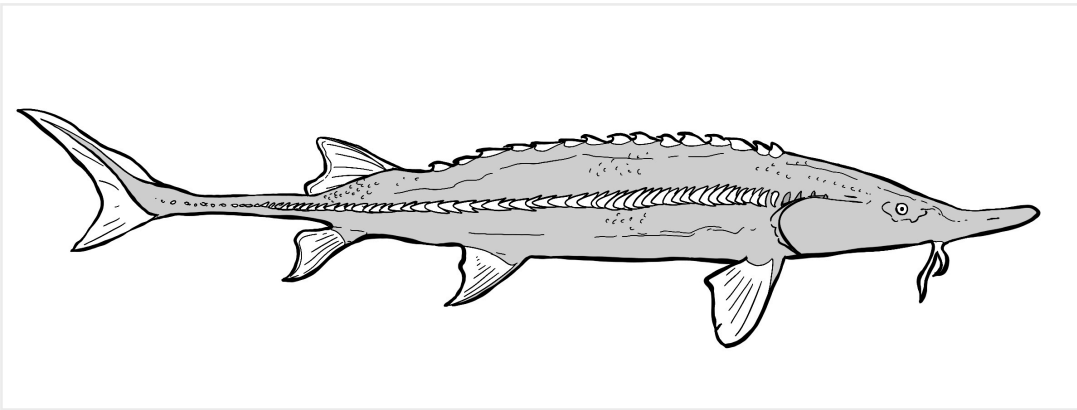


Fishsuit!
by Kaia Aitchison



Ah, to swim idly in the green waters. To drift on the current and let it tug on one's fins- that was the embodiment of peace. A shiver was sent up his lateral stripe as something moved past. A fish's stripe is an organ of sight, sensing light and dark, alerting him of movement. His eyes, yellow orbs in which floated a perfectly round pupil, swiveled toward the flash of silver, a bluegill slipping away into the reeds. Fishsuit turned, his tail beating the water in a single powerful stroke. He plunged into the dark mass of the reeds, driven by a sudden hunger. Several smaller fish scattered on sight of him. He could taste the bluegill and the iron-rich trail it left behind. Had Fishsuit been anywhere else, he may have pondered what brought about its injury but instinct led him on- all he thought about was the joy of the chase, the simple pleasure.

He came to the sunfish breeding grounds, innumerable shallow pits dug into the mud. As his shadow passed overhead, all cowered before the king of Poplar Lake. The tail of the injured bluegill flashed brightly as the animal darted behind a submerged log, black, sulfurous and dead as it sat among the graveyard of trees. Fishsuit turned. The trail of the small fish had ended quite abruptly. He surveyed his surroundings and saw the log which seemed to emanate the scent of his prey. He approached it. This had once been the hollow trunk of a tree, the gnarled kind. In its day branches had fallen off and healed into large welts, knots in the wood. Those nodules had then sunken out, leaving three or four small holes. This was only a section of the tree, perhaps a meter long. The bluegill had crept up into the hollow mass. Fishsuit swam to one end of the log and looked in. There he saw glinting scales. Unable to fit through the opening, he beat himself against the side of the wooden chamber in hopes of driving out the smaller fish. This was in vain. He then peered through one of the holes and saw that the position of his prey had not changed. He hovered there for a moment, the movements of his fins stirring up a cloud of sediment. Fish do not frown. They do not growl or murmur, and their lack of expression may shroud them in a cloak of tepid indifference. With not the slightest hint of disappointment on his face, Fishsuit swam toward the bright surface. Sunbeams shone through the water and cast him in a green light as he ascended from the murk. There he hovered below the filmy surface, watching the

shadows of insects and small birds pass overhead.

He was safe. There were no diseases that he could contract, for the water was tested biweekly and the flow of foreign runoff was restricted by a deep moat and drain system. He was the longest, the strongest- the king. A cunning creature, he knew when the larger birds swooped over in search of food. He sensed their presence long before their arrival, the disruptions they caused in the light and air pressure. Upon discovery of such a creature he would plunge away into the inky bottom and there he would stay as the predator passed. But today only mallards and crows flew over, neither which posed a threat to such a large sturgeon. A frog paddled by and he swiftly leapt upon it and swallowed the amphibian in a single watery gulp. The sun poured across his plated scales, a warm, soothing presence. Then came the call. A buzz at the back of his skull heralded the arrival of a voice.

"Can you hear me? It's Otis."

