

SEAN PURIO

Crossings and Connections: A Conversation with Elliot Ackerman

There was a kid in my high school who was remarkably ugly. He was short, fat, smelled of unwashed something, and appeared to be on the backside of a mid-life crisis. His smile wasn't necessarily ugly, just unattractive. It understood its own unattractiveness and darted in and out like a trout: quick, not full, never reaching that place where a smile sparks in the eyes, where bankers and beggars crack jokes over metal drum fires.

His personality was much the same. Instead of radiating outward, it seemed to dull everything around him. He was a junior at Kimball Union Academy, from somewhere in Florida, Miami, I think. When I saw him, he was slumped into a chair by the telephone in the hall—probably talking to his mom or dad—and I wondered what cosmic force pushed him down into the cushioned seat. I just thought him strange, harmless, and out of place in the false Eden autumn of the northeast. As people tend to do, the ugly kid from Miami drifted off into the world, quickly fading into my memory. His name was Steven Sotloff.

The next time I saw Steven, he was pixelated on his knees in the desert somewhere, his orange cinematic jumpsuit contrasted against the desert stretching out behind him. A man known as Jihadi John—a name out of a bad western—all dressed in black, loomed over him wielding a knife and a British accent. I'd been in the world long enough to know there was no saving Steven. Handcuffed in the desert, he was no longer ugly. Jihadi John slit his throat.

Steven was a journalist, not a soldier. He didn't deserve his end. What could I have done sitting at my desk in Colorado Springs? Not much, so I wrote a poem, a really bad poem titled, "Dear John." It detailed how Jihadi John would die for killing Steven Sotloff and I signed it "—America."

I wasn't wrong. American forces did kill him. But after learning of Jihadi John's death—as it was with Osama Bin Laden's—I wasn't elated; relieved certainly, but also deflated, unsatisfied.

*I never gave a thought to who Jihadi John was. I didn't care. I had stamped him as TERRORIST and left it at that. All I saw were my own fears projected onto that black, blank canvas in the desert. That is until I read Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*. The mark of a good writer is not to tell you things you already know, but to change the way you question the world. Ackerman's prose, specifically his ability to create grotesque and beautiful images, did just that. And he did it again in his second novel *Dark at the Crossing*, which is set along the Turkish and Syrian border. I, like so many others, had made the mistake of not recognizing or at least questioning Jihadi John's story. To ignore the stories of others, especially one's enemies, is like trying to open a lock with the wrong key. Jihadi John's name was Mohammed Emwazi, and he had his own story and had made his own choices that brought him to stand over Steven.*

*So much is revealed in the questions we choose to ask, and, sometimes, even more so, in the questions we refuse to answer. After finishing Ackerman's novel *Dark at the Crossing*, I rummaged around my office for the sheet of loose leaf with "Dear John," scribbled on it, took the poem outside, and set it on fire.*

***Green on Blue* and *Dark at the Crossing* cover similar subject matter, yet they almost read as if they were written by different authors. Will you share how you approached each work and how, if at all, your artistic sensibilities have changed, matured, and expanded since publishing *Green on Blue*?**

The books are stylistically different. *Green on Blue* was written with a first person Afghan narrator, Aziz. That book is told completely in his voice. *Dark at the Crossing* is told in the third-person, albeit a close third-person, and through the perspective of Haris Abadi. So the method of narration is different. I don't like to spend too much time thinking of my "artistic sensibilities," that's a great way to jinx whatever you're working on. When I wrote *Green on Blue* I was thinking about certain things, reading certain things, and my life was in a certain place. When I wrote *Dark at the Crossing*, there were different things I was thinking about and reading, and my life was different. And on it goes. But I don't pine over this stuff

too much. It's a little precious to be doing that. I work everyday. Much of what I write I throw out. Some stuff I keep. Eventually, I will realize I've got a good story. And one good story doesn't help you write the next one. So for that reason alone you don't want to jinx yourself.

