

## Correlations

- I. On a graph I loved to understand in junior high,  
each July, people seemed to drown because of ice cream—  
lake water rippled with their bodies, wet sugar  
crystallizing the life ring, the lifeguard licking  
the deep-end blue of a coconut popsicle, dreaming

as a boy waves—heat spike & sweet spike & splash of a body  
creamed, as we used to say then: *man, he creamed you*  
*in that race, she creamed you at that free throw, I creamed the test*  
after I learned that two lines can climb a single curve

sly & steady as the morning heat,  
without causation:  
motorcycle wrecks & cheese; steak dinners & the gristle  
of lightning strikes; golf course profits & Nicholas Cage;  
spilled Diet Coke & bodies on the floor after *The Dark Knight Rises*;

or in the further future, after that pool party where the man  
dials his phone (*it is apparent [he] wanted his girlfriend to listen in*), then  
fires into the rubber backs of deck chairs, & then & then &  
then & then & then & then & then

- II. *It's so easy, you can do it yourself, on the back*  
*of a napkin*, BJ Campbell writes. He's out to prove  
*everyone's lying about the link between gun ownership and*  
*homicides*. He excludes the data-skewing stats  
of suicide, police violence, accidents. Marks each  
state's guns & homicides as little dots. You'll see,  
he says, there's absolutely no way you could draw  
a line for any correlation; it's far too scattered,  
*like someone shot a piece of graph paper with #8 birdshot.*

III. Arkansas, where I was raised in heat that drove us to double-dip ice cream cones for tourists, dip ourselves in motel pools—sneaking through flimsy gates to their splotch-&-foot-scald edge—ranks #5 out of all the states for gun deaths.

*Coincidental*  
to a July 4 on which at least six people were shot in the Little Rock area comes. . . a survey that shows Arkansas No. 2 among the states in the percentage of adults who own guns.

*Coincidental,*  
which meant originally, *to fall upon together.*

IV. The man who wanted his girlfriend to listen to him, listen to him, held a cell phone that killed no one by a pool chair

that killed no one, by stripy towels & sun-screen, pool noodles, paddleboards

too small to be gurneys. You could make a dot for each item on a paper napkin. You could look away

at confounding factors. Mental health. Video games. Freedom. You could draw dots until they cluster like stars

on the flag for an impossible country that hasn't heard of constellations. Pool towel. Pool noodle.

A history of rage & isolation. Some people are just lonely. You can pile dots like Dippin' Dots at the ballpark, at Worlds of Fun—

cream plus liquid nitrogen—ice cream made into individualism. There's no winged horse in the sky; no dipper

but this metal in a teenage hand. You can wipe your mouth on the napkin, say *doesn't always equal*

means *never equals*. You can forget cigarettes & lung cancer, air bags & seat belts & survival in collisions. Before

an American invented it, who ever dreamed of beaded ice cream? Who imagined this hate on a sunny day?

V. In the duke's palace in Urbino, Italy, sculpted  
into the door lintels (his guestrooms, his parlor,  
his own wife's bedroom) acorn-shaped jellyfish  
dangle plaster tentacles—tidal & poisonous  
& painted gold. Their flamelike drift  
inexplicable in inland Umbria  
until the art historian explains they aren't Ulmaridae at all,  
but early Renaissance grenades: petards in mid-explosion  
like tentacled rocket ships. Federico's motto,  
*Ich kann verdauen ein grosses eisen:*  
I can swallow a big iron, reboasted in their vaulting  
each door each guest had to pass through—  
the non-ornamental ornaments of power  
impressing that even he, humanist, philanthropist, was a force  
not to fuck with. Their high-tech threats  
floating through dreams, streaming like *rampage & carnage*  
*& America's deadliest summer on record*, which finds me even here  
this summer, which *is ending as it began. . . this month's loss of life*  
*most acute in Texas—acute*, which no longer & maybe never meant  
the opposite of *chronic*, but something like terror  
becoming ever young again. Becoming near  
transparent & proliferate as moon jellies  
I thought once, swimming off the coast, were innocent,  
like living soap bubbles  
until a single tendril slipped across my lip.  
That vanishing point  
(new still in the Renaissance too) where perspective  
begins.

VI. And if there is a reason, the preachers say, it is God  
exiled from the school; God  
who wants to sit at His swiveling  
chair-desk as the bell buzzes, as the teacher flips the lights  
on like the fourth day. God  
who wants standardized tests  
& pink erasers & the hearts of each American. Twizzlers & tater tots &  
obeyance of metal detectors inside &  
outside the heart. God who wants social science & civics  
classes on the Second Amendment He gave this country  
to save its people from Tom-Petty freefalling  
people with their souls mixed up like pop rocks & spit, that crackling  
on the tongue, those sinners who never learned to call God's name  
like a roll call, never asked for Him  
to sit beside them in Earth Science  
after He created this very Earth,  
never bowed their heads or bubbled in the True-Right answers  
of *a) God b) God c) God*  
*d) Damn the rest of them;* the preachers say,  
if teenagers are dead again in a school today  
it's *for the root cause of Godless, depraved hearts:*  
this country's impenitent desks, the simple subtraction  
of opening to chapter five, when God wants  
His own words to crack the spine  
of every morning. *Let every patriotic American*  
*have the right to hold a gun,* God says,  
& they do. *Let me use my big pink eraser to rub out danger,* God says,  
or He could have.

