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Writing Back

Margaret Spinoza

Peter McShane and Derek Davey are storytellers who recreate a series of exquisitely vivid snapshots drawn from deeply personal experiences that simultaneously astound and encourage. In “Minefield” and “Therapy Dog,” these authors gently

nudge readers toward the edge of their seats and skillfully bring to life moments we share as historically mindful thinkers. Their narratives stand as a reminder of the courage, dedication, and sacrifice invested in upholding the framework of our national community. McShane and Davey are both members of the Syracuse Veterans’ Writing Group and individually demonstrate distinctive stylistic qualities that make their stories evocative and compelling. Having the opportunity to interview each author, I offer a momentary glimpse into the storytellers behind the story.

Few people know the feeling of flight. Peter McShane does. McShane was a Green Beret, a member of Special Forces, who served in that branch of the military from 1966 to 1969, during the Vietnam War. He qualified for airborne infantry after jump school, which gave him the necessary training to parachute out of military aircraft. McShane describes the act of jumping



Peter McShane in Vietnam.

Layout by Matt Kovac. “I’m still writing the letters I’ll never send” by Flickr user Ashley Rose, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ashleyrose/3210845075/>; Other photos courtesy of McShane and Davey.

as “hanging from the arms of the almighty.” He says that “you are harnessed in so tight, and enveloping it feels like a giant has you in its grasp.” During our interview, I was compelled to ask him what it felt like to be on the verge of jumping into a seemingly endless cyan sea. Was he frightened? Was he hesitant at that critical moment just before the fall? His answer was one I never would have anticipated. McShane reveals that since the planes were not insulated, there was pandemonium inside the aircraft. The ear-splitting noise of the engines and vibrating airframe was deafening. He says that he would have done anything to get out of the plane, describing it as going “from a cacophony of sounds to utter silence—peaceful, serene.”

His piece, “Minefield,” describes an actual event during McShane’s tour of Vietnam. There were “no average days” serving in Vietnam, he says. As a medic, McShane took care of the wounded and provided some of the only professional medical support to the Cambodian mercenaries in his camp. From delivering babies and pulling teeth to performing amputations and healing wounds, McShane acted as more than a soldier. He was a healer. The particular team he belonged to was known as the Mobile Strike Force. His job: to support other

A-teams in regional camps located along enemy supply lines. Consequently, McShane spent a lot of time travelling. He had little down time because the sites he was travelling to were being bombarded at all times. While his team was authorized four medics, two had been killed and the third ended his tour just after McShane arrived. He was the only medic on duty. His teammates

did not want to fight without him.

“The situation in Vietnam required complete and utter focus,” he said. You never knew if you would be “ambushed, sniped, or if a child would roll a grenade out.” To him, Vietnam was the experience of “paranoia in an environment that was almost idyllic.” McShane’s first-hand experience of that paradox was jarring; during the height of the War many Westerners were still vacationing in Vietnam. These diverging images of war-induced destruction is discordant for me. I cannot imagine his internal conflict experiencing this dis-



Peter McShane in uniform.

sonance firsthand.

Towards the end of “Minefield,” McShane writes that a gift saved his life. This gift consisted of two religious icons, a Buddha amulet and a prayer cloth, given to him by a senior Cambodian camp leader as thanks for the act of courage which he narrates in his story. McShane explained that the prayer cloth was

sitting in his left breast pocket, over his heart, when a bullet grazed right by it. He is not superstitious. Nor am I. But I am still left wondering. A gift given and a gift received. And in his story, the gift McShane both gives and receives is life itself.

Like McShane, Derek Davey also knows the feeling of flight. After his infantry training, Davey attended flight school and was stationed at Cherry Point, a North Carolina Marine Corps base. His diverse military experience included an air exercise in Korea for six weeks, a temporary assignment from his Marine Corps unit to the US Air Force headquarters. Davey served in the Western Pacific (Japan, Philippines, Korea) for six months and was also stationed in the Mediterranean, including at the Gulf of Sidra, for the same amount of time.

Davey knew since he was a child growing up on Staten Island that he would be a pilot. His father worked on a merchant ship, and when he got a job with the NYS Department of Conservation, the family left Staten Island and moved to Lewis County, NY. He recalled picking up his aunt at the airport and looking out of the window—planes surrounding him. After peering into the captain’s cabin, it struck him that this is what he would do someday. He describes it as “one of those things you put on your bucket list.” For Davey, flight is a dream attained.

Currently living in Lewis County, NY, Davey is the Director of the County Service Agency. Davey gets resources and benefits that the veterans of his County rate. During our interview, Davey emphasized the fact that veterans have families and the tangible and urgent need that exists for our service men and women and their dependents. In Davey’s words, “they deserve money, healthcare, and to get off public assistance. They deserve to live with dignity because it gives them pride in what they do.” Davey is improving his



Derek Davey (right) with son, Seamus.

community by finding resources for veterans and their families. His commitment to helping families is remarkable, especially in light of the heartbreak felt within his own family. On October 21, 2005, Davey’s son, Seamus MacLean Davey, was killed in a gunfight in Iraq. He was a corporal in the Marine Corps and had followed his father’s footsteps in serving our national community. With calm reserve, Davey tells me that “war leads to unintentional consequences.” And, in the Writing Program lounge, set against the beige backdrop walls, Davey said that “if it was people interacting with people, I think war would go away.”

Davey wrote “Therapy Dog” as a true to life telling of loss, coping, and recovery. He believes that soldiers suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be over-medicated and should engage in alternate types of therapy, including rehabilitation through yoga or pets. Davey says that Shadow, his black, wide-eyed pooch “came to me when I needed her and her, me.” As a member of the Syracuse Veterans’ Writing Group, Davey and McShane both explore the boundaries of their communities—the ties that bind. And in their communities they find something that allows them to reconcile the past and ameliorate the future. And that something is their own narrative voices.