In his essay "Soldier-Artists: Preserving the World," Donald Anderson writes, "At their best, soldier-artists affirm the power of word and image and the craving for meaning. And if one of the functions of such art is to disturb the status quo, to force us to view the world anew, to consider our capacities to build or tear down, then we must welcome these disturbances." How has being a soldier affected you as an artist?

I think that's just what artists do. All artists, nevermind soldier-artists. I try to steer away from hyphenates. I don't think they're helpful when considering one's identity. That's not to say our experiences don't inform who we are. Of course they do. I was a Marine for eight years and am extremely proud of that. The time I spent in the Corps is certainly at the center of who I am. But it's not the circumference of who I am. The idea of center versus circumference is why I don't like hyphenates. When you put a hyphen into who you are, or what you are doing, too often you take an experience and instead of having it become part of your core—which can always be expanded—that experience becomes a ring of limitation we place around ourselves, inhibiting what we can do and, oftentimes, who we let into our circle of experience.

Beyond your choice of locating the narrative focus of *Green on Blue on Aziz*, which others have commented on extensively, I was taken with how fluidly you portrayed the subtleties of shifting allegiances and alliances based on love, loyalty, revenge, and survival. It was no secret how the book was going to end given the title, but I still found myself mesmerized by the intricate interweaves of the stories of Aziz, Commander Sabir, Gazan, Atal, Mr. Jack and Mumtaz and the profoundly simple, almost inevitable, conclusion: the old and deadly game of war continues just with new players. How were you able to elegantly tie together all of the competing stories into a unified whole?

At first you need to give the characters space. You have to let them do things that you might not understand. You have to draw up entire scenes that as you are writing them might make little sense to you or that might seem frivolous. And

you have to write with all of the attendant detail, even though some of that detail might not seem relevant. Then, slowly, you will start to see how everything fits together. You will discover who these characters are. You will understand why they behave the way that they do. Once all of this is in place the story becomes inevitable. Everything just fits together.

In war, the stories of the dead are as much weapons as RPGs, M4s, social media sites, and holy texts. Chris Hedges in *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* states, “All wars feed off martyrs, the mention of the dead instantly shutting down all arguments for compromise or tolerance for the other. It is the dead who rule. They speak from beyond the grave urging a nation toward revenge.” The stories of the dead become invaluable ammunition stored in the depots of collective memory to be fired by those who need to justify a war’s perpetuation. How does one appropriately remember the war dead?

By living.

It is an unprofound idea, but the whole point of war is to disfigure. War’s aim to disfigure primarily targets the fleshy and fragile human body, but also roots its way into the softer and more nebulous places such as the mind or morality. Your writing displays a beautiful command of the human body. For instance,

Passage to Commander Sabir’s small table was through achievements in combat. He wore this violent reminder across his disfigured face. He had a mangled bottom lip. It looked like the blown-out end of a firecracker. Behind it, rows of teeth, some gold, some rotted, some still white, stuck out at the world with an underbite and a snarl. This disfigurement, as well as the scars, paunches, and calluses of the other men gave the group an honest authority, one greater than shining medals and rank.

And when describing Fareeda’s body:

Her eyes held many colors, never catching light the same way twice. Flecks of emerald and black, and a deep uncut red turned orbits in her stare. I could tell you that the mixing of all this color resulted in brown, and it did, but in her eyes brown was no more a single color than in two palms

filled with rare stones ... She picked up the tray and tucked it under her left arm. As she did, I saw the right hand. It was grotesque, the thumb and index finger engorged as though they were about to burst, the fingernails yellow and brittle. A scrawl of blue veins ran up the hand's back like sick trees roots running out from the earth. The sweet scent of her hung around us, and despite her deformity she was lovely. Her beauty rested in the savage contradictions of her body.

Although war is not the only force hell-bent on disfiguring the human body (one can't forget about the pernicious creep of time and the never ending pull of gravity), it is the savage immediacy of war—a depraved carnival game where some come willingly, but most are involuntarily conscripted, and the price to play could be an eye, a pair of hands, a home, a psyche, a life, or the life of a loved one—that both allures and horrifies. And then there is the creative cruelty in the seemingly unending assortment of instruments that traffic in human disfigurement—knives, bullets, bombs, drones, forced displacement, humanitarian aid, the threat of nuclear fission, rape. At the center of it all is the human body becoming an extension of a disfiguring instrument or receiving such an instrument's unwanted attention. How do you see art working against, if at all, the waste and horror of war?

