the NORMAL SCHOOL
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SIX NEEDLES BY SETH SAWYERS

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Again, it's a book out back. I switch on the stringed lights, snap open something cold, and layer onto my bare arms and legs a spray that smells like a plastics factory's exhaust.

Beyond our fence, in the alley, where once were broken bottles, shredded plastic bags, busted-up concrete, Magan has got prairie coneflower, echinacea, elderflower, even a bald cypress shooting up taller than me now. And on this side of the fence, it's ferns, foam flower, cardinal

flower. Out front, 28th Street roars, straight through a floating virus that's shut down most of the world we know, but not back here.

Except that there is one thing floating back here, a familiar little ancient dirtbag, a speck that drifts across my book's open pages like a plankton, like a floater in the eye, which I clap at but miss. I'm sprayed down all the way, so I don't think about the speck again. I think myself immune. Magan tells me that, since we're in the city, the bats, birds, frogs, fish that eat mosquitoes aren't around. "Shit's out of balance," she says. Our out-back green island's plenty big enough for bugs but for not much else.

Let's take this one mosquito. She's been waiting, very literally, for me. I contain, in my hot veins, the thing that completes her. On book nights, resting on the underside of a wisteria leaf, her simple eyes notice my movement. By the time I'm finding my page, she's flying my way, maybe only floating, but locked in. She's thirsty.

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For a long time, Jake liked to drink, until he didn't. I liked to drink with Jake, until I didn't. Everyone did. The other day, I had the urge to text him about a T-shirt I saw at the Safeway on 25th Street, on a guy whose mask was lowered down below his chin. His shirt said, in all-caps:

FUCK KEEPING CALM
AND FUCK CARRYING ON
AND FUCK YOU

We were going to meet for a baseball game downtown. This was five, six years ago. I'd get us hot dogs, Cokes. It would be fun, like we were kids again. I joked with Magan that, without beer, maybe I'd actually watch the game, maybe I'd keep score. Earlier that day, on the phone, Jake was anxious about where exactly we'd meet, which gate, what time, who was getting tickets. He was fragile but still Jake.

I left early enough to walk down, for an afternoon anyway all exercise and health, and got to the plaza outside the centerfield scoreboard in time to hear the national anthem. I was running a

little late. I looked for him: my body and my walk, only a little taller, thicker, with curly black hair, probably in a golf visor, golf shirt, khaki shorts. Home runs were hit. I texted and then called, texted and called.

In the bottom of the third, he called back. He was slurring. He was somewhere downtown. He didn't know where. He was sitting on concrete steps. He could see bushes. Where are you in relation to the big Bank of America building, I asked. He didn't know. Concrete steps, he kept saying. Bushes.

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There's this stuff called picaridin now, which I can vouch for, but for a long time the only thing we had that kept mosquitoes from sucking human blood was DEET, a chemical discovered in 1944 by the USDA, during the rush to win the war. We shipped it to our soldiers in the Pacific, who, like the Australians, the Japanese, the Melanesian people who have lived there for a very long time, were getting horribly sick with malaria. Sixty percent of all American troops in the Pacific would get malaria at some point. Ninety percent of the Japanese soldiers, we think. In another war, there was a saying among the North Vietnamese: "We're not afraid of the American imperialists, but we are afraid of malaria."

Here's the thing about mosquitoes: they only really matter in that, in the warmer, wetter parts of the world, they make people very sick: yellow fever, Chikungunya, dengue fever, and the big one: malaria. Malaria is terrible. You get chills, the worst fever of your life, then get better, then get chills again, and then an even worse fever that makes you delirious. Often, if you survive all of this, it comes back, sometimes weeks or months later.

By the late 1950s, regular people could buy products with DEET in them. My parents remember it being a new thing when they were kids. We're still not sure how DEET works, whether it decreases our vertebrate odors that mosquitoes like or if it's simply that mosquitoes don't like how DEET smells.

