



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 33 | Issue 1

Article 6

2011

Truth

Andriana Ierodiconou

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Ierodiconou, Andriana, Truth, *Kunapipi*, 33(1), 2011.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol33/iss1/6>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Truth

Abstract

I am twelve years of age. I was twelve years of age. I live on an island. I know this because the land is completely surrounded by water: wherever you start from, if you keep going long enough, you will get to the sea. When I grow up I will write a poem about it. When I grew up I wrote a poem about it, the poem was called 'Island'. Here is the poem, not the completely true poem, which was written in Greek, but the truth the poem contains, translated into English:

Andriana Ierodiaconou

TRUTH

I am twelve years of age. I was twelve years of age. I live on an island. I know this because the land is completely surrounded by water: wherever you start from, if you keep going long enough, you will get to the sea. When I grow up I will write a poem about it. When I grew up I wrote a poem about it, the poem was called 'Island'. Here is the poem, not the completely true poem, which was written in Greek, but the truth the poem contains, translated into English:

Beyond the lies
ours yours the lies of others
there remain: one wide plain
two mountain ranges a beautiful peninsula
and the truth of the sea
completely surrounding us, fatal and salty.

This was the truth at twelve years of age. It is the truth now. It is the truth.

The truth is, I am not English, but I am twelve years of age and go to an English school and I speak English in perfect imitation of the English teachers who teach me how to speak it. I went to an English school. When I speak English I sound English but it is not true. When I went to study at university in England, people asked, was I English, but I told them, no. My parents are not English. The island I come from is not England. It was owned by England and so was English for a time, but it is not England, even though some parts of the island were kept by England to use, after it stopped owning the whole island. There are English soldiers there, and streets with neat English houses and English names, as if it is England. It isn't the truth, but it is made to look like the truth.

I want to tell the story of being twelve years of age, but I want it to be the truth, not something that isn't the truth made to look like the truth. Children know the difference. I knew the difference. I am awake, I am twelve years of age and it is a school-day. I live on an island which isn't England but I go to an English school and the school has a uniform and after I wash my face I put it on: a grey pleated skirt, a white shirt, a dark green-and-crimson striped tie, a crimson cardigan in the same shade as the stripes on the tie, and black button-strap shoes with white ankle-socks. I like this uniform because the uniform says the world is orderly and there are grown-ups who know what to do and if one does good work one gets good marks and life is a clear case of knowing. I don't like this uniform because I am not sure it is telling the truth. I wasn't sure the uniform was telling the truth.

I go down to breakfast with my stomach in a knot. I always went down to breakfast with my stomach in a knot. Because it is too early for eating, half-past

six in the morning, too early for the day, which is still not open, and too early for my body, which also is still not open and wants to stay closed in sleep. Also because it is mid-December, and today instead of lessons in the afternoon we will have a dress-rehearsal of this year's Christmas play: 'The Sacrifice of Abraham', in preparation for the performance the next day. It is a horrible play, I think, but all the teachers and parents seem to think it is a very good play for school and Christmas. God tells Abraham to kill his son, and Abraham is going to do it. He only gets stopped at the last minute by God, who tells him it was just a test. What kind of a god is a god who tests by telling a father to kill his son? And what kind of a father is a father who is willing to kill his son because God tells him to? And shouldn't it be called 'The Sacrifice of Isaac'? It is Isaac's throat that is in danger of being cut.

I saw a throat cut once, or rather I heard it done. Not the throat of a boy, the throat of a kid goat. It was on August 15, Assumption Day, the feast of the Virgin Mary. The kid goat was white as white. I was seven years of age and the kid goat was my friend, on weekends at my grandmother's house in the country I played with it: it stood up on its hind legs and danced with me, its little white comma of a tail aloft and happy. On Assumption Day they took it away and my great-aunt cut its throat so that we could eat it. I heard it bleating in fright as they took it away, then a scream as the knife — or did I hear a scream? Did I not run away to some place where I couldn't hear it scream? Did I eat some of the dark, fragrant barbecued meat afterwards? I don't know. I can't say the truth is yes and I can't say the truth is no, I can't say. Why does God need the cutting of throats? Isaac was saved at the last minute, but the kid goat wasn't saved.