That's some question. Let me try. I don't think that art is going to stop war. I don't think anything is going to stop war. Being anti-war is like being anti-hurricane, both are forces of nature, one is the nature of the elements and the other is human nature. I believe as a society we should avoid war at all costs and that we should adopt smart policies that increase our chances of the same. But wars are always going to happen. Hurricanes are always going to happen. So what's the role of the artist? The artist is always trying to say something true about being human. Why do those truths matter? The best art creates an emotional transference. When I was writing those passages you just quoted, I was feeling something. I put those emotions on the page as best that I could. If you read those passages and felt something, too, then there was an emotional transference. You probably only felt a fraction of what I felt, because art is imperfect. But if you felt anything, then an intimacy passed between us, a connection. That's pretty powerful. We don't even know one another. But that's what art does. Does that work against "the waste and horror of war"? Maybe just a little bit.

The character of Fareeda is many things, but I mainly read her as a symbol for Afghanistan: trapped, uncontrollable, physically beautiful, familiarly complex, and disfigured by the disease of war. What now for Fareeda? What now for Afghanistan?

Fareeda is a symbol of Afghanistan, at least that's how she developed in the book. One remarkable thing about the country is that it has been at war for thirty-seven years. The average life expectancy for an Afghan male is around sixty. That means the generation of Afghans who are currently dying were in their early twenties when the Soviets invaded in 1979. They are the last Afghans who can remember their country at peace, none of the young people can. For this reason, peace in Afghanistan is not an act of returning to a previous state, which everyone can remember. Instead, conjuring peace has become an act of sheer imagination. I don't have any policy recommendations for Afghanistan, certainly not any that will fit neatly into an interview. But I do think that war has become inextricably linked to normal life in Afghanistan and that this makes peace particularly challenging, as opposed to countries where the war has been horrific, but without such longevity.

It is as if you have taken the overall structure of *Green on Blue* with all of its internal and external complexities and then expanded it in *Dark at the Crossing*. To say that the future of Afghanistan is uncertain is an understatement, but even it, compared to the situation in Syria, feels like solid ground and that is saying something. When I try to wrap my head around the situation—such a lackluster word—I can see money and equipment pouring in to all sides, but I don't have a clear understanding of motive. And the thought that some of the backers have nuclear weapons and are lingering at the fringes like hungry vultures, keeps me up at night. So for you to frame your story with the broken marriage between Amir and Daphne at least provides me with some sort of foothold. Why did you choose the structure of Amir and Daphne's broken marriage as an entry into what is going on in Syria?

War is politics and politics is emotion. In *Dark at the Crossing*, I wanted to show the humanity of an incredibly complex conflict. I've spent a great deal of time along the Turkish-Syrian border and have become close with a number of people who were or are involved in the civil war in Syria, and on different sides. What became clear, particularly among the democratic activists, was that they fell in love with the revolution. Then, when the revolution failed, they were left with a very real

heartbreak. They reacted almost like a discouraged lover. Some turned their back on the revolution, wanting nothing to do with it. Others stayed close, hoping that conditions might improve inside Syria, that perhaps the revolution would rekindle and they could once again be part of it. This emotional arc was the same as any love story, and soon the thrust of the novel became clear: the book is the story of a failed revolution told through the lens of a failed marriage.

Your choice of Haris—an Iraqi interpreter for the Americans during the Iraq war who then earned American citizenship—in *Dark at the Crossing* allows the character to have a foot in both worlds. He seems lost, guilt-ridden, and searching for purpose. How did the character of Haris materialize?

You'll note it is Haris, with one "r," not two. This is the Arabic spelling of a name that is also common in the west, and a very conscious choice on my part because he is a man with a split identity. Many of the revolutionaries I mentioned above became what I would term: ideologically dispossessed, meaning their ideals had been proven incorrect and they had to learn how to function in the world without them. I see a similar type of ideological dispossession in American society. We are currently facing a streak of nihilism we haven't seen in decades. Haris is the link between America's ideological dispossession and the ideological dispossession of the Arab world.