Picaridin smells like apples that are in that spot between overly ripe and openly rotting. It's not so bad. But DEET, according to Magan, smells like a robot's idea of citrus but suspended in gasoline. To me, DEET smells like what you imagine originally lived in those big blue plastic barrels at county fairs that now collect paper plates.

It's picaridin or DEET. Don't even try that shit about citronella or incense sticks or any of that. The only stuff that works to keep mosquitoes from inserting themselves into me is jeans and a sweatshirt, tropical storm-level winds, or chemicals that smell like either rotting apples or what's inside a barrel with CAUTION written on the side. I don't want to hear about whatever you heard works, your lotions, your magic garbage.

Back to the patio out back, where I sit with a book. I don't know that I've missed a spot with my spray, the soft triangle of the inside of my right heel, but the mosquito does. While I'm trying to drop back into the novel, she lands so softly that I don't feel her. Almost immediately, with her hair-thick snout, she probes.

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I found Jake halfway up a short set of concrete steps downtown, a block shy of the stadium. He'd made it as far as he could. He cried. Jake cried a lot back then. I sat with him. He told me: "I hate drinking. I hate it. I fucking hate it." I asked him to send a text to everyone in the family saying that he was done with it. He tapped it out, sent it. I felt better, and I think he did, too. It was always better to get something from Jake, even if it was a four-in-the-morning ramble. When he texted after months of silence, we all thought: at least he's alive.

I got us a cab back to the apartment he shared with his girlfriend. As he teetered into the lobby, fragile, I called out to him. He came back. We hugged. He said he would be all right. Back home, Magan asked me: So you didn't even see the game? You had to joke about it. If you didn't, you'd crumple upon yourself like an empty beer can. I have these stories about Jake. Ryan, Dad, Mom have a thousand more.

The last time I saw him, he drove down from the halfway house, in Frederick. We watched the Steelers game on TV. Magan made soft pretzels and beer-cheese dip without the beer. “If he can’t drink, the least we can do is stuff him,” she said. He didn’t know that our dog had died half a year before, but he was there, eating, figuring out our charging cords, tapping at his phone like anyone else. He wanted to see the community garden Magan runs. He looked older, softer, tired, but he was more Jake than I’d seen him be in five years, asking me if I got those jeans at one of my thrift stores or did I go straight to the source and get them off a homeless man?

After the game, before he had to get back for curfew, we took him to one of the food halls that cities have now. After oysters, I realized what I’d done. Shit, man, I said. You’re surrounded by beer here. Nah, he said, don’t worry. I was never a beer guy.

But he used to be. After I came back to Baltimore from Norfolk, we’d spend Sundays at his favorite Tex-Mex bar on Fleet, watching all three football games at one, four, and eight, posting up until midnight, running up two-hundred-dollar tabs, easy. It was two meals each, six, seven, eight beers for me and, for Jake, a shot of Grand Marnier every few hours along with an ocean of Bud Light. With his buddies, sometimes mine, we’d throw ourselves, inside that narrow and dark bar that I can still smell, into laughing and shouting and pool-playing and highlight-watching and so much shit-talking it filled our guts.

At home after he died, we needed to get his Social Security number. Mom dug around in Jake’s boxes of clothes, papers, supplements, printed-out notes from all the counselors until she found a copy of the police report from one of his two DWIs. His blood alcohol level had been 0.295 percent. For years, he tried to obliterate himself.

Before that, he had been fun to drink with. I just couldn’t do it how he did.

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The mosquito doesn’t want to drink, or like to. She needs to drink, and here’s where it gets nuts. She pushes the tip of her proboscis against my skin so that the snout’s flexible outer cover, called the labium, folds back like a length of garden hose that’s been bent into a U shape.

Then she puts her six needles into me. If I feel anything at all, it's a slight pinch, a minor itch, but only if I'm paying attention, which I'm not, since, on this hundredth pandemic night, I'm lost in my book.

