

Her Seal Skin Coat

By Lauren Beukes

solarpunk // transhumanism // expedition

The London Reader's Foreword: Could virtual reality bring us closer to the natural world and perhaps our true nature? In this elegant short story, Lauren Beukes imagines an experience like a live nature documentary that links her main character, Maia, to the seals hunting and swimming beneath the ice of Antarctica. She uses this immersive virtual reality to explore disembodiment, a difficult experience for some neuro-divergent people. Beukes took inspiration from her own trip to the endangered continent where wealthy vacationers and scientists come face to face with the sublime beauty of icebergs and sea mammals. It led to her truly original take on the cyberpunk theme of an impoverished jockey jacking-in to virtual reality at the behest of wealthy corporate benefactors; however, here the impoverished protagonist is the increasingly familiar academic desperate for funding. Beukes takes us into new solarpunk territory beneath the ice of a natural habitat that is fast disappearing.

About the Author: Lauren Beukes is the award-winning and internationally best-selling author of five novels, including *Zoo City*, winner of the Arthur C Clarke Award, and *The Shining Girls*, soon to be a major television series starring Elizabeth Moss. Her novel *Broken Monsters* features social media and a killer trying to remake the world in his image and was named best suspense novel in the ALA's 2015 Reading List. Lauren Beukes has been called "a major, major talent" by George RR Martin and she is also the winner of the University of Johannesburg Prize for South African Writing in English. Her new novel *Afterland*, a post-pandemic dystopian neo-noir chase set in a world of women, is available for pre-order. She lives in Cape Town, South Africa with her daughter. You can find her online at laurenbeukes.com

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Some kind of communion

THE BIG GUY from Kansas City flops about half-heartedly inside the sensory immersion tank. He's not into it, Maia can tell, even as his dutiful wife films the experience, zooming in on his face, expressionless behind the regulator that fills his mouth, the oversized goggles that let him see in first person. Not "like a video game"—Maia shuts down that terminology. It raises expectations, and you're not in control here.

'Is it called a seal suit because you're *sealed* up inside it?' one of the waiting teenagers quips, all skinny limbs and natty hair and nerves. Maia chuckles, as if she hasn't heard the joke a hundred times before from a hundred other *Antarctica Experience!* guests waiting their turn in the tank. The kid is one of the family from Ghana, doctors or something, who have brought their three teens to come see the ends of the earth.

(The end of the earth.)

At least they're showing an interest, paying thousands of dollars to weather the Drake Passage to get here in real life. Gourmet meals, two expeditions a day out to the Peninsula with expert guides and scientists, snow shoeing, kayaking, penguins, whale-spotting, and check out our unique new on-board feature, "Inside the Mind of a Weddell Seal". Of course, that's not accurate, it's still *your* mind inside the body of a Weddell seal. And isn't that the problem?

The bio-feedback nodes built into the suit light up along the length of Mr Kansas City's body, his decidedly unseal-like limbs flailing around. He's moving too much, out of sync with the Weddell he's live-connected to: Juniper, a female nudging her recalcitrant pup into the ice hole and the black beneath the ice. It's a special moment, wasted on him.

She knows he would want to be in one of the fighting males—they're out there; she's seen their intertwined bio-signatures on the scope. Fig and Boris Karlov. (These are not their real names, which are not names at all, but serial numbers for scientific purposes to attach to the data.) She knows they're pretzelling around each other in battle, chewing each other's faces bloody and raw, sick with territorial adrenaline. She could easily switch him into one of them, give him the cheap visceral thrill, earn big five stars on his TripAdvisor review—but violence is a kind of pornography.

And hey, could have set her watch to it: he's bored already. Premature ejection! The big guy hauls himself out of the tank, pushing the goggles up to the top of his head.

'Is that *it?*' he says, peeling off half-a-million dollars' worth of SBI (Subjective Behavioural Immersion) equipment, the suit puddling at his big, pale feet, the haptic sensors dimmed. He sucks his teeth. 'Kinda dull,' he tells his wife. He's got one of those broad, flat American faces, button nose, floppy black hair, thick eyebrows like punctuation marks. She has to make a mental checklist of the different passengers to be able to tell them apart. Technically, it's not face-blindness; she has not (yet) mistaken anyone for a hat. Call it face-disinterest. They're not seals. Humans all look the same to her.

He towels his hair into sea urchin spikes and gives her a sorry-not-sorry grin, slabs of white teeth in his mouth.

'You know what would be fan-fucking-tastic? A killer whale immerse. You should add that to the program!'