In the play 'The Sacrifice of Abraham' I play Abraham's wife Sarah. My mother has made a costume for me, a light blue cotton robe fashioned out of old curtain material, and a gauzy white veil for my head. I will dust my hair, which is plaited into two long plaits almost down to my waist, with talcum powder so that through the veil it will look like the white hair of an old woman, for as everyone knows Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac. Could this be the truth? It is in the Bible and everyone knows it, it is supposed to be the truth, but is it the truth? I am only twelve years of age, Sarah was ninety, there is no one I can ask. There was no one I could ask.

I will dust my hair with baby talc because in a play it is allowed for something not to be the truth but to be made to look like the truth, so that the people watching can believe the story, and in the story Sarah is ninety and must have white hair. I know that my parents will not be among the people watching. They will not come to the play because it is about a son and dying, and this reminds them of my baby brother Louis who died. He died before he was one year old. He could crawl but not walk yet. His name was really Vassilis but in the dialect Vassiloui is a diminutive and from that came Louis, and we always called him Louis. While he was alive. Now that he is dead we always say 'the baby'. After he died we

always said, 'the baby'. When the time comes for the yearly memorial service at the end of August, my mother always says to my father: 'We have to arrange for the baby's memorial service'.

Now my mother says, 'Mary, finish your breakfast or you'll be late'. What she says is partly the truth, and partly not the truth. It's true that if I dawdle over my toast and jam I'll be late for school. But it's not true that I am Mary. My real name is Demetra. I was named after Saint Demetrios, because I was born on his day in the Orthodox calendar: October 26th. But Demetra is an awkward name for English speakers, it would sit uncomfortably in the mouths of my teachers who are English; and my mother, anticipating this fact from the very start, said, 'We'll name her Demetra as is the custom, but we'll call her Mary'. Mary is not the truth. Demetra is the truth. But I am called Mary. No one can see, but each time someone speaks my name I feel a jab in the region of my stomach. When I grew up I found out this jab had names: guilt and fear. Guilt because Mary is not the truth, and I am twelve years of age and I know that it is not; fear that I will be found out as a not-true Mary.

I am twelve years of age and I wonder whether there are other children whose names are not the truth, who feel the same jab, the same guilt and fear that I do. I wonder whether names for some things might not be the truth either. When I grew up I read a book about Confucius, and in the book it said that when Confucius was asked once by a disciple what would be the first thing he would do if a king entrusted a territory to him to rule as he thought right, he said, 'My first task would certainly be to rectify the names'. The disciple didn't understand, but I am twelve years of age and I understand that Mary is not the truth and that it is important that names be the truth: otherwise language has no sense, and then nothing makes any sense, or matters. I understood.

I can't say any of this to my parents because it is in the future and right now I must finish my breakfast and get to school, whether I am called Mary or no. I couldn't say any of this to my parents. What I do say, as I hurriedly swallow the last mouthful of toast and jam, is, 'Will you come to see the play? It's tomorrow instead of afternoon school we're going to have the play'. My parents are silent for a moment. My father has already picked up his briefcase and car keys in preparation for going to the office, and my mother has begun clearing the breakfast table. There is a moment of silence, they mutter in distracted unison, 'We'll see'. But I know this is not the truth, that they will not see. They will not come to see me as white-haired Sarah, holding a doll that is supposed to be the baby Isaac at the beginning of the play, rocking and kissing it and saying, 'Praise God, I have given Abraham a son'; they will not see me later in the play welcoming Abraham and Isaac back from the mountain, and standing close together with them as a yellow spotlight shines on the three of us, symbolising the grace of God, which is the end of the play. That's how the play ended, with the three of us in a yellow spotlight symbolising the grace of God.

