

# Bloodshot: Reflections on a Mass Shooting

*Mark Pittenger*



A memorial for the victims of a mass shooting at a grocery store in Boulder, Colo., in 2021.

Credit: Stephen Speranza for The New York Times (NYT, 2024)

Oh, I know your way  
Is hard to see today  
Bullets, they fly faster than mothers' lullabies  
And the sparrows cannot sing  
For it is theirs to bring  
The souls of those lost babies back to the sky

--Allison Russell, "Requiem"

I wrote these reflections during the trial that followed a mass shooting in my town—hence my use of the present tense during parts of this essay.

*September 5-22, 2024*

Allison Russell's song "Requiem" is about Black children who have died by gun violence. Of the ten who died in the mass shooting at my neighborhood grocery store, none was Black or a child. That tells you something about Boulder, Colorado. Still, Russell's song resonates powerfully for anyone who lives on after such an event. These things happen everywhere, all the time, in our gun-crazy country. Right now, my town—neighbors, acquaintances, strangers—is reliving it all as the King Soopers shooter's trial finally begins in a downtown courtroom more than three years after March 2021, when he murdered those ten people in the parking lot and in the store.

So in the courtroom the security footage rolls and family members watch their loved ones die again as a twenty-one-year-old man, having planned this attack for months, now wearing tactical body armor and carrying a Ruger AR-556 pistol with an add-on rifle stock as well as a Girsan nine-millimeter pistol, moves from parking lot to entryway, then from aisle to aisle, systematically hunting down victims and killing them with multiple shots, many fired at point-blank range. The shooter kills eight people during the first sixty-eight seconds of the attack. Shoppers and workers scatter, some escaping out the back of the store, others hiding in closets, behind displays or under counters. Occasionally a camera catches the shooter walking right past a hiding customer or worker without noticing the potential target. Occasionally—inexplicably—he chooses not to shoot someone. Blood pools under and around the dead.

The noise—the pop-pop of gunshots, the screams—is terrifying. A shopper later recalls, "I was hearing gunfire and bodies dropping." A retired emergency-room physician survives by hiding behind a row of potato chip bags on a bottom shelf in the snack aisle, her yellow ski jacket blending in with the yellow chip bags. She sees the shooter as he passes by her aisle, pausing to stare down its length, his face calm, his eyes observant. He is hunting. After he walks on, she hears a gunshot from a nearby aisle, then a sound that's familiar from her work: a final exhalation as someone dies. She smells blood. Another survivor remembers thinking, "God I hope you're ready for me, because I think this is it."

The charges, as successive stories in the local newspaper always inform us, are: ten counts of first-degree murder, forty-seven counts of attempted first-degree murder, one count of first-degree assault, six counts of felony possession of a prohibited large capacity magazine, and forty-seven crime-of-violence possible sentence enhancers. Stories in the paper also always include the following information, so we in Boulder have come to know well these names and ages: Boulder Police Officer Eric Talley, 51; Denny Stong, 20; Neven Stanisic, 23; Rikki Olds, 25; Tralona Bartkowiak, 49; Teri Leiker, 51;

Suzanne Fountain, 59; Kevin Mahoney, 61; Lynn Murray, 62; and Jody Waters, 65, were killed in the shooting.

The Table Mesa King Soopers store—part of a once-local chain now owned by the Cincinnati-based Kroger corporation—is an ordinary American grocery store, the sort of place where locals do their weekly shopping and also drop in regularly for coffee or flowers or a carton of milk. I’ve been saying the words “King Soopers” for more than three decades, so have mainly forgotten how silly the name sounds and looks. Now I see what an odd and chilling juxtaposition it makes with the term “mass shooting.” As a regular customer, I interacted a few times with Rikki Olds and frequently with Teri Leiker. I think I would have recognized Denny Stong, and probably knew some of the other workers and shoppers by sight but not by name. If they weren’t all exactly my neighbors, I did and do think of them all as part of my neighborhood, as local folks. Amazingly, even after the shootings, a great many of the store workers whom I had come to know over the previous years returned to work in the scrubbed and cleansed and completely-redesigned space after it reopened in February 2022 with much fanfare and a big community celebration.

