

LINE NINE
NOAH BURD



E

F P

T O Z

L P E D

P E C F D

E D F C Z P

F E L O P Z D

D E F P O T E C

L E F O D P C T

F D P L T C E O

P E Z O L C F T D

D E F P O T E C

L E F O D P C T

F D P L T C E O

P E Z O L C F T D

“D,” he says, and before he can live through the ramifications of this decision, he regrets it and imagines instead a world where he says B.

“Okay,” says the optometrist’s assistant.

The room is quiet as she makes notes that Ryan can’t see. It’s not a particularly friendly office, but then that doesn’t seem to be the point. The stakes don’t seem all that significant. Still, he can’t help but hear the room let out a sigh, as though its been caught holding its breath the entire time that he was reading the chart.

His skin is cold even though it’s the middle of summer. Somebody has let the air conditioning go too long and nobody else seems to have noticed, so now there’s a chill running down Ryan’s shirt and into his stomach that makes him consider asking the optometrist’s assistant if they could reschedule for another time to allow him to return with a sweatshirt.

“Again,” says the optometrist’s assistant, switching the letters. “Line nine.”

Ryan struggles through another series of letters like tiny Rorschach tests, seeing variably a T, an L, and a butterfly. The optometrist’s assistant doesn’t say anything: she doesn’t give him any hints or betray with a frown any sort of pride or displeasure.

He finishes the line to the applause of pen marks

and clock ticks. Ryan's mind wanders as the optometrist's assistant finishes scribbling down notes on a sheet of paper and hides it in a manila folder.

"Okay," she says. "Dr. Hufferman will be with you in a few minutes."

Ryan imagines that Dr. Hufferman will be old, but he's in his mid-30s, which is old for a Ryan, but pretty young for a Dr. Hufferman.

"So," says the doctor, as he leads Ryan down a hallway. "Hāě yŭ bêǵñ having any pröblem̄s with your eyēs?"

Ryan hesitates. "What was that?"

"Eyes. Any problems?"

"Oh. Nope," Ryan says. "Don't think so."

The answer comes automatically. No problem here. It takes him a second to realize how ahead of his mind he has let his mouth run, which embarrasses him, and he resolves not to answer other questions with such unchecked haste. But now he wonders: has there been anything wrong with his eyes? He attempts to cycle through a few images in his mind—snapshots of a camping trip from the previous fall; a painting of clocks that he had wanted to see, then seen; Julia's



body and all its secrets learned and lost—but he thinks the blurriness more a matter of memory than of vision.

“Nothing I can *think* of,” he adds.

“When was the last time you saw an optometrist?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” says Ryan. “Maybe when I was about nine.”

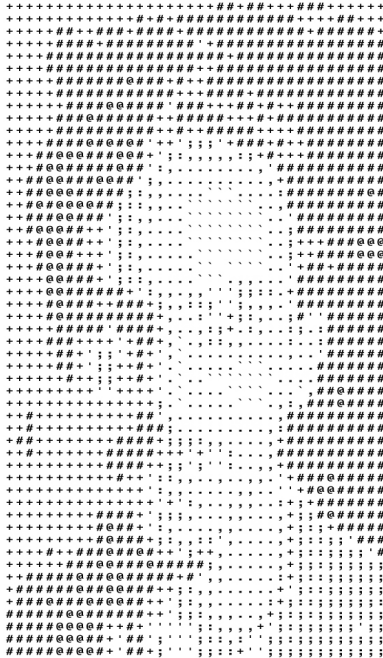
When he was a child, he was referred to an optometrist by a psychologist who thought that there was something wrong with the way he saw the world. The psychologist had given him one of those comic puzzles, where Ryan was supposed to put the panels in order. The linchpin to the whole thing had been this squash racket that appeared in all the panels. Ryan had seen the racket, but didn’t know about squash, so when he put the pieces in order, he’d assumed it was a story about a man smashing an ancient Greek urn against a tennis ball. At this, the psychologist recommended a different kind of professional intervention.

Dr. Hufferman chuckles.

“So it’s been a little while,” he says, opening a door and gesturing Ryan through.

Despite not having been to an optometrist since he was very young, Ryan finds that the room is much as

About the Author



Noah Burd is a writer located in Philadelphia. He is the founder of Jetsam Press, where he publishes short-form fiction, poetry, and literary objects. Contact him on the web at www.JetsamPress.com or [@woahburd](https://twitter.com/woahburd).