"OTIS OVERTURF. INTRODUCTIONS ARE NOT A NECESSITY. I AM ALWAYS ALERTED OF THE CALLER'S UNIQUE NUMBER SEQUENCE. I HAVE COME TO RECOGNIZE YOURS."

"I am also the one who most commonly reaches out to you." There may have been no tonal inflection over the cranial transmission system, and Fishsuit would have been unable to detect it had there been any, but Otis was saying this with a wry humor. "Were you aware of our plans? I have been telling you all week- I wanted to attend the Marine Biology Conference in Columbus, Ohio."

"YOU WANTED TO EXHIBIT MY UNUSUAL QUALITIES AND FORTUITOUS INTELLECT. I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT THOSE PLANS HAD NOT BEEN SECURED."

"Your intellect is certainly a fortunate thing. And yes, that so happens to be my plan. The booths were sold out... and I know jack-squat about marine biology, but I bought a booth for three times the price and evicted some scientist. The hotel simply could not refuse the money... you see, humans are simple creatures. Know the way they work, know how to influence them. You are always trying to manage my welfare but this recent purchase made not the slightest dent in my wallet. I could buy the neighborhood and still not see the difference."

"AM I CORRECT IN MY ASSUMPTION THAT THIS IS A USE OF A HYPERBOLE, AN EXAGGERATED STATEMENT WITH THE PURPOSE OF EXPRESSING YOUR OPINION BOLDLY?"

"Yes Fishsuit, you are correct. As always." On the other end of the 400 acre estate, Otis paused his transmission and the quiet buzzing pressure in the sturgeon's mind was briefly absent. Otis chewed on his lip and considered what he would tell the fish next. With a mental signal, he reopened the electric current. "We leave tonight. Got to be there by 9 o'clock tomorrow morning and we have got a bit of driving to do, seven to ten hours depending on traffic. I have a route planned for us. Your sleeping schedule is a bit different from mine... you appear to have an endless and undying stamina—so, you may drive. It's wonderful that you have a license now. I believe the novelty of your presence has bought your citizenship."

"AND YOUR MONEY."

"That too."

"I WILL RETURN NOW. FISHSUIT WILL SEE YOU IN APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES."

The sigh that ensued did not transmit over the network. Otis had been fine tuning the fish's linguistic abilities. The sturgeon knew English well enough along with Spanish, basic French and aspects of Mandarin and Portuguese. Eventually he would speak every language there was- and fluently, so the rich man hoped. The sturgeon was still learning certain peculiarities of the English language, such as the context in which the use of 'Fishsuit' and 'me' were acceptable. Otis reminisced over the fascinating history of the fish, how the AI brain chip had introduced the possibility of language. How surprised were Overturf and his team when they discovered this. Never did they think the experiment would amount to much... yet it had, quickly. Fishsuit was an innovation of modern tech. He was growing in popularity as was his creator, Overturf, and it seemed as though copycats were inevitable. Others, fans and followers of the sturgeon, would create similar creatures.

Otis was somewhat baffled by the sense of up coming doom this thought instilled within him. The idea of more Fishsuits— ones who did not belong to him and never would—they seemed like monsters, creatures of darkness. He couldn't trust that they would not turn against their human forebears without his direct guidance and influence. If only he could patent this creation... He chuckled, somewhat amused by the absurdity of the situation and this imagined revolt.

Fishsuit, somewhat perturbed by this recent disruption, was on his way back toward the residence when it struck him what a fortunate yet cursed thing he was. Deprived of a fish's inherent struggles- hunger, disease and predation, he was in some ways a bit too secure. His existence was lacking in something although he could not define the essence of his unease in clear terms. Knowledge of the world one lives within gives a person leverage on life. With such knowledge and language at his disposal the sturgeon had already gone far beyond what any of his kind had previously accomplished, or so he reminded himself when feeling down. It would be nice to simply live and not think in words. To feel and do without questioning the action, may it be life or death. He silently considered this as he slid into the broad metal pipe that would lead him to the villa.