\*\*\*

There must be some way out of here  
Said the joker to the thief  
There’s too much confusion  
I can’t get no relief

--Bob Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower”

The defendant has pled not guilty by reason of insanity. Once incarcerated, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia; but he had not been diagnosed and was not undergoing treatment at the time of the shootings. The defense acknowledges that he killed ten people, but maintains that he was “in the throes of a psychotic episode” during the shootings. The trial is intended not to establish guilt or innocence, but to establish the shooter’s frame of mind while he was committing these crimes: he was mentally ill, but was he “sane?” Did he know right from wrong, and did he understand the possible consequences of his actions? The burden of proof rests with the prosecution. The jury will have to reach its decision without succumbing to emotions that may arise during the presentation of oral testimony and video evidence. Hundreds of potential jurors responded on the court’s questionnaire that if chosen to serve, they would be unable to suppress such emotions. I was relieved not to have been called.

\*\*\*

This is an “insanity” trial. A mentally-ill person isn’t necessarily insane, and may be held responsible for criminal actions. On September 16 the shooter’s mother says in court that her son is plainly “crazy,” as only a crazy person would do the things he did. Is this what she believes about her boy? Or is she saying this only to underpin his insanity plea? There’s no death penalty in Colorado, so the outcome will be prison or a state mental institution. In either case, it will probably be for life. The prosecution makes much of the careful, intricate planning the shooter carried out, which they see as evidence of his sanity. I can’t help noting here that the shooter bought his guns and ammunition legally. So, who’s crazy? Him? Or us?

Over the following days, jurors are visibly upset by the testimony and video footage. Family members in the gallery sniffle and cry. Tissues are offered and received. Cops reach out to hold and support each other while their colleagues, sometimes crying on the stand, testify about their fellow officer’s death and about their own fears of being “outgunned” and killed as they maneuvered to trap the heavily-armed shooter in the back of the store. The shooter cries as his mother leaves the courtroom after testifying to her son’s insanity.

\*\*\*

As the trial goes on, so does ordinary life. So does shopping. What does that feel like? How did I feel about walking back into the store at the reopening? About being there as the months and years plodded on after the shootings, without resolution? About being there right now, standing in the produce section, picking out a knob of fresh ginger and a few bananas while downtown the survivors are testifying? I continue to shop there every week, usually parking not far from the small memorial to the victims: a grassy plot where an oak sapling has been planted for each of the ten. I often think of them and of what happened here as I walk through the parking lot and head inside. I’m not scared—just sad. And angry about this country’s irrational, lethal gun culture, without which I don’t believe that this incomprehensibly awful event could have happened. But at the same time, I am just walking in to what is still my grocery store. I pull a cart loose and check my list. Downtown, the prosecution calls attention to the store’s role in our neighborhood in order to highlight its violent disruption. It’s a strange thing to watch as this very ordinary American chain supermarket is reimagined for the jury as a warm and welcoming community institution, almost like a church, a synagogue or a mosque. Yet in some way it is exactly that. We make these mass-produced chain stores into local, face-to-face institutions simply by going there, shopping there, interacting there, being there; and, some of us, by dying there.

