge any connection between the two, he pointed out. To him, it was evident that the perspective on language she was using in her project did not match that of contemporary linguists. When she had decided to explore the word ברא (bara) through a material inquiry, it meant that she thought it possible to learn something about a word by doing it. She was suggesting that words weren't arbitrary, but rather, on the contrary, could hold a correspondence to the material world. He did not agree to her stance, and so they ate the rest of their dinner in silence instead of arguing about it.

After dinner, she went into her studio to look for a piece of woven cloth to work with. What is special about woven textiles is that a weave results from two elements – the character of the fibers used in the thread and the construction of the weave. This makes the weave always portray how it has been made, and with what it has been made. During the years, she had collected many different textiles; there were tons of them on her shelves.

All in various colours, materials, and bindings. Now her eyes were drawn to the section of woven cloth that originally had been intended as canvases for painting. The canvases were made of linen that reflected light in a way cotton never could, but in a more demure way than any silk would. She picked out a selection of woven fabrics to which no color, pattern, or bleach had been added. Where the fibers were still close to their beginning.

She took one of the weavings, placed it on her desk, took up her scissors, and made a single cut in the middle of the fabric. She heard the small click the scissors made as the thread was cut in two. She then began to pull one of the thread's ends out from the weave's intersecting threads. Where the thread once was, there now was a void. As the fabric she had chosen was tightly woven, there was no way to cover up the void; she couldn't hide that there once was a thread in this part of the weave and now it wasn't. When she made a new cut somewhere else in the weave and a new void was created, the old one wouldn't stop existing. If she had worked in another material, this exact property wouldn't necessarily have been present. A much more porous material could have spilled out, hiding the void. That's how she realized the construction and the material are essential to how a separation utters itself.

When she had made a cut, she took the thread and started pulling it out of the weave, always with the other end still attached. This was a rule she created for herself, as one of the

biblical scholars interviewed in the article had pointed out that the separation ברא (bara) characterized was a temporal process where initially two or more things were connected, but at the end were apart from each other. When she at one point started toying with the idea of cutting the thread in both ends, she wouldn't be doing ברא (bara) anymore, but rather בתק (bathaq), the Hebrew word for a separation that cuts a unity into two separate pieces. She knew that separation could be seen in a very specific kind of creation. The unity of an atom split into two. Fission. Separation, creation, and at the same time destruction. It's ironic how the word "atom" is derived from a Greek word that means "uncuttable", she thought. But she was also realizing how many words there were for separation. In Hebrew, she, besides ברא (bara) and בתק (bathaq), also knew of the word בדל (badal), which describes a separation between already distinct objects, to put a distance between them. In her native Swedish, she could list words related to "skilja" such as "avskilja, urskilja, särskilja". She found even more words in English: "split, cut, divide, part, cleave, sunder, chop". What drives us to meticulously define the different ways it is possible to separate? she asked her partner when she returned home from her studio that evening.

The next day, she was back in her studio. Picking up where she left off, she took the separated threads and stitched them down in another part of the weave. The overlaying threads started creating new lines on the surface. All of the lines were straight; her technique prevented her from doing any curved forms,

but it allowed her to play around with the width and length of the lines – lines made of distance. The separation started to create forms that filled the weavings she was working on. She perceived the forms as some kind of symbols. The problem was that she had no idea what the symbols meant, even if they were visual consequences of her own doing. Yet somehow, she recognized them, not with her mind, but with her body. Looking at them, she didn't feel certainty; she felt truth, a kind of truth born from making.

Weeks passed, and during that time she had started to view the symbols as the source of the knowledge she was acquiring. What she was learning about the relationship between separation and creation was derived from her doing of ברא (bara). A doing which in turn produced the symbols. She had nailed a couple of the weavings to her studio wall, and as she one day stood looking at them from a distance, thought to herself that the symbols were a kind of cosmological equation, a symbol describing an origin. Ironically, she had hung the weavings next to a framed picture of parts of the equation that make up the Λ CDM (Lambda-CDM) model, a mathematical model of the Big Bang theory. The image had been a gift from her partner for their 5th anniversary.

She and her partner had met at a cosmology course at university some years earlier. Her subjects had been art and religion, his mathematics and philosophy. Cosmology was where their interest intersected. Looking at the Λ CDM

(Lambda-CDM) model, she recalled some lines she had read in a book several nights earlier. The writer had been discussing that the scientific theory describing the beginning of the Universe – The Big Bang theory – exists primarily as a mathematical construct, since the earliest moments it describes are not directly accessible to observation. This means we must rely on the symbols that make up the equations as the generators of knowledge, because no one will ever witness the Big Bang itself. She saw very clearly that the insights she was making on the relationship between separation and creation were, in a way, the exact opposite. Her knowledge was empirical as it had been acquired through her own doing. It was possible for anyone else to repeat her actions. Still, her symbols functioned much like the cosmological equations, for those who hadn't been present in the studio would need to trust the symbols on the weave as the origin of the knowledge she had accumulated in her artistic research project. She understood her symbols were not cosmological as such. But she knew from the physicists who had been her teachers at university, they, just like her, wrestled with the question of correspondence. When she asked what correspondence a word might have to the world, they pondered the correspondence between mathematics and the Universe.