Could this story possibly be a true story? Could it possibly be the truth that God asked Abraham to cut his son's throat? That Sarah did not know Abraham was going to cut Isaac's throat and burn him as an offering to God, at God's behest? And if she did know, could it be the truth that she did not fall to her knees and rend her clothes and supplicate, 'Don't listen to God, don't kill our only child, don't, oh, don't make him a burnt offering'? That she did not tear her white hair and beat her breast and supplicate? If it is the truth then what kind of a mother was Sarah and what kind of a god is God? Or if Sarah was as she should have been and God is as He should be, then how could it be the truth? I am twelve years of age, there is no one I can ask besides myself, but I can't answer. There was no one I could ask besides myself. But I couldn't answer.

It is the dress rehearsal. In the first scene of the play Sarah has miraculously given birth to the baby Isaac. We don't see the birth because you can't do things like births on stage but we see Sarah, who is me at twelve years of age playing Sarah at the age of ninety, holding the baby Isaac and rocking and kissing him. I am dressed in the light blue cotton robe fashioned out of old curtain material and the white gauzy veil and my plaits are thick with white baby talc. I rock and kiss the doll, and I say, 'Praise God, I have given Abraham a son'. 'No, no, Mary!' the English lady teacher of English who is the director of the play cries out in exasperation. 'Too flat! Her voice must be ecstatic! Happy!' she adds, thinking I might not be quite sure what 'ecstatic' means. I know what 'ecstatic' means. I am twelve years of age but I am a precocious reader, and besides 'ecstatic' is a Greek word, and I know Greek. I knew Greek. But the most important thing is not that I am a precocious reader or that 'ecstatic' is a Greek word and I know Greek. The most important thing is that I held my brother Louis when he was born, the same way I am holding the doll which is supposed to be the new-born Isaac in the play.

When I grew up I found a photograph of me holding my baby brother Louis. My father must have taken the photograph. I am sitting in a chair next to my mother's bed in her private hospital room, holding my day-old brother Louis wrapped in a blanket, his face scrunched up and his eyes closed. I am dressed in my school uniform — my father and I must have gone to the hospital after school, or could it have been on the way? It is November, a couple of months into the new school year, and I am seven years of age in the photograph, my plaits, which at twelve years of age almost reach my waist, barely touch my shoulders. My brother Louis' eyes are closed, and I am looking dark-eyed straight at the camera, not smiling. But when I am twelve years of age and the English lady teacher of English says '... ecstatic! Happy!' I think of my mother giving me my baby brother Louis to hold for the first time and I know now how I should make Sarah speak as she holds the baby Isaac. When I grew up I found the photograph of me holding my baby brother Louis, and I saw that I am not smiling for the camera. But I am twelve years of age and I remember how, when I held my baby brother

Louis for the first time, my heart became secretly ecstatic, happy, how it sang, 'A baby! A baby!' and I loved him. And I understand that Sarah need not smile, she can keep the singing of her heart and the love for baby Isaac secret, but the smile and the singing and the love must be in her voice. I am twelve years of age and I remember holding my baby brother Louis, and Sarah's voice has a smile and a song and love in it, and the English lady teacher of English says, sounding surprised, 'Why Mary! That's much better!' and I say, 'Thank you'.

After my mother and my baby brother Louis came home from the hospital, for the first while the house was full of visitors. 'A boy!' they all said as they stepped through the door, beaming, offering their gift. 'A boy!' My mother only smiled a small smile but my father beamed back and invariably answered, 'A boy!' No one said, as my heart said, 'A baby!' They all said, 'A boy!' And I began to know that when I was born, they did not say, 'A girl!' My heart still became secretly happy, ecstatic, whenever my mother gave me my baby brother Louis to hold, and I did, oh, I did love him. But I am seven years of age and I know they did not beam and say, 'A girl!' and that my father did not beam and say, 'A girl!' in return, when I was born. My baby brother Louis looks at me and chuckles his baby chuckle and I look at him and feel how my heart loves him, but I also know what they did not say when I was born.

