

Ashes

by CL Bledsoe

He woke with the taste of ashes, though, with the new filters in the air conditioning system, that was impossible. Still, he tasted them. He was pretty sure it was from a dream, but he couldn't remember what he'd dreamed since he started the new prescription. Better than remembering, probably.

He rose, showered, ate in a daze, still feeling the residual effects of the medication. It would be like that for a couple weeks, the doctor had told him, until he got used to it. Then he wouldn't notice.

He turned the radio to the only station that didn't have a talk show in the morning—classical, though they still had news. He was thinking about what he had to do that day, listening to news reports about fires, always more fires. You'd think everything would be burned by now. He thought back to when he was a kid, when fires were rare, back when it was just starting to warm up. Now, the Midwest was ashes. The oceans were covered with hydroponics plant growth. When he was a kid, land being covered with trees and grass meant it was undeveloped, rural, poor; now, it was a sign of immense wealth. It meant that the owner could afford to pay for the fire fighters to monitor the vegetation, the water that had to be constantly sprayed to keep the plants from spontaneously combusting. The old forests that he'd seen as a child were gone, either burned up or bulldozed for public safety. It was a shame. When he was a boy, his parents had taken him hiking every weekend, during the summers. As he grew older, they were able to go in winter, too, as it grew warmer. Then it grew too warm. But it was the way of the world.

He pulled into his parking space without even remembering how he'd gotten there. The medication, again. He locked his car, donning his protective hat, breather, and sunglasses. The radio said it was 120 degrees, so it was cooling off for the weekend. He ran from his car to the door, the heat slapping at his

body. Inside, the air conditioning made it thirty degrees cooler. He passed through the lobby, past the elevators, and to the arboretum.

In the middle of the building, the ceiling rose and enclosed a small grove of trees in a greenhouse. On his lunch breaks, he liked to sneak down and just watch the trees, breathing in their clean, car freshener smell through the vents. There were birds, a very expensive rarity, and bugs, also, though they were mechanical. Sometimes, if he closed his eyes, he could imagine himself back on those childhood hikes, his father in the lead, Mom trailing behind. They'd both died in the riots that followed the bull-dozings, unable to change with the times. But he didn't like to think about that. He didn't like to think about anything. He just closed his eyes, leaned against the glass, almost able to touch one of the tall trees a gardener had told him was an oak. The air was so thick with their smell he could taste it. It tasted like something familiar he couldn't quite place.