'Fraid we can't,' Maia smiles, because she has to, because the Guest Experience trumps everything else on board. Killer whales are the only other species apart from pilot whales and humans that go through menopause. She wonders if Mr Kansas City would like to immerse through *that*, because it's not much fun, she can tell you.

'Isn't it because Weddell seals are the only animals that will let us get close enough to install the cranial rig?' the Ghanaian teenager chips in. Baby science nerd over here actually paid attention during the briefing. She appreciates him.

'*Exactement,*' she says, cringing at herself as the word comes out. 'Killer

whales and leopard seals would eat you for lunch. Humpbacks scrape the rigs off. Weddells and elephant seals are the only ones who will tolerate it – they’re the best Antarctic scientists we have...’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Kansas City interrupts, standing there in his boxer shorts. ‘I get it, I get it. Deepest divers...’

‘One of the deepest divers—’ she corrects automatically.

‘Only mammals able to get under the ice shelf. I’m just saying killer whales would be cool.’ He checks his big dumb gold watch. ‘Is the bar open yet?’

‘Half an hour,’ Maia says. Smiling.

‘Can I go next?’ the teen says. She softens for him, his raw, shining enthusiasm.

‘Let’s get you in that suit already!’ Maia says. She’s trying. She really is. She’s just not good with people.

Stolen

They all steal time, the expedition guides. Every one of them is overqualified for this, underpaid, but it means they can be here at all. Science is competitive; getting a grant or landing a position on a devoted research vessel, or at one of the research bases, is hard. Harder still if you’re over forty. Or fifty. Or fifty-one and a half.

Worse, you could get a position and lose it. You could have a falling-out with your lover at the-base-that-will-not-be-named, which makes it impossible for you to stay, because he *makes* it impossible for you to stay.

Dr Casey Armstrong could tell you that regrettably, he’s had to advise management to shut down the SBI unit, because immersion is too expensive and indulgent, it takes up too much bandwidth, that the raw data the seals send back from radio signals (old-school tech from the 20teens) is enough to capture and relay the most urgent concerns, changing currents and water temperatures.

He could tell you that animal science is all about genetics and sequencing these days, behaviour is out of fashion—and honestly, babe, science doesn’t need you to *feel*. Which would be rich, you could throw back in his face, because he’s all feels, all the time: jealous, insecure, controlling.

He could retort that he *should* be first in your life. You could reply that *you*

are first in your life, asshole, because, hey surprise, you're a full human being. He could laugh and say sometimes he's not so sure. And he'd be right. He'd be wrong about everything else, including the reasons you loved him. But not that.

And you'd have to pack up your gear and go, find something new, because he was doing important life-or-death actual climate work, and you were just one of the *mammal people*.

Dysmorphia

Four thirty am, while the guests are still dreaming in their berths, she gets up from her bed in the cramped cabin she shares with Ana, the nineteen-year-old Filipino server, who comes in reeking of cigarillos late at night, too loud, which is not her fault. Maia slips out and up the stairs, to the immersion room, which takes up the area of two full berths that could be rented out to paying guests. It's an indulgence here, too.

She pulls on the suit, hoping no-one has peed in it, straps on the master controller that lets her skip between animals in range, and lowers herself into the warm brine of the tank. It's smoother and slicker than water, a kind of breathable saline solution. There's less friction, a better approximation of how the environment absorbs the seals, effortlessly one with the ocean.

She jumps, without knowing who she's reaching for. Juniper, lolling topside on the ice, her pup Paprika flopped half on top of her. She can feel the comfort of his weight through the sensors on her suit, a spike of anxiety that she's come to recognize as hunger. Juniper has lost almost half her body weight nursing him through the summer, practically wasting away.

'They're such great mothers,' Casey said, meaningfully, a hundred years ago in her previous life (sixteen months, her last birthday at the base). It took her too long to realize that when he was talking about 'his legacy', he wasn't only referring to his publications—somewhere along the way he'd changed his mind about reproduction as the single most selfish act a human could indulge in. Genetics is in. But Maia has never wanted children.

She slides into Fred Astaire, drowsing in the water, hanging still and easy. He stirs, does a slow twirl, as if he can sense that Maia is connected to him and he's putting on a show. (There is no indication that the seals can detect when

their rigs are transmitting information to a human immerser.)

More likely, he's checking on his breathing hole. Weddells live and die by their access to air. They grind their teeth against the ice to widen their holes or keep them open against the elements closing in. They guard them ferociously, especially from attack from below. If you get lost down there, if the hole closes up, if your teeth wear down with age, that's it. Science feels the same sometimes, Maia thinks, all of them guarding their holes, their grants, their research positions, their tenure.

She switches consciousness again, into Ginger Rogers, who is fishing. Heightened focus, adrenaline, her vibrissae quivering, cat-like, detecting current, movement.

