

STEVEN MOORE

Of Creativity

It's strange and a little unnerving to think how creative we are as animals. Like how, for example, people often decide that a certain piece of land should be made distinct from the land right beside it. They take a big swath of contiguous earth, land that is by all means uniform and basically the same, then make up distinctions. As in, *this* side of the dry riverbed belongs to a sovereign political entity called Afghanistan, and this other side belongs to another sovereign political entity called Pakistan. There can be a bridge crossing the riverbed, with a road going across, but there must be a line upon the road to mark the boundary between these two kinds of land.

That is a really creative thing to do.

Not only is the distinction made, then represented with an invisible line, but the line is so important that it must be *secured*. Soldiers will guard the line and search people who go back and forth. Soldiers will protect the integrity of the line. It seems to me this is a really creative way to behave with regard to land.

I lived close to that line for a while and helped guard and secure and protect it. (This is especially confusing, because the land where I come from—the United States—is a *third* distinction of land, completely different from these other two, but bear with me.) During the time in my life when I lived near the line, there used to be these semis that pulled long yellow trailers. Tanker trailers, full of fuel. Semis pulled the trailers down this long dusty road. The road stretched hundreds of miles across southwestern Asia. It went from Islamabad through Jalalabad

through Kabul through Kandahar and on and on in both directions. To construct a road so long is of course another creative thing to do. But then to build vehicles to travel the long road. Vehicles that, in order to travel the long road, must burn fuel. So further vehicles are created. To haul the fuel. To supply the other vehicles. Creativity prompts more of itself. Creativity is fecund.

The vehicles that hauled the fuel, while I was there on the line, were these yellow tankers. And there used to be these people, somewhere near the western edge of Pakistan. People who built explosives with timers on them. And not just timers, but also magnets, so the explosives would hold upon metal surfaces. Then one of these people would saunter up beside one of these yellow trailers and affix the explosive to the side of the trailer. Then walk away.

Because land was divided into sovereign areas, with a line between the areas, and crossing the line was such a big deal—cars were searched, paperwork was inspected, et cetera—crossing the line took a long time to happen. Crossing the line was arduous. So traffic backed up. Semis especially. Some of the semis hauled fuel, but many hauled oranges and lumber. Hundreds of semis stacked up at the border and formed a long line. Lines are also fecund.

This line became so long that it ceased to be a line. The trucks had to wait side by side, in rows, because the line would stretch for miles, and trucks who saw the end of the line would have no idea what it was for, because the line's target was completely out of sight. So they formed dutiful rows in a nearby gravel lot. And there, they waited to cross the border.

They waited and waited. Savvy businessmen went up and down the rows, selling pastries and hashish to the truck drivers. The drivers ate and smoked and waited. Waited not just hours, but days. They slept in their trucks. While one driver slept, someone sauntered up beside his trailer and affixed a magnetic explosive to the underside of the trailer's belly. Then the person sauntered away. The line of trucks slowly proceeded. The timer counted down. The person who affixed the bomb set the timer in hopes that it would stop counting at the exact moment when the trailer crossed that invisible line, moved from one country to the next. The timer would stop counting precisely upon that invisible line, and when the timer stopped counting, the bomb would know to activate itself, and when the bomb activated itself, hundreds of gallons of fuel inside the yellow trailer would know to explode. The person who affixed the bomb hoped to make the fuel perform this terrible explosion in the immediate vicinity of the young American men who guarded the invisible line. Americans who stood at the border and searched the vehicles, who held rifles and wore sunglasses. And who were extremely unwelcome in this part

of Asia. In order to notify the men that they were unwelcome, someone decided to make a trailer full of flammable material explode right in front of them. Using magnets and timers and coopting the tedious security procedures of an invisible political boundary.

That, to me, is pathologically creative.

I am able to remark about its inventiveness because none of the exploding trailers ever harmed any of us. Even the drivers were usually fine. One driver was blown out his own windshield, but even he was fine. It must've been very challenging to set the timers just right. They never could do it. Which is why I can have this genuinely wondrous attitude about it. The other feelings have all faded. Instead of the feelings, I have memories of the feelings, and I am way over here, able to remark and comment about them. I am able to take a position of wonder. Which, really, is the only position that makes sense anyway, as far as I can tell.

Because just think. Just imagine us back there in the past. A hundred yellow trucks drove past those young guys each day. There was a long persistent orderly stream of yellow trucks hauling fuel. In fact, it was this very fuel that powered the Americans' other trucks. This fuel was the Americans' fuel. It powered the very activities that made the men so unwelcome in the first place. And it was someone's idea to try to explode that fuel right in front of them. To try to harm or kill them *with their own fuel*. Even to use fuel at all—a truly American liquid—is an awful but creative thing to do.