- VII. *The preamble thus both sets forth the object of the amendment and informs the meaning of the remainder of its text. . . 'it cannot be presumed that any clause in the Constitution is intended to be without effect.'*  
from the dissenting opinion in *District of Columbia v. Heller*

A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of the sweatpants rack at Walmart, to a festival of artichokes & fresh-fried garlic, to a man sloshing a Manhattan under dance-floor strobes, to a bank lobby, a synagogue, a pool party, a bipolar man in his room alone; a well-regulated militia being necessary to each individual knuckle on the man's fist knocking against another man's windshield at the Stinker Station by the hardware store where the LED sign flashes ads for *Festival Dance* at the university, the parking lot *Gem Show*, their own *Enhanced Conceal-Carry* class; a well-regulated militia being necessary to the fingers & whole bald palm of that hand now covering the glass, his face leaning in to shout, *go back where you came from, N—*. *If I was carrying this morning, I'd shoot you.* A well-regulated militia being absent, my friend, a colleague of that *you*, calls the police, says, *he was on his way back-to-school shopping; his daughter was in the car; he's Pakistani; he was scared to call.* A well-regulated professor/first responder being necessary for the free State's classrooms where they teach, where I teach, three miles across the state line, but still in America, we know about absolute clauses & causation: *Speed being necessary to stop someone from bleeding to death, your shirt, paper towels, Kleenex, whatever you have can be used to staunch the blood flow. Or, a well-regulated back-to-school list being necessary to succeed in third grade*, which does not mean, and is never made to mean, that we each need small plastic protractors & lunch boxes & Hello Kitty erasers— although my younger cousins' list in rural Texas includes laminated name tags on lanyards they have to wear now daily, they tell me, in case a body count needs to be regulated.

VIII. I was raised in Arkansas in a family-that-did-not-own-guns that owned a gun. My mother kept it in her dresser drawer wrapped in a scarf like the one she wore on rare days she pinned her hair in auburn knots. Those latent curls. Latent shimmer of its mother-of-pearl stock in the winter-shirt-wooled dark as she & I fought & cried, as my boyfriend/foster brother punched himself square in his eye—those rings of purple-black like a wayward planet. He hadn't been diagnosed yet. We never said bipolar ran in our family. I gave a speech as valedictorian: *Progress lies not in enhancing what is, but advancing toward what will be* with him, swollen-eyed behind me, my own bruised ribs forgotten before they even happened. *Latent*, from *lath*, *hidden*, relative of *lethe*, the river we swam, forgetting the bullets, the nylon scarf, the hurt we were capable of.

IX. The effects of human voices on other animals—  
even ones we think of as predators, even the mountain  
lions which grow skittish, avoid the trails

if NPR is playing from speakers or a woman's voice  
in genteel tones recites a poem—is what ecologists call  
*the landscape of fear*, which sounds like a metal band

that senior in algebra who pressured & flirted with me  
to borrow my bracelet for *just one day*, then gave  
it to his girlfriend, would have loved; like that nightfall

on an Oakland street three men crossed quick from  
different corners, converging toward me—that run-down  
store I ducked into & them through the window & me

pretending I needed Snickers or Ruffles or Ruffles or anything—  
that old fear-song of *why were you ever here? where  
can you go now at night in America?* That landscape

of gunshots we'd hear sometimes bedtimes, saying  
*maybe fireworks?* near no known holiday.  
Unclasped fear in our backs after each new headline

when we'd all guard our bodies, keep *our distance from  
the grids, move cautiously along a mental map of risk.*  
Those men's still-there laughter, those men with bullets

at their backs too in this racist country. We learn to  
detour. We *human super predators*, our softest voices  
reading *The Wind in the Willows*, *profoundly disturbing*

the animals, so the raccoons stop eating, so fish  
proliferate, then mussels, whole cascades.

- X. Though it's known to contain as much radiation as a collapsing star, no one knows for sure if dark lightning has ever struck a person. Invisibility makes correlation hard to prove. When my nephew shot himself, a man in their ghost town (*diminished mining town*, my sister calls it) used dowsing rods to find space in the old-West cemetery. *There are so many unmarked bodies*, he told us, *best not just start digging*. He showed us after: the rods held loosely in his hands like reins of an invisible horse. He'd learned from his father, witching for water. To explain plot, teachers say, *if a gun is introduced on page two, it has to be fired by the end*. Because I didn't know my nephew had a gun, I didn't think, a gun means he's *three times more likely to die by suicide*. I found that out later in the story. *There is no life you could live out till its end*, says a poem he loved. Studies show dowsing is no more accurate than chance: the person reads the landscape's cues, hands moving before the rods do. When people say, *guns don't kill people, people kill people* they mean *if people are introduced on page two*. Just because beef consumption doesn't correlate with lightning in one famous graph, doesn't negate all correlations. In 2016, twenty-two thousand people holding a gun died in America. Ghosts' invisibility makes motives hard to know. When my sister called, dark lightning struck through my phone. At almost twenty-six, Gabriel was my youngest nephew. My family prides itself on precision. *Ghost town is inaccurate. It's never been fully uninhabited*, my sister says. Dowsing rods don't bury people, people bury their friend's son with dowsing rods. The man was backhoeing a deep, perfect rectangle when we arrived. He climbed down to show us how he'd found the site with a mountain view. He held out two thin metal L-shaped rods. We looked where they pointed, though we knew.