Buoyant is another word for happy. The electronic fritz and crackle of seal songs carries through the water. Like a Skrillex track, one of the admiring teenagers observed. Or a dial-up modem sound, the mum said, and the teens wrinkled their faces.

Ginger/Maia dives into the dark in a sharp parabola, then back towards the surface. The ice shelf above looks like rolling eddies of Magellanic Cloud, a Turner painting of a storm, slashed with blinding white and turquoise in the cracks where the twenty-four-hour sunlight is shining through.

And there: Ginger/Maia's prey, an emerald cod, perfectly backlit. This is intentional. Like blowing bubbles through the cracks in the ice to stir fish into flight. A flood of adrenaline and happy satisfaction as she torpedoes into it, and teeth designed for this purpose shear through the fish-flesh. Maia can almost taste the blood in her mouth. Her other-mouth.

When she emerges, forty-eight minutes later, a man is waiting for her. One of the guests—she's seen him on deck. Bronzed skin and slick hair, mid-thirties, handsome in a cultivated way, like his cultivated belly. Or it might simply be the charisma of the very rich. He buys expensive rounds at the bar, but she hasn't spoken to him, or caught his name.

'Dev,' he says, handing her a towel. 'I was hoping to catch you.'

'You're not supposed to be in here,' she tells him, self-conscious, wrapping the towel around her. She doesn't wear anything under the skin. Being naked feels more natural, as close as she can get to the dappled grey palomino of her

seals.

Dev shrugs, grinning. 'I need to pitch you a wild idea.'

'I can't put you in a killer whale,' she sighs.

'Oh no, I have no interest in using that thing.' He flicks a disdainful glance at the tank. 'I want you to find something for me.'

A history of explorers

Antarctica was discovered by sealers. They followed the fur seals all the way home, and they found them on the icy shores where they lived, and they killed them and killed them and killed them, by the millions, until there were only a few hundred left on the craggiest and most inaccessible rocks. The explorers followed, marking their territory like dogs pissing on fences, conquering and laying claim. Weddell seals take their name from their genocidaire.

But that's the refreshing thing about Weddell seals. They don't give a shit: about their name, about humans, who, because the seals don't have any predators here, can walk right up to them on the ice, about the lightweight cranial rigs those same humans install on them.

She's not good at giving a shit either. Kansas City has registered a complaint about her attitude; somehow he got wind that there were territorial males in the vicinity, and that 'fat cow' deprived him of exactly the kind of experience he's paying for, and what does that say about the professionalism on board this vessel, and you can bet he's going to escalate it to management.

Natasha, the expedition leader, rolls her eyes. 'Same old, wanting wild animals to perform on schedule. But Maia, please, can you at least try to give them what they want? Every passenger becomes an ambassador.'

'No promises,' she says. Already considering Dev's offer: as many hours immersed as she can handle, all day, every day, and, less interesting, a quest of the kind that men like him can hang their egos on.

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Which is how, two months later, she finds herself on the deck of Dev's

superyacht as he holds court over an investors' dinner party. The icebergs rise up around them like sunken Alps driven into the coal-black sea. No matter that they're off the coast of the Peninsula, miles from the Weddell Sea, they get the picture.

'This will be the greatest undersea archaeological expedition since the Titanic,' Dev proclaims. 'But James Cameron had submarines, and we have a wreck that is beyond the reach of even the most sophisticated autonomous underwater vehicles.' He's wearing black-and-white cold-weather gear styled to mimic a tuxedo. It naturally makes him look like a penguin, which *could* be intentional, Maia supposes, to add to his eccentric charm, this billionaire pitching those investors brave enough to fly out here to hear his spiel about the new golden age of exploration. To her, it sounds like craven nostalgia for the old one, trying to add yourself to the pantheon of the great men—the Scotts and the Shackletons. You know what the great thing is about gods and monsters, she thinks, while Dev raises his champagne flute: the money they can raise to throw after the promise of adventure.

'The Endurance became frozen in place in 1915 and was crushed in the teeth of the ice pack—a "painful spectacle of chaos and wreck"' (Maia likes to think of it being chewed up like a seal munches a fish.) 'The wooden ship sank into the black and frigid depths of what Shackleton called, "the worst portion of the worst sea in the world". But as the man himself said, "difficulties are just things to overcome." We will overcome the "evil conditions", we will find the tall masts of that barquentine vessel in the cold dark graveyard where she rests, by using the most disruptive technology we have... nature.'

She realises they're all looking at her. Some of the women are shivering in their gowns under their heavy jackets, aching for them to wrap up the speeches so they can go back inside. You need more blubber, she thinks. She raises her glass in acknowledgement. 'To nature,' she says.