There came a door, a plain sheet of stainless steel, split down the middle by an impermeable seam. He thought of its irony. It did not matter how watertight it was when holes were punched in the door with the sole purpose of allowing water to filter through. Upon the approach of Fishsuit's chip the two halves of the door slid into invisible slots and he was allowed through. It then closed with an odd liquid thump that pushed through the water in a wave of light pressure. The tunnels beyond were of bulletproof glass, enabling Fishsuit to view the surrounding scenery which was arranged to satisfy his curiosity and fanciful eye. Around him was saltwater, carefully matching the pressurized tube in its downward push. Monstrous fish, seven feet long, passed above and beneath him. Every now and again one would press itself against the glass tube, watching the sturgeon. There

were many threatened and exotic varieties- Coelacanths, living fossils of a lost era and somewhat draconic in appearance. How Otis had gone about procuring those Fishsuit could only presume, considering the strict regulations protecting these rare deep-dwelling beasts. He supposed money bought all laws. There were Nassau groupers, an endangered large-mouthed variety of reef fish. Dark ruddy brown of scale and pinstriped with white, they were not the showiest of Otis's collection although they served their purpose. There were many other varieties, including new additions that the sturgeon did not bother to classify as he moved swiftly over the colorful marine landscape. He was not frightened by the massive yellow-finned swallowtail which lingered near the tube- he was well accustomed to its hawkish presence, for it came to watch him in his passing every day. The sturgeon failed to behold the new lights which had been installed in the diverse reef below- he was too deeply embedded in a frenzy of thoughts. The reef chamber ended and he passed through the next door.

Similar to the last, this was an aquatic museum of sorts, only it was more to the liking of Otis who could view it through a window on the third floor. There he stood now, surveying the scene as the sturgeon passed quickly through the glass tube. As it turned out, the rich man had a fondness for swamp biomes. Not only was there this luscious swamp scape aquarium he stared into for hours of the day, but his room was decorated with charts which read FISH & REPTILES OF THE MARSHLAND. There was even a taxidermy alligator head on his dresser. Behind closed doors he would confide in 'Alley' and tell her the trials and tribulations of his day.

A distant cousin residing in the northern reaches of Canada had once speculated that perhaps it was a feeling of deep loneliness and hermetic isolation that had brought about the invention of Fishsuit. Why Otis had cut himself off from society the way he had— it baffled family and estranged friends alike. The sturgeon was, in a way, forcing the reclusive middle aged man out into the world. The upcoming conference was one of the many recent events Otis and Fishsuit had attended. They had a certain shock value, you see. Enough people had heard of them that they had become the headliners at these gatherings and maintained a steadily growing presence on the internet. Event holders were starting to contact Otis, offering him free booths although the money meant nothing to him. They knew that his presence was valuable for it would draw a crowd. This marine biology conference had been a bit different, though- he had sought it out and entered on a whim.

The swamp aquarium held about 20,000 gallons of water and was the home to the caiman, the piranha and the auburn peacock bass as well as a few stranger varieties of creature. There was the arapaima, a long eel-like configuration with a tale flashing vermillion and a blunt silvery head. Resembling some dangerous beast of Amazonian legend it was the largest known freshwater fish, reaching up to 10 feet in length and amassing weights of over 400 pounds. There was the redbtail catfish, a portly bottom-dwelling creature that unwisely hid beneath the rocks where the caiman basked. They churned about moodily in the dark mud,

searching for eatables. Multitudes of Payara, silvery sharp-toothed beasts, drifted by in shimmering clouds. Some would venture right up to the glass and slide keenly over the surface as they tried and failed to access the scrumptious morsel within. Another door, this one with his name inscribed boldly upon it, opened up to the sturgeon and he found himself in a small aquarium. It was a bare glass case, rectangular and undecorated except for the red stones that lay on the floor. It was his sleeping chamber and also the door between two worlds, two ways of life- fish and human, land and air... which was he?

Otis still stood by the window, transfixed. A wan greenish light filtered through the bog and into the many windows where it played ghoulishly across his angular features. He had noticed Fishsuit's entrance, though whether he had spotted him sideways or sensed his presence via closeness of cranial network, there was no telling. In any event, he waited for the sturgeon's message.

"I AM HERE. I WILL PREPARE MY SUIT."

"That was fast. I'll leave you to it."

Fishsuit mentally located his 'body.' As if it were part of himself, the suit which had been leaning against the wall began to move forward by his will. Effortlessly it marched toward the glass and the sturgeon hopped through a flap located just above water level and swished into a bowl that sat between the shoulders of the suit. Air came in through a hole in the see-through globe and oxygenated the water. He moved his back fin as though swimming. The metallic legs began to mirror his motion and soon he was walking. He thought at Otis and words were uttered aloud through a powerful speaker.

"FISHSUIT IS READY."