



How did I get here?

Victoria Field: A wild and precious life

Victoria Field was born in London in 1963. She originally lectured in psychology before joining the British Council and working for nine years in Turkey, Russia and Pakistan. She has a lifelong love of language and languages and has won many awards for her poetry and fiction which have been widely published and anthologised. Her first poetry collection, *Olga's Dreams*, was described in Poetry London as 'delicious'. Hall for Cornwall has produced two of her plays – *Blood* in July 2005 and *Glass Heart* which toured Cornwall in February 2006. She has been a writer-in-residence at Truro Cathedral. She is a trained Poetry Therapist and runs therapeutic writing workshops and courses.

Here, now

It's February 2006 and I am in the Acorn Theatre in Penzance on the opening night of my new play *Glass Heart*. I am excited and apprehensive, wondering how the audience will respond to this new work. I am in awe of the skills of the whole team, director, actors, designer and composer, as well as the behind-the-scenes work of the technical and marketing people, who have taken my raw and strange text and created something magical.

The show is part of Hall for Cornwall's New Writing Programme which provided me with a 'seed commission' to write my first full-length play after I had successfully entered an open competition for new work last summer. I had carried the competition flier around for months, procrastinating, before eventually writing a play called *Blood* based on the fact that Dvorak was a son of a butcher and had to find a way of becoming a composer and musician. Entering that competition has opened doors for me I didn't know existed. It also confirmed for me that all writing is connected – writing drama has taught me new things about poetry and fiction.

Earlier today, I held the first session of a new workshop for writers interested in working in a 'cathedral context'. I am two months into a 10-month Writer-in-Residence project at Truro Cathedral and some of the participants are in the audience tonight. The residency brief includes my own creative work and engaging the community.

Two years ago, I applied for a writing residency that I really wanted and was told afterwards that my interview had badly let me down. I didn't get the post and my confidence was knocked by the feedback. When the cathedral residency was advertised, I nearly didn't apply and even after the appointment, suffered from 'impostor syndrome' – feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. Someone gave me the advice to simply be oneself and be sincere and let others make the judgement about suitability.

Later this week, I am beginning a new poetry group at St Petroc's, a charity providing services for the single homeless in Cornwall – another context, another new group of people and the unpredictable alchemy of bringing together experiences, stories and writing. A couple of years ago, I helped them in a voluntary capacity

with editing a book of poems by homeless people in Cornwall. This led to an invitation to start a regular group on a paid basis. I like to do a mixture of voluntary and paid work – one certainly feeds the other.

I have also just finished co-editing a book of therapeutic writing exercises and workshops together with Gillie Bolton and Kate Thompson to be published this August by Jessica Kingsley. So this February is a month of new projects and endeavours. In the background are regular poetry therapy sessions, one-off writing projects with schools and community groups, a small publishing venture, occasional readings and voluntary work with Lapidus, both nationally and in Cornwall – plus my creative and other writing. This is what they call portfolio working! It means careful prioritising and occasionally being uncomfortably stretched – as happens in any ‘job’ – but with the knowledge that all of my work is something I have actively chosen to do.

At last, at forty three, I feel I am doing precisely what both challenges and fulfils me. Mary Oliver asks at the end of her poem, *The Summer’s Day*, ‘what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?’. At today’s workshop, the consensus was that, usually, we don’t plan – life takes us along unpredictable paths and it happens while we are busy doing something else. For me, that was true until, around ten years ago, I decided that I wanted to leave the British Council, where I had served in Turkey, Russia and Pakistan, in a secure and interesting job, to move more towards ‘writing’ – both as an activity and a subject which fascinated me.

How did I become ‘a writer’?

In a sense writing found me – or perhaps I was ready to be found. I experienced it as a kind of calling. In 1995, I attended a fortnight’s writing workshop organised by the Skyros Centre. It was my first and I had no idea what a workshop was, its conventions nor how powerful writing in groups can be. The weather was hot, the retsina

and brandy cheap, my room-mate became an instant firm friend and we behaved quite badly. I also wrote wildly and copiously and from then on, writing has been at the centre of my life.