But further: targeting the yellow trailers made the Americans begin to wonder about each and every yellow trailer that drove by. Made them feel suspicious toward each one. Each of the hundreds, each day. Every time they saw a yellow trailer, their minds would recall previous times when similar-looking trailers suddenly tore open with fire and loud noise. They recalled how the trailers would stay on fire for a long time—they would burn and burn and burn—and because it took such a great amount of time for so many gallons of burnable material to stop being on fire, the image stayed in their minds a long time. This really violent image. This attack upon them. And each passing trailer could be another try. Each one could tear open and burn.

Yellow trailers, one after the other.

And when one of them exploded, it was like the trailer did it all by itself. Like no one caused it to happen. No evildoer was there to shoot. And that was another creative thing: the people who caused the explosion were on the other side of the imaginary line, and the Americans were not allowed to cross the line, for abstract

political reasons, so not only could the men not shoot anyone, nor could they *hunt* them. Because of that line. The war was only happening on one side of the line, and not the other. So in lieu of being able to shoot or being able to hunt, the men stood still and wondered which trailer would be the next to explode as it drove past. How accurate the timer would be, how close the fire would come. They walked circles around the trailers trying to find the bombs. They looked and guessed and wondered, because there was nothing at all they could really *do*, and pretty soon, their minds were just fucked crooked more ways than backward, and their blood just bubbled and simmered and raced up and down their veins, and all they could *do* to calm the blood was shout in the faces of random local people who were crossing the line on foot and who sometimes did not always exactly follow the rules the men had invented to protect the imaginary line where they stood. So the simmering blood in the men's veins caused them to shout and be cruel toward people who did not even build the explosives or add the magnets or set the timers, they were completely different people, but the men couldn't tell, they didn't know who was who, they only knew how their blood felt and how one of the few things toward which they felt truly able and competent and good at was shooting their rifles, but none of the people were permissible for shooting, so they cursed at them. Because they were good at that too.

The truck drivers didn't get paid if their cargo blew up, and they didn't get paid if they died in a blast of fuel, so they got creative too. They began to hire partners. A partner rode on the trailer, stood at the very back, holding an upright metal pipe, and the partner watched the trailer at all times. The driver and the partner slept in shifts. So that no one could saunter up and affix a magnetic bomb to count down and prompt huge insidious fire.

But hiring a partner meant splitting the money with them. It meant taking a smaller cut. And the cut was already small because the police along the road were corrupt and had to be bribed. The Pakistani police, the Afghan police, the Afghan army, the assorted customs officials. All wanted bribes. The police were being creative too. They had power, suddenly. This new power was created out of American power and given to them, and they took the power and used it to create wealth, so their families could be happier and stronger and safer. And in response to the creativity of the police, the truck drivers had less money. Then even less, because they had to pay their partners to watch out for bombs. The truck drivers paid and paid and paid, in hopes of traveling the long road without being arrested, without their cargo exploding, without injury or death. Hope is an imaginative act. Hope is a creative thing to do.

But it gets even more curious. Because some of the local people who travelled the long road, who crossed the boundary repeatedly to get to school or see a doctor, who saw the foreign army every day, who let themselves be searched and questioned, some of those people lived in isolated villages in the mountains, where they had limited or no access to news or international events. So some of those people didn't know about the terrible attack in the autumn of 2001, on the east coast of the United States, which was an extremely faraway place to them. Some of the people had no idea what happened there, which meant they had no idea what prompted the men to come to their country and stand on their invisible lines and search their cars and go through their things; they had no idea what caused it. Suddenly, people were just *there*. White men mostly. With rifles and pistols and machine guns and dark sunglasses and gloves with Kevlar knuckles, suddenly there, rummaging through center consoles, pounding on the inner paneling of car doors and listening for the hollow sound that meant nothing was being smuggled inside.

Please just *consider* the complexity of a mind that can incorporate into its everyday experience the spontaneous presence of a technologically advanced foreign army. A mind that can watch soldiers patrol the villages and drive the local roads. A mind that can somehow integrate those images with its current perception of reality. A mind that is without a crucial piece but invents *something* to fill the crucial void. A mind that is not only bafflingly creative, but so creative that whatever it invents is probably more logical and more comprehensible than what really happened. This mind surely creates a better explanation than the rampant irrational truth.

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