I remember how my baby brother Louis died. I am twelve years of age and it is the dress rehearsal of 'The Sacrifice of Abraham', a play I do not like at all, and I am Sarah holding a doll that is supposed to be the baby Isaac, and I am remembering how my baby brother Louis died. It is the end of August. The Feast of the Assumption has been and gone, my great-aunt has slit the throat of my friend the kid goat, and I have or have not heard the desperate bleating, and I have or have not eaten some of the fragrant barbecued meat, and now we are at the beach. It is probably the last seaside outing before school starts again, the main season is over, and there aren't many people. Just my mother, my father, my baby brother Louis and I; the next striped and fringed sun umbrella is some distance away. I am seven years of age and I am digging a moat around an elaborate sand-castle, with my back to my baby brother Louis, who is sitting plumply naked on the sand, wearing a white sun bonnet. Louis cannot walk yet but he has learned to crawl, we all laugh watching his little fat body scuttle from here to there on the living-room floor. But right now he is sitting on the sand in his sun bonnet, chuckling his baby chuckle at the sight of the blue sea and the foam of the lazy, lapping wavelets breaking and spreading like lace over the sand. My parents suddenly stand up and say, 'We are going to get some ice-cream!' and I throw a quick, distracted glance over my shoulder and see them walking off, laughing, in the direction of the ice-cream kiosk across the street from the beach.

I am twelve years of age remembering myself at seven years of age digging a moat around an elaborate sand-castle. I do not look around at my baby brother Louis. What is the truth? That I did not want to look around? That I simply didn't

think to look around? I don't know. I can't say that the truth is yes and I can't say that the truth is no, I can't say. Did I hear the bleating, did I eat some of the fragrant, barbecued meat? I can't say. I could never say. I remember myself at seven years of age hearing the cries of my parents as they walked, then ran, back from the ice-cream kiosk. 'The baby! The baby!' This time they said, 'The baby!' and not, 'The boy!' When I grew up I thought, 'That's when they started to call him "the baby"'. I am seven years of age and finally I turn around and I see that my baby brother Louis has crawled to the sea, into the lazy, lapping wavelets, that he is lying face down in the blue water. The white sun bonnet has come off and is drifting next to him, now a little out to sea, now back towards the shore, like breathing. But my baby brother Louis is not breathing. My parents are making desperate sounds, they are doing the desperate things grown-ups do when their baby son has drowned, but I can only sit looking at them, frozen in place. No one speaks to me. I do not remember anyone speaking to me. No one spoke to me. Then it is afterwards, and it has happened, and there will never be a time any more when it has not happened: my baby brother Louis is drowned. Then it was afterwards, and it had happened, and there was never a time any more when it had not happened.

It is the end of the first act in the dress rehearsal of 'The Sacrifice of Abraham', and I am twelve years of age, stepping off the stage holding the doll representing baby Isaac and remembering how no one spoke to me, how my parents never spoke to me about the drowning of my baby brother Louis while I dug a moat with my back to him. I had to speak, they never spoke to me so I spoke to myself. I was seven years of age, and now I am twelve years of age and every night I speak to myself and ask, did I not want to turn around, did I simply not think to turn around, what is the truth? I can't say yes and I can't say no, I can't say. I could never say. I am speaking to myself now, stepping off the stage holding the baby Isaac because it is the end of the first act. I speak to myself as I stand off-stage watching the second act. I watch Abraham as God tells him to go to the mountain with his son Isaac and make a sacrifice. The voice of God is one of my classmates standing off in the wings, at first he wanted to shout the things he had to tell Abraham, but the lady teacher directing the play said, 'No, speak distinctly but there is no need to shout, God doesn't have to shout like a policeman to be heard or understood'.