Benjamin Busch's memoir, *Dust to Dust*, details his experience in America's most recent war in Iraq where he writes, "The world of healing was different from the world of wounding and each had a different frame of regularity." Having come into contact with a variety of cultures in varying degrees of peace and hostility, how has that shaped your understandings of humanity and if there is anything "regular" about it?

Regardless of culture or nation, we are more alike than we are different. Our differences, in fact, are often superficial. And, sadly, oftentimes the more superficial our differences are, the more deadly and divisive they become. However, if you look for it you can always find those common threads. For example, when I was in Afghanistan, I was the advisor to a six-foot-five Afghan Lieutenant Colonel named Kareem Abdul Jabar (great name, right). He was a Tajik. He'd fought against the Taliban before the U.S. invasion. He was pretty grizzled. He also didn't speak a lick of English and my Dari was virtually non-existent. Within a week or two of

meeting one another, the two of us had to move his battalion across the country to a new headquarters. This required us to do a survey of the route, which involved the two of us traveling across the country over a couple of weeks. That equated to lots of time together hanging out on airfields, just the two of us. On the second day, we found a chessboard in one of the waiting rooms on the airfield. We began to play. We didn't need a common language to do this. Colonel Jabar always beat me. He'd knock over my king and laugh. "Ha, ha, ha, ... my advisor," he'd say. Throughout that deployment he and I always had the connection of chess. It's the same anywhere you go. If you're looking, you can find those connections. But the barrier between peace and violence is always a tenuous one. The guys I was fighting against weren't that different from Jabar.

In both novels, *Green on Blue* and *Dark at the Crossing*, you provide readers with possible answers to refute the arguments of war. In *Green on Blue*, it is Mumtaz, the aging mujahideen who refuses to re-enter the logic of war and is thus destined to a meagre and yet livable existence. And then the concluding image in *Dark at the Crossing* of the barley rising under the elm:

Amir reached for the Nokia, powering it on. Saved to its background was a photograph. The squat cinder-block house with its empty windows and door sat in a dry, rutted field. The sky was very blue. Framed against it, in the center of the photo, was the elm, its branches bare and gray, yet to green. At the base of the tree, where its roots clutched at the earth, a single thick tuft of barley grew. Its long feathered stalks bent heavily in the wind, a strange and stubborn crop it seemed.

Why did you choose to end *Dark at the Crossing* on this image?

I don't think "choose" is really the right verb when you're talking about how you end a book when you're an author. It's more like you know how it's supposed to end, and there is only one way that it can end, and you have to find the right words to make it end that way, to convey what you're hoping to convey in the work. Without spoiling the novel, the last image in *Dark at the Crossing* became obvious to me during the process of writing. That image linked together many points in the plot and themes in the novel. There was no other image or scene that could bring

together so many aspects of the book with as much economy, and what I hope is emotional force. So the book had to end that way. I didn't choose it from a field of options. It was the only option.

I'm always interested in what writers are reading. What books have you read recently that have changed your perspective on the world, if only by a degree or two?

I recently read *Embers* by Sándor Márai, a great novel about friendship by a Hungarian novelist. I'd recommend the *Radetzky March* by Joseph Roth to anyone who hasn't read it. The University of Virginia just published a slim volume of lectures delivered by James Salter entitled *The Art of Fiction*, which are really worth reading. I don't know if any of those books changed my perspective on the world, but I certainly enjoyed them.

SEAN PURIO is an air force officer who currently teaches war literature at the United States Air Force Academy.

ELLIOT ACKERMAN is a writer based out of Istanbul. His novel *Dark at the Crossing* is forthcoming from Knopf. His novel *Green on Blue* was published in 2015. He is a contributor to *The Daily Beast*, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He has been interviewed in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* and appeared on Charlie Rose, The Colbert Report, NPR Talk of the Nation, Meet the Press, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Al Jazeera and PBS News Hour among others.