She's looking for a blood vessel smaller than anything you could see with your eyes but many times larger than a capillary. Once she finds it, one of those six needles injects me with anticoagulant so that my blood may flow. This coagulant is what puts malaria in people, and also what makes me, in about two minutes, when she's gone, begin the marathon of scratching and, in about three minutes, will produce the taut little swollen mound that mosquito people call an "ordinary wheal and flare response." I wheal and flare maybe a little worse than everyone else. Magan hears a lot about my ordinary whealing and flaring.

Timothy C. Winegard's *The Mosquito: A Human History of Our Deadliest Predator*, published around the time of the West Nile virus panic just before 9/11, is about how the mosquito, because of malaria, is the single worst thing to ever happen to humanity, worse than any other disease, worse than war, worse, presumably, than racism, genocide, and even Donald Trump. He figures half of all humans to ever live were killed by the malaria in mosquitoes' bellies. We think now that because malaria was so common in West and Central Africa, that we developed sickle-cell anemia as a way to fight malaria and therefore keep young men and women alive for long enough to make babies, but not long enough to live to what we now think of as middle age.

The argument for the usefulness of the mosquito is not so great. While they do pollinate certain plants, they do so no better than other, less awful insects. "Contrary to popular belief, the mosquito doesn't even serve as an indispensable food source for any other animal," Winegard writes. "She has no purpose other than to propagate her species and perhaps to kill humans. As the apex predator throughout our odyssey, it appears that her role in our relationship is to act as a countermeasure against uncontrolled human population growth."

He writes: "I can safely say that most of you reading this book have one thing in common—a general hatred for mosquitoes. Bashing mosquitoes is a universal pastime and has been since the dawn of humanity."

I know I'm no different than you. My ordinary wheal and flare may be a little more wheal, a little more flare, but none of us likes mosquitoes. They are flies, mice, lice, honked horns, parking tickets, hangnails, sits in dentists' offices, coworkers who email in all caps, drunks outside our windows wailing to the sky. For a long time, because of this mosquito's itch, this ordinary wheal and flare that stays with me for days, I thought I hated, but now I'm sure it's just that they annoy me very much, even if it's true that the two emotions can sometimes be difficult to tell apart.

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While he was still alive, and even after he died, it was tempting to list the times Jake was annoying, though this urge has lately greatly faded. Now, I just miss him, want to text him about the Steelers, about a silly crude funny thing I'd seen that I know would have doubled him over. It's true that, maybe ten years ago, when he was bartending in Fells Point and drinking plenty but not yet chugging cheap vodka in our parents' garage, Jake could be hours late to everything while always trying to blame someone else, a habit I was known for among my friends when I was younger, and which I've since worked to quit.

Seven, eight years back, he was in town for a golf tournament at a public course twenty blocks from our old apartment in Mount Vernon. He was going to crash with us for the night, but, drunk, he couldn't figure out how to get from the course to us, so I tried to talk him through the handful of turns he needed to make. Over and over, I told him to take a left on St. Paul, but by the time the light on North Avenue turned green, he'd forgotten the street name, all the time growing more and more irritated at me, the traffic, himself, whatever, and I'd have to tell him yet again. When he finally knocked on our door, my annoyance cranked up so tight I could have chewed drywall, the first thing he said was, "Where's the vodka?"

The drinking incapacitated him even when he was sober. One time, he called me down before a party his girlfriend was throwing. Jake's job was to replace a broken bedroom door. I asked him why it was broken and he mumbled something about an argument. I am no fix-it man, but when I got there, I could see immediately that the reason why the bolt wouldn't catch in the jamb was

that he'd hung the door upside-down. Another time, he couldn't figure out how to order a fishing license online. He'd often get angry, or cry. Ryan and I both, over time, became Jake's big brothers. Mom and Dad have their own stories. His friends, too. Everyone who loved him has stories like this.

