

A HABIT OF WASTE



by **nalo hopkinson**

*These are the latitudes of the ex-colonised,
of degradation still unmollified,
imported managers, styles in art,
second-hand subsistence of the spirit,
the habit of waste,
mayhem committed on the personality,
and everywhere the wrecked or scuttled mind.
Scholars, more brilliant than I could hope to be,
advised that if I valued poetry,
I should eschew all sociology.*

-Slade Hopkinson, excerpt from "The Madwoman of Papine: Two Cartoons With Captions"

That sage advice about which my father writes in his poem has echoes for me of when people say that science fiction writers aren't to be taken seriously because we don't write "real" literature. Here's an excerpt from my first published short story, A Habit of Waste:

I was nodding off on the streetcar home from work when I saw the woman getting on. She was wearing the body I used to have! The shock woke me right up: it was my original; the body I had replaced two years before: same full, tarty-looking lips; same fat thighs, rubbing together with every step; same outsize ass; same narrow torso that seemed grafted onto a lower body a good three sizes bigger, as though God had glued left-over parts together. On my pay, I'd had to save for five years before I could afford the switch. When I ordered the catalogue from MediPerfiction, I pored over it for a month, drooling at the different options: arrow-slim "Cindies" had long, long legs - ("supermodel quality"). "Indiras" came with creamy brown skin, falls of straight, dark hair and curvaceous bodies - ("exotic grace").

I finally chose one of the "Dianas" with their lithe muscles and small, firm breasts - ("boyish beauty"). They downloaded me into her as soon as I could get the time off work. I was back on the job in four days, although my fine muscle control was still a little shaky.

And now, here was someone wearing my old cast-off. She must have been in a bad accident: too bad for the body to be salvaged. If she couldn't afford cloning, the doctors would have just downloaded her brain into any donated discard. Mine, for instance. Poor thing, I thought. I wonder how she's handling that chafing problem. It used to drive me mad in the summer. I watched her put her ticket in the box. The driver gave her a melting smile. What did he see to grin at?

I studied my former body carefully as it made its way down the centre of the streetcar. I hated what she'd done to the hair--let it go natural, for Christ's sake, sectioned it off, and coiled black thread tightly around each section, with a puff of hair on the end of every stalk. Man, I hated that back-to-Africa nostalgia shit. She looked like a Doctor Seuss character.

There's no excuse for that nappy-headed nonsense. She had a lot of nerve, too, wrapping that behind in a flower print sarong mini-skirt. Sort of like making your ass into a billboard. When it was my body, I always covered its butt in long skirts or loose pants. Her skirt was so short that I could see the edges of the bike shorts peeking out below it. Well, it's one way to deal with the chafing. Strange, though; on her, the little peek of black shorts looked stylish and sexy all at once. Far from looking graceless, her high, round bottom twitched confidently with each step, giving her a proud sexiness that I had never had. Her upper body was sheathed in a white sleeveless t-shirt. White! Such a plain colour. To tell the truth, though, the clingy material emphasized her tiny waist, and the white looked really good against her dark skin. Had my old skin always had that glow to it? Such firm, strong arms... All the seats on the streetcar were taken. Good. Let the bitch stand. I hoped my fallen arches were giving her hell.