What's at stake for us in Boulder as this trial unfolds and eventually reaches its conclusion? What do we want and need from it? Since the beginning, I've thought about this in terms of stories: I think we need a story, a narrative, that somehow contains and at least begins to explain these events and their perpetrator. Not to "make sense of" what happened—I don't think that's possible. So, what is possible? What do I mean by containment? I suppose that I'm looking for some way of ordering the events in our minds so they no longer just burst upon us, as they did that day: sirens suddenly wailing through the neighborhood in a mysterious dissonant chorus; a terrified teenaged worker running from the store all the way up to Greenbriar Boulevard, a mile away, where my wife ran into him—still scared, waiting for his mom to pick him up; finding real-time coverage on a local TV station just in time to see the shooter, wearing nothing but underwear, being escorted out of the store by police. We didn't know anything more than what we saw, nor did the on-scene reporters: Were there more shooters still inside? How many were dead or wounded? Why had this happened? There was no narrative, no story—only the shock of mass murder three blocks from our home.

Information trickled out over the coming days. Media reports revealed the shooter's name and background. His family had emigrated from Syria years ago, and he had grown up almost entirely in the nearby town of Arvada, Colorado (so strangely, the hometown of King Soopers), where he graduated from high school and worked in the family's restaurant. Scattered details emerged about conflicts at school, but there was no broader portrait or timeline leading to the shootings, and no suggestion of a motive. For weeks, and then for months and years, the newspaper updated us on his incarceration, on his diagnosis and treatment, and on the legal maneuvering that repeatedly delayed his trial. Most stories ritually repeated already-familiar information and ended with those lists of charges, of names and ages. Only during the trial do we read about expert testimony that in Syrian culture, mental illness may be considered shameful and possibly the result of demonic possession, so that seeking treatment—drawing attention to the problem—may not be seen as an option. The shooter's father testifies that he believed his son to be possessed after he witnessed episodes of withdrawal and paranoid or seemingly delusional behavior. He had never heard, he says, of the word "schizophrenia," and didn't know what it meant. The defense leans heavily on such cultural factors to explain why no one in the family, upon observing the shooter's odd but seemingly undangerous behavior, ever encouraged him to see a mental-health professional for diagnosis or treatment.

For more than three years, then, we have had no story—no sequence of generative moments, no emergence and crystallization of a motive, no portrait of deteriorating mental health—no narrative to contain the horrific events that had torn a hole in our town. We have waited. A "speedy trial?" I had always imagined that this was supposed

to benefit defendants and victims alike. The shooter has been shunted back and forth between jail and a backed-up state psychiatric hospital, variously resisting and receiving treatment. The lengthy delays resulting from debates among doctors, hospital officials, lawyers and the judge about his treatment, testing, sites of incarceration and competency to stand trial have been hard on the victims' families and hard on the community. For all of us, there has been no clear way to process what happened—no story. Only now, with the trial, are we starting to get a picture of who the shooter is, if not “why” he did what he did. Of course, this is a lot more than we ever got with the Jonbenet Ramsey murder—Boulder's other sad, sick claim to true-crime fame—which remains unsolved. At least in the King Soopers case, the principal facts about what happened and who did it are undisputed. But what will the court and the community do with whatever is learned during the trial? Are trials supposed to uncover and expose the truth—to resolve the plot—as on TV? Or are they just a face-off between competing hired guns trying to win the case, with only a secondary interest in truth-telling?

I don't even know what “the truth” means in this case. How and why did it come into the mind of this young man to commit a mass shooting? How and why was he able to amass such an arsenal, including bomb-making materials and other firearms that weren't used in the attack? What should now become of him? Is he insane? Mental illness is not synonymous with insanity. But is sanity nothing more than the ability to rationally plan and carry out an action? Can we think of someone who did what this man did as anything other than insane? Or, as his mother puts it, as “crazy?” If we consider him insane, then are we saying that sanity necessarily carries within itself an element of moral consciousness that he lacks? The shooter told one of the psychiatrists who examined him that he knew his actions were wrong, but thought that carrying out a mass shooting would stop the “killing voices” in his head. Although he regularly claimed to his doctors to have heard such voices, and to have been hearing them when he began killing people in the parking lot, three psychiatrists concluded that he was sane during the shootings. Yet during the trial a pharmacy worker testifies that when the shooter passed close to her hiding place, she heard him laughing and repeatedly pronouncing the attack “fun.” Would a sane person say this? Would a sane person shoot a random passerby in a grocery-store parking lot, then walk over to where the man has fallen and shoot him multiple further times? The King Soopers killer shot all but one of his victims with multiple bullets. A defense lawyer argues that he was “psychotic and delusional,” while the prosecutor insists that “He was having mental health issues but he was completely functioning.” The defense lawyer acknowledges that there are “no words to describe what happened on March 22, 2021.” The prosecutor responds that in fact there is a word: “Guilty.”