James Hillman has written about the acorn somehow having the blueprint of the oak tree. Even if growth is stunted, the ‘oak’ remains within. It has taken me a while to find my vocation (partly because this hinterland of writing and personal development simply didn’t exist a decade or so ago) but I think the ‘oak’ of writing, especially therapeutic writing, was in me from infancy. I read early and voraciously, poems gave me that ‘tingle’. From my teens, I was equally fascinated by psychology, in which I did my first degree. I was concerned about human injustice and had an early desire to be a social worker. Travel and experiencing other cultures was also important and my years working abroad have certainly informed my work today.

Many would-be artists work as arts administrators and my first job on leaving the British Council in 1997 was as Director of Survivors Poetry. It gave me an invaluable introduction to poets and others with an interest in its relationship to mental health, many of whom remain friends and colleagues. It didn’t, unfortunately, help my writing – sometimes too much facilitating of others can work against finding what the self needs. Part of the job was being on the committee of the newly-formed Lapidus (Literary Arts for Personal Development) at a time when it had no funding, few members and was in danger of disappearing. Happily, it is now thriving.

After a year at Survivors, I moved to Cornwall to marry a Cornishman and began to work freelance in cultural administration. One of the contracts was to set up an arts education agency, brokering links between schools and arts organisations. That led to me doing writing workshops in schools, initially as a volunteer, then as an ‘assistant artist’ to experienced poet-in-schools, Phil Bowen. More and more, schools, adult education and community groups began to request my input on a paid basis. I gradually

wound down the arts administration in order to do more writing and running of groups.

I do, though, still have an active 'inner bureaucrat' who enjoys managing things. I keep her happy with my chairing of Lapidus and also, other congenial administrative work such as in 2004, co-producing Cornwall Library Service's first ever Poetry Festival together with fellow local poet and friend, Zeeba Ansari.

I have always been happy in the role of student or apprentice. I attend workshops and training courses wherever and whenever possible. I believe strongly in both collaboration and learning from the masters (in the sense of 'mastery' – many of my teachers are women) of the craft. Attending Falmouth Poetry Group with the late Peter Redgrove gave me a model of a truly great, generous poet which I cherish. I don't think there is another group where one's work would get such close and informed reading. I have learned that criticism, even when harsh, is simply information – useful information – that you may or may not choose to act on.

Attending a workshop by John Fox in London in 2000, led to me applying to ACE for a grant to go to the National Association for Poetry Therapy conference in the US. That ultimately led to my qualifying in 2005 as a Certified Poetry Therapist. This journey has been one of the most satisfying and illuminating of my life, bringing together my twin passions for literature and psychology. My mentor-supervisor for the training was Geri Chavis and her wisdom and insight continually surprised me. I had local supervision for one of my poetry therapy groups from Annabel Aguirre, the Senior Art Therapist in Cornwall and again, I gained a huge amount from this formal sharing of experience. For me, 'super-vision' is an essential part of professional practice and if it isn't offered routinely, find a way of ensuring it happens.

What would I say to others

If you have confidence in a dream, commit to it and be prepared to work hard for its own sake. My experience is that then the necessary support will follow. But also be brave – my increasing professional success has been against the background of my marriage breaking down, confusion over whether or not I wanted children, a bereavement and general upheaval. In mid-2004, I felt myself to be emotionally utterly 'broken open' (incidentally, the name of an excellent self-help book). With hindsight, although I would never wish the experience on anyone else, I now value that near-breakdown as informing my current perspective on life and giving me a clarity and an openness I lacked before.