I am listening to the distinct but not shouting voice of God, and suddenly at twelve years of age something happens in my mind and I hear the distinct but not shouting voice of my mother through the open door of my parents' bedroom. My parents are lying down for their siesta and they have left the door ajar and I am in the hallway and can hear my mother's voice. I have no baby brother Louis yet, I am still an only child, in the hallway, and my mother's voice is saying, distinctly, 'But I don't want another one, George. You were an only child, you don't know how fortunate that was. There were six of us, you have no idea'. I

keep on walking to my own room, quiet as quiet, and I lie down and I forget my mother's words, they go to the part of my mind where words go to be forgotten. I forgot my mother's words. But now the distinct voice of God has suddenly made the words come to the surface of my mind, shoot to the surface like a cork released under water, and I begin to hear another sound besides the voice of the classmate who is God, a sound like a kid goat having its throat cut, a sound like: aiiiiiiiieeeee! And the sound is my own voice screaming. And then the sobs start to heave in my body, enormous waves of grief, not lazy, lapping wavelets but huge rollers that break and pour out of my eyes as large, scalding tears, and I am sobbing and screaming and sobbing, and the English lady teacher is bending over me in panicked consternation, saying, 'Mary, Mary! What on earth has happened to you! Mary!'

In the sick-bay, the school nurse makes me lie down, and as I stop screaming and the sobs become deep, heaving breaths, she gives me a glass of water and a pill and says, 'There, there. Is that better now, dear? Shall we call your mother?' I say, 'No, please, not my mother! I'm fine, thank you'. The teacher is hovering anxiously but the nurse says, 'Let her rest, it's just nerves and the excitement of the play', and they both go out into the corridor, leaving the door ajar. I hear teacher's voice saying distinctly, 'Oh, dear. Will she be all right for the performance tomorrow? Do you think she will be all right?' and the nurse's reassuring answering murmur.

They didn't call my mother, and I was all right for the performance the next day. When I grew up I also found, in the same old box containing the photograph of me holding my new-born brother Louis, a photograph of the final scene of 'The Sacrifice of Abraham'. It is a little grainy, but clearly shows me at twelve years of age in my robe of old curtain material and gauzy veil and my plaits dusted with talc, standing with Abraham and Isaac in the spotlight symbolising the grace of God. I don't know who took the photograph; it wasn't my father, because my parents didn't come to the play. In this photograph, I am smiling. Am I smiling because I want to smile, because I enjoyed acting, even though I didn't like this play at all, or because I am Sarah, who is supposed to smile? I can't say the truth is yes and I can't say the truth is no, I can't say.

I grew up and I found photographs, and I am always all right for the performance, but I never found the truth about the death of my baby brother Louis. Did I forget to look around; did I simply not think to look around? Or did my mother forget that Louis could crawl; did she simply not think to take him with her to the ice-cream stand instead of leaving him sitting on the sand with me at seven years of age absorbed in digging a moat around a sand-castle, with my back to him? Why didn't my father think of it? What kind of mother was my mother, what kind of father was my father, what kind of god was God when my baby brother Louis died? When I watch people in Hollywood court-room dramas being sworn in and declaring they will tell the truth and nothing but the truth, I

am always amazed: is it possible to know what is the truth, and nothing but the truth? I myself could never say the truth is yes, and I could never say the truth is no, I could never say. Some now call me Demetra, and I answer, but some still call me Mary, and I answer to that name too, even though I know that Confucius is right, that it all starts with the names, the names must be the truth. There is only one name I am certain is the truth, and that name is: island. The only certainly true thing is that we lived on an island; that I come from an island. I know it is an island because wherever one starts from, if one goes on long enough, one always gets to the sea; and beyond the lies, all the lies, the only truth that remains is the truth of the sea, completely surrounding us, fatal and salty.