Should a person who enjoys committing evil acts and commits them on a massive scale be considered sane? My visceral response is “no,” but that brings up other questions, the most obvious of which is: Was the commandant of Auschwitz sane? What about the whole army of functionaries who ran the Nazi killing machine? Should we classify Adolf Eichmann as insane by definition, considering his role in coordinating and carrying out the Holocaust? The philosopher Hannah Arendt, who observed Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem, didn’t think so. She thought that while evil took an outwardly-“banal” shape in Eichmann’s apparent “normality,” his pose of being a simple, colorless bureaucrat following orders was a sham. While later scholars would show in detail that Eichmann was an enthusiastic Nazi, Arendt saw him at the very least as a “joiner,” an organization man who was eager to please his superiors and cared nothing for his victims. Arendt thought he should be executed for his role in making the killing machine function. So, would I regard Eichmann as having been insane and therefore not criminally liable, simply because of the nature and scope of his crimes and of his apparent inability to recognize them as wrong? If so, what treatment would I prescribe for him? Such a judgement—not to mention the question of treatment—seems patently ridiculous and a moral horror in Eichmann’s case. But on what generalizable principle—if any—can we distinguish an Eichmann from a King Soopers shooter? Both were careful, meticulous, efficient planners of heinous acts. Were Eichmann’s eyes cold and vacant as he sat in his office signing forms, as the King Soopers shooter’s eyes were said to have been while he went about his murderous business? Should anyone who does what Eichmann and the shooter did be regarded not as “evil” but as “crazy,” and therefore to be treated rather than punished? And—to echo a point that my wife raised—if the King Soopers shooter were judged not guilty by reason of insanity, what if he were later to be pronounced “cured?” Should he then be considered no longer a threat, and be released? What exactly is sanity? What is its moral content, if any? Or is it—as the prosecution’s case implies—merely a rational, instrumental state, lacking any particular moral grounding or implications? Eichmann and the shooter both demonstrated such a state. But I know of no evidence that Eichmann suffered from any form of mental illness, and the Israeli psychiatrists who examined him pronounced him sane. Was he simply “evil,” then—while the shooter might be regarded as “sick” in a way that prompted him to *do* evil? When are we—or aren’t we—responsible for our actions? And if “sickness” and “evil” become functionally indistinguishable, should we respond to both with the same sanctions?

\*\*\*

*September 23, 2024*

I don't wanna talk about it,  
I just wanna dance.

--Norah Jones, "I Just Wanna Dance"

Let us not talk falsely now,  
the hour is getting late.

--Bob Dylan, "All Along the Watchtower"

So, today we have a verdict: guilty on all counts. The jury does not find the shooter to be insane, and therefore finds him to be criminally responsible for what he did, despite the absence of any clear motive. In the prosecutor's language, he is judged to have been in "a culpable mental state" while shooting his victims. He has been sentenced to ten consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole, along with more than eighteen hundred further years of imprisonment for the other charges. During the hearing, many of the victims' family members speak. Tralona Bartkowiak's mother says of her life today, "There is always emptiness, and it is unspoken." Kevin Mahoney's daughter says, "It all needs to stop."