All of which is to say that Jake could be annoying because he drank so much because he had a deep hole inside of him, and who doesn't, that he couldn't figure out how to fill until the only thing he knew would work, if only for a night, an hour, half a moment, killed him. In the end, without something better to do with himself, it was the only thing he knew to do. It is much harder to be annoyed with Jake when I think about him like this. He was powerless. He was an adolescent in the surf, a sick tree in a storm. Now, if I'm annoyed with anything, it's only that he's gone, that he's missing Thanksgivings at Ryan's house, that I can't make him laugh, which is another way of saying that I'm angry with the way that a life, despite our toil, can turn toward the dark rather than the light.

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The mosquito, of course, is powerless, too, even as she right now would appear to be doing exactly as she wishes, working her head back and forth like a steak knife in a jack-o-lantern, getting into me with two saw-like needles. Two other needles are forceps, to keep the tiny wound open. And the last of the six needles sucks my blood. It takes about a minute. Then, laden, working her head back and forth again, she pries herself free, and, job done, flies off to make eggs. The term "flying bloodsucker" appears frequently in mosquito literature.

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More and more, I want to tell you how much fun Jake could be. Before his body gave up, he was the guy everyone wanted around. He wanted nothing more than to laugh. Watch out if you were wearing a pink shirt or if your jeans were too tight or if, like me, you popped up your first-tee drive into the air like an Estes rocket. He could be tender. When I was in my twenties, I took girl troubles to him, and he listened. Yeah, it's hard, he agreed, but whatever you do, I trust you, and I'll always like you better than the girl, and give me a call tomorrow.

He really did excel in bars, like how gardeners excel in dirt, chefs with butter and garlic, how athletes transform once a ball is rolled to them. All of us at some point told him to try to work that easy, smiling self into something that paid, made him feel he was good at something. The closest he got was bartending, which was half-good for him, half-bad, good for the joking, the easy talk, bad since he was forever surrounded by those glinting, smooth, easy bottles: rows of them, columns, the escape a quick backroom gulp away.

Jake was no bloodsucker. He was merely lost with only a shitty map for any kind of help. Endlessly, we tried to work through why. Where did his hole come from? Was he lazy? Did he not know how to fight? Would a child have given him that thing to fight for? Did something dark happen to him when he was younger, some blackness unknown to us from which he couldn't escape?

It's a common story, but it happened to my brother, who was tall, who could quote lines from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, could in the course of a long lunch fill a kitchen with more dirty pots and pans than you thought possible, could palm a basketball, and who once said of a too-loud, too-cocky friend of mine: "He got told he was smart once and never forgot it."

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It's not my fault, either, that this one mosquito found me so easily. They like type-O blood, people who breathe out lots of carbon dioxide, higher levels of carboxylic acids on the skin, higher body temperatures, beer drinkers, bright colors. A lot of it has to do with genetics, that old prison. Of the mosquito's 72 types of odor receptors in their antennae, 27 are devoted to the chemicals found in sweat. I've perhaps got some combination of all of these in a slightly sweeter mixture than you.

It takes a few minutes for the itch to come and, often, with it, come three, four others, always where the skin is softest and most hair-free: the insides of the forearms, the backs of the upper arms, sometimes even at the temples, once or twice on the eyelids. Mosquitoes, like vodka, will find your weak spot.

Jake tried cold turkey many times, one time frightening our parents when, wide-eyed, he described in great detail the mice covering the downstairs ceiling like a writhing carpet. He went to detox so that he could come to the dinner the night before my wedding. He was jittery, drugged, but he was there, picking at crabs with us on the waterfront. The next morning, in the little room in the courthouse decorated in strings of plastic flowers and pink paper hearts, he tugged on my suit sleeve and, smiling his old smile, said: "Don't back out."