Suddenly, she was interrupted in her thinking as her partner swung the studio door open. Looking around, his half-eaten lunch sandwich in his hand, he saw the weavings nailed to the wall and took a few steps to inspect them. Every now and then,

he came over to her studio sometime during lunch. He spent his days working from his study in their apartment, writing his dissertation in physics. His chosen topic was a mathematical investigation of Hubble's Law, a key part of the Big Bang theory. While the Big Bang theory describes the Universe's expansion, Hubble's Law explains that galaxies within it also move away from each other. The farther apart they are, the faster they recede. She had been mesmerized the first time he told her about those theories. It was precisely the movement she felt was happening in language. The more time passed since the days of the Garden of Eden, the further language was pushed away from humanity.

She walked over next to him and told him about her inclination – that the symbols on her weavings were like a symbol in a cosmological equation.

Her hands moved across the weavings, and she said aloud a thought that had been growing inside her.

“The symbols are portraying how they have been made through how they were made.”

It didn't make sense, so she tried to explain.

“A weave is the result of two elements – the character of the fibers used in the thread and the construction of the weave.”

“So the weave will always portray how it has been made, and with what it has been made.”

“Through my actions, I have only altered the threads of the weavings I have been working with, so you can see exactly what my actions have been.”

“That’s why the symbols on the weavings are portraits of how the symbols have been made.”

Her partner just stared, first at her, then at the weavings. Slowly, he collected himself and said with a firm voice,

“You’re reading too much into this. The weave doesn’t portray anything; those marks are certainly not symbols or a cosmological equation.

“It’s just patterns you created.”

He glanced over at the weavings again, frowning. His voice rose; he was almost shouting.

“Symbols, just like words, don’t create reality; they merely describe it.”

“You think you’re creating knowledge through cutting fabric, but really, you’re mistaking subjective experience for objective truth.”

As he spoke, she felt as though the room itself was pulling away from her. She fell silent, her face flushing hot as she opened the door and left.

After a long walk through their neighbourhood, she returned to her studio a few hours later. The studio was empty, her partner had left. She sat down and stared at the weavings hanging on her wall, her hands restlessly twisting the fringes of an old blanket. Not only had she and her partner left each other under such bad terms, but the artistic research project deadline was drawing closer. Only this morning had she received a second reminder to e-mail a first draft for the paper she was supposed to present at a conference. Still, she hadn’t written a single sentence as she had been so occupied working with her textiles.

Later in the evening, when she returned home, she found that her partner had gone to bed early. Just seeing him, she felt the anger flare up, so to calm herself down, she climbed into bed, lit a candle, and read the book of Psalms. She was just starting to yawn when verse 13 of Psalm 139 caught her eye, which read, “You brought my inner parts into being; You wove me in my mother’s womb.” From her schooling, she remembered that the Latin word used in Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Bible), which in English was translated as “wove”, was “orsus”. A word that could mean both “beginning” and “word” as well as “warp and weft”. She instantly felt more awake than she had all day. It was as though her whole project could be encompassed in the word “orsus”. The weave’s warp and

weft had been the origin of the Universe in some cultures. In others, it had been the word. In “orsus”, the word and the weave were the same, and at the same time, the beginning. This also meant that she didn’t need to write that paper after all, she had done all of her writing through the weavings she had been working on. It was as though her weavings were her Adamic language. Her weavings had become her words, making the correspondence absolute. She got out of their bed and very quietly put on her clothes again. Words aren’t arbitrary, she thought to herself, on the contrary, they are reality. She opened the door, leaving her partner sleeping in their bedroom, and headed towards her studio to continue her work.

Once she had asked her partner if they should get married in a church, he said he didn’t believe in God, so what was the point? Argued it didn’t mean anything, that in a secular society, religion has no power, no influence on people’s lives. So they weren’t husband and wife. She thought that might be why he kept telling her they were soulmates, to compensate somehow. The Swedish word for soulmate is “själsfrände”. “Själ” is Swedish for soul, the word comes from the Norse word “sál”. When the word “sál” made its way into Swedish sometime around the first millennium, it was through Christian missionaries who introduced both Christianity as well as the Latin alphabet, which came to replace the runic. Meaning that when the word “själ” is used in Swedish, the word per se is derived from the Christian understanding of what a soul is. The word and the concept are impossible to separate. In the

end, she knew that despite their differences and contradictory perspectives, it was her partner’s use of the word soulmate that would tear them apart. His persistent use of a word where half of it was derived from a concept he didn’t believe in, derived from a religion he believed exercised no influence on him, was the word he used to define their relationship to each other. And at some point, it would be the final thread that would cause their whole fabric to unravel.