Do we have a narrative? A story that we can use, that we can live with, in the aftermath of these events? Maybe that was a futile hope on my part. Or maybe, with time, a narrative will settle upon us and become part of how we understand our town and our world. I just don't know. I also wonder: for those who live with mental health issues or who work in that field, will this verdict be seen as a positive outcome? As confirmation that people with mental illnesses should not be considered by definition to be morally or practically incompetent? Or should we see this outcome as evidence of our inability as a society to adequately define and recognize what it means to be insane? Can sanity really be reduced to an ability to plan rationally and to act instrumentally without considering the intended act's moral content and outcome? If so, then what does it really mean to know right from wrong?

As the trial concludes, then, I am left with more questions than answers. The King Soopers mass shooting remains, for me, an open wound in our physical and moral community. It's a wound that seems unlikely to heal, however scarred-over it may be rendered by time's passing. Three and a half years later, I can still see the faces of Terri Leiker and Rikki Olds in my mind's eye. When I read the trial accounts of how each was shot and killed—the number of bullets, the point and angle at which each bullet entered



each woman's body, the destruction caused in each instance—my stomach turns over and my throat tightens. I am sickened and sad. And I am infuriated by the insanely lethal insistence of the gun lobby and its congressional skills that Americans must have access to firearms of almost every size, shape and capacity.

\*\*\*

*October 29, 2024*

Tell me what did the blackbird say to the crow?  
Dry your eyes, don't you cry, ain't gonna rain no more

--Gillian Welch & David Rawlings, "Howdy Howdy"

So the King Soopers mass shooting now becomes part of our local and national history. Maybe it's a good thing that this wound won't heal. Those of us who didn't lose loved ones shouldn't be allowed to believe that mere time can allay the ravages that violence and unbounded grief inflict. People in my neighborhood and in my town will continue to think of what happened on that March afternoon: of those who were killed, of the families that remain. For the rest of the United States, it will be one more entry, already dim to memory, on an ever-growing list of infamous events. As Kevin Mahoney's daughter said at the sentencing hearing, "It all needs to stop."

The answer lies partly in our politics, which we must continue to push forward in whatever ways we can, never bowing to what so often looks like the inevitability of defeat ("pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will"—thank you, Antonio Gramsci). Meanwhile, beyond just trying to live in peaceful and just relations with our neighbors, what do we do as individuals? To go on living without fully averting our eyes in a world that daily confronts us with hideous and preventable violence and injustice, I find that it helps—indeed, that it's necessary—to look beyond the news to the realm of expressive culture and art. There we can hope not only for solace (though I don't underrate that). We can also look for images—whether abstract or clearly-etched—of "what's going on," as Marvin Gaye so memorably put it; and we can look for hints, at least, of what might be—hints of possibility, hope, beauty and love. Taj Mahal once sang, "Music keeps me together." That can mean not only propping us up but confronting us with things we would rather ignore, while also offering us ways to imagine a pathway toward better days. Art makes our hearts and minds bigger. It helps us to look ahead, as well as back, and to each other, as well as to the self. Long before Laura Nyro died of cancer in 1997, she wrote of her own ending and of its aftermath. Her words and her music are a gift and

a guide as we think of those we've lost, of those they left behind, and of how we might lay a better path before us.

And when I die  
And when I'm dead, dead and gone  
There'll be one child born  
And a world to carry on, to carry on.

Carry it on we must. And we can.

### **Note on Sources**

(NYT, 2024). Bogel-Burroughs, N. "Gunman Convicted of Murdering 10 at a Colorado Supermarket." *The New York Times*. 23 September. Available online at URL = <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/us/colorado-boulder-shooting-king-soopers-trial-verdict.html>.

Other information about the shootings and the trial comes from coverage by the *Boulder Daily Camera*, September 5-24, 2024, and from Ray Sanchez and Andi Babineau "'He was hunting,'" CNN, September 5, 2024, available online at URL = <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/05/us/king-soopers-mass-shooting-trial/index.html>.

For further information on any of the songs from which I have quoted lyrics, see the artist's website or Wikipedia page.