It was the vodka. It was the hole. Who knows. Now, it's all swirling and sad and done with. It made him annoying, but he couldn't help it. He wasn't thinking about me that night he couldn't figure out North Avenue. He was thinking only of himself, because that's all he had the strength to do. That was his entire world, his whole fight. Jake would say to me, always when he was scooped-out: I don't have a purpose. We tried for twenty years to give him one, remind him, but that was never a job we were going to finish. Now, all I want to say to him is: it's OK. You're my brother, and you make me laugh, and we'll figure something out. Just stay here, with us.

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These days, I sometimes like to picture Jake doing what he was very best at, what brought him closest to flying. Before the bars, it was ballfields. We all like to picture him like this, because he was beautiful and because his beauty made us love the world. I played sports because of Jake, and while on every play I ate the insides of my cheeks, Jake glided, loped, danced. He was all ease. I'm seeing now Jake at seventeen, up in Mount Savage. I'm thirteen, sitting on those ice-cold, ice-hard bleachers, next to Ryan, twelve. Mom and Dad are on either side. Maybe there's hot chocolate in Styrofoam cups. While that field's not yet frozen, it will be by the first week of deer season.

Jake, in burgundy and yellow, all lank, forearms covered but thighs bare, breath fast and billowing, lurks at the top of the eighteen-yard box. In, bending toward the Mount Savage goal, comes the corner. The keeper, his business end gloved fists, dives. By an inch, he misses. But Jake, just past the goalie and pointed the other way like a sleek arrow, connects. Forehead to ball to the crink and sudden bulging of the net. It's another goal. After coming to rest, for a

moment, he lays facedown. I think about him there, breath and grass and dirt deep into his lungs. Everything else—the roar, the ride home, the girls, the night out with his friends—is in front of him. Up in the bleachers, we stand, and roar, and in that moment we are free and in love with Jake and all together again.

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Winegard hates mosquitoes, and I enjoy him for that. It's like reading a detailed history about how that one coworker you despise got fired for exactly the reasons you hate them. But his book can read like a 400-page exploration of the maxim that "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

It's not that I've come around on mosquitoes. They're the worst. But they're just trying to make eggs, man. I can picture saying this to Jake, at Geckos or Kokos or Kisling's or Appels or in the kitchen in Rawlings, just like that. He'd say: I guess, man. But I still like to smash them, though, and, for the trillionth time, two things are again true at once.

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What Jake did was not quantifiable, not in hours worked or money made, not in days sober. Before all of that, some Sunday that is gone but which is still glowing in my chest on nights I'm trying to fall asleep, when he was already bellied up to that bar, golf visor on, arms across his chest, he's looking up at the TV, laughing again. And then he's looking your way, again, as you walk into some bar you'd never been in before, and his smile is crooked and just what you'd come there to see.

Look at this guy, he'd say, rollin' in fresh with a tight haircut. And it's today, or just the other day, and time's all messed up now, and I asked him or just now I'm asking him if he's seen the Mike Tomlin press conference about rumors of him leaving the Steelers for a college job. But of course Jake's seen it, or would have seen it, and he would have loved that, loves that, would have been able to quote it even, and just now he's texting me about it, calling me, rehashing it, laughing all over again, saying I love that man, and he meant Mike Tomlin but also me, would

have meant me and all of us, and then we'd talk about some dickhead wearing his mask below his nose, or how he took Mom out for crabs, and would you believe it but this time of year, this far into fall, there were mosquitoes out there? Smashed like a hundred of them, he would have said, is saying. And I said, am saying, the worst, right? Just doing their thing, he's saying, those mosquitoes. But so are you, I say.

Seth Sawyer's writing has appeared in *The Rumpus, The Millions, Salon, Southeast Review, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Sports Illustrated, The Morning News, River Teeth, Fourth Genre, Quarterly West, Crab Orchard Review, Ninth Letter, Phoebe*, and elsewhere. He has been awarded scholarships and residencies to the Sewanee Writers' Conference, Writers@Work, and VCCA, and was an Emerging Writer in Residence at Penn State Altoona.