Some wit leans over to his companion barely two seats away. 'I know people start to resemble their pets, but I didn't realize it happened between scientists and their subjects too.' His friend jabs him with her elbow.

‘To our SBI unit!’ Dev says and his audience whoops and stamps their feet; although, perhaps that’s to ward off the cold. ‘To the seals! To our endeavour! To Endurance!’

Later, she will help some of the guests into the tank, tipsy on champagne and the wonder of the icelands around them, to try out immersion for themselves. All part of the package. Along with a promise of the percentage of the merchandise. Like Shackleton’s whiskey, rescued from the ice beneath his hut a century later, there is the promise of spoils as well as glory.

‘So how do you direct them?’ one of the women asks, shark-eyed in her bra and panties as she yanks on the suit. ‘Some kind of electric pulse in the rigging?’

‘You’d have to ask Dev about the technical specs,’ Maia demurs, but inside she’s seething.

The next day, when they have all flown home again, she confronts him.

‘You’re misrepresenting the technology. I can’t guide where the seals go. Some woman asked if it was electroshocks. Electroshocks! You’re lying to them, Dev.’

‘I’m exaggerating. They want guarantees. You and I know that’s what it takes, telling them what they want to hear. It’s all compromise, Maia. We’ll get the results in the end,’ he winks.

But will they? She’s not so sure. Maybe she already mentioned this, but seals don’t give a damn about what you want.

Endurance

Maia flicks one hand out, in echo with her seal, mere milliseconds behind her, as Cher/Maia makes a sharp curve to the left. All the hours and hours and hours uninterrupted in immersion have made her more attuned. She lives and breathes seals for fourteen to sixteen hours a day, only clambering out of the tank because Dev insists she can’t sleep in there, and she has to eat. The ghost sensation of fish or favourite octopus in her *other-mouth* don’t contain actual nutrients. But it’s irritating every time she has to emerge. At least seals are also awkward, clumsy, lunking on land.

Cher/Maia cruises in a wide parabola over the rocky corals, a bright

starfish. The drifts of krill and ice floe are like milky stars in the black. Maia wishes herself deeper. A week ago, she caught a glimpse of something that might have been a mast. But of course, wishing doesn't work (if wishes were fishes...) and Cher/Maia goes where she wants, which is out, today, into the wider ocean, and Maia is about to switch away, to find another seal closer to the best guess they have at the coordinates where the ship was swallowed by the ice, when there is a blur of motion. Her system floods with corresponding adrenaline. An electronic call wrenched from Cher/Maia, a warning maybe, and then the white panda eyes coming out of the dark, the teeth in the black, and the orca is on her. A terrible pressure registering in the suit, too much to bear. Pain. Blood in the water. Murder on the dance floor, Maia thinks wildly. And she is hauling herself out of the tank, gasping, ripping the suit off before she's even breached. Get it off get it off.

She lies heaving on the wetroom floor. The teeth coming out of the black. So sudden. The pressure.

'Are you alright?' Dev pokes his head in the door. 'Phil said there was a major spike in the readings...' She opens her eyes, reaches out a hand for him.

'Woah, woah, woah, what happened here?' He kneels down next to her. 'Are you crying? Wait.... Did you find it?'

'No.' She gulps a sob. The white eyes in the dark. 'I think. I died. A killer whale.'

Dev frowns. 'I thought they didn't come under the ice.'

'Open ocean.'

'Oh well, you shouldn't have been out there—I mean, I'm sorry, that sounds traumatic as hell. I hope you're okay.'

'I'll be fine,' she rolls over, heaves herself up. The sharp teeth like a smile. 'Really,' she waves his hand away.

'Okay. I mean, obviously I care about your welfare. But what were you even doing out there?' he laughs, uncomfortable. 'I'm not paying you to play around in seals all day.'

No, she thinks, you're paying me so you can play at being an explorer.

'Do you need a drink? Because you look like you need a drink.'

'I'll be fine. I said. Got to get back to work.' Whatever it takes.

'If it's too much for you, I could probably get someone else in. You could do shifts. You're not the only immerse expert.'

She has to endure. This. The outside world. This man holding her skin.

Maia takes his wrist, looks him dead in the eyes (still seeing that panda white, overlaying his face like a skull). 'Difficulties are just things to overcome, right? I'll find you what you want. Eventually.'

Science is curiosity. It's connection.

Sometimes it's compromise. You have to guard your breathing hole.

She gets back in the tank, not because he wants her to, not because she needs to overcome the fear before it sets in, but because it's the only place Maia is truly herself.