For me, being on good terms with all people and celebrating difference is vital. We have to share this small planet and conflicts between nations and different political factions are conflicts between individuals writ large. Everyone has something to offer, something to teach. Often I have discovered that people I find difficult are, in fact, offering a challenge – a kind of dialectic which may often lead to unexpected middle ground. Or, they may illuminate an unwelcome aspect of myself – so often projection and displacement are at the root of discomfort. I have also discovered that the world of writing and writing therapy isn't finite – the more work I do, the more opportunities are generated – sharing these opportunities has usually led to yet more interesting work.

Life is five minutes – just do it!

Cornwall is an almost-island with the highest concentration of so-called 'creatives' in the UK. It is remote, with a scattered population, and the Romans never made it here so there is a tradition of a more Celtic, non-hierarchical way of working. If something doesn't exist, there is no

reason why it can't be created. Rather than waiting for things to happen, I have been involved in setting up a Lapidus local group, organising peer learning sessions for writing for personal development, a library-based poetry festival, poetry therapy on the NHS and starting a small press. What's the worst that can happen?

A few weeks ago, Lapidus Cornwall organised a workshop for local members – it was led by Roselle Angwin, who runs the Fire in the Head creative writing courses, on the theme of 'Darkness into Light'. I was deeply moved by the writing produced by the participants which included all ages, and new writers as well as widely published poets. The room we were in overlooked fields and the River Tamar, there was winter sunshine and the festival of Candlemas was imminent. Somehow, on that day, everyone's journeys intersected in a place where there was love, trust, respect, humour, creativity and wonder before we dispersed again into the world. I felt I'd arrived at a place I'd been travelling towards for most of my life.

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Useful links

Victoria Field Therapeutic Writing Workshops
The 2008 programme includes workshops and courses in Cornwall, Greece, Wales and Worcestershire. To receive details, contact Victoria Field T 01236 319030
E victoriafield@btconnect.com,

Arts & Health South West

A membership organisation open to anyone with an interest in Arts and Health.
www.artsandhealthsouthwest.org.uk

Creative Skills

The professional development organisation for all creative industries practitioners in Cornwall.
www.creativeskills.org.uk

Fire in the Head

Creative and reflective writing courses in Devon and Cornwall led by Roselle Angwin.
www.fire-in-the-head.co.uk

Hall for Cornwall

Provides development for writers of all levels across the south west through its New Writing Programme. Contact: Anna Coombs, Head of Projects, Community & Education
www.hallforcornwall.co.uk

KEAP (Kernow Education Arts Partnership) - Brings together the arts and education sectors in Cornwall.

www.keap.org.uk

Lapidus

Membership organisation promoting the benefits of the literary arts for personal development, health and wellbeing. Regional groups in Brighton, Bristol, Cornwall, Nottingham, North Yorkshire, Scotland and the Thames Valley. The Regional Co-ordinator for Lapidus Cornwall is Victoria Field victoriafield@btconnect.com

NALD (The National Association for Literature Development)

The professional body for all involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.

www.nald.org

The National Association for Poetry Therapy
World-wide community of poets, writers and journal-keepers helping health care professionals, educators and lovers of words who recognize and appreciate the healing power of language.

www.poetrytherapy.org

NAWE (The National Association of Writers in Education)

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK.

www.nawe.co.uk

Poetry Can

Supports the development of poetry in the Bristol and Bath areas and South Gloucestershire and across the whole of the South West region through its websites.

www.poetrycan.co.uk

Skyros Writers' Lab

Courses for writers of all levels on the idyllic Greek island of Skyros.

<http://www.skyros.co.uk/writers.3.html>

South West New Writing Network

A network for playwrights, literary managers and all those involved in creating and supporting new writing in the South West facilitated by writernet

Contact Sarah Dickenson at writernet

sarah@writernet.org.uk

www.writernet.org.uk

Survivors' Poetry

Promotes the poetry of survivors of mental distress

www.survivorspoetry.com

Writing Works: A Resource Handbook for Therapeutic Writing Workshops and Activities

Edited by Gillie Bolton, Victoria Field, Kate Thompson (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006)