

CityFish

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CityFish is a hybrid word, title of a hybrid work, tale of a hybrid creature. A big fish story swallowing a small tale's tail. A rhizome, a fable, an urban legend. Like an old wives' tale, it's long been told but is never quite finished. In its latest incarnation, *CityFish*¹ is a web-based hypermedia panoramic narrative. Completed in November 2010, with the support of a new media creation grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, *CityFish* was presented in Beta at "Archive & Innovate, The 4th International Conference & Festival of the Electronic Literature Organization," at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, USA, June 3-6, 2010. *CityFish* was also presented as a work-in-progress at "Interventions: Literary Practice at the Edge: A Gathering," at The Banff Centre, in Banff, Alberta, Canada, February 18, 2010. The Coney Island videos were shot on location in 2005 and edited during the "Babel Babble Rabble: On Language and Art" thematic residency at The Banff Centre in 2006. A very, very, very early web-based iteration of *CityFish* was presented in an exhibition called IBWAS, at the Bavarian American Hotel in Nuremberg, Germany, July 1998. That iteration incorporated a series of photographs shot on 35mm film in Chinatown, Toronto, circa 1996; a line drawing of a fish with a tall building for a tail, drawn at around the same time; and a very short story of the same name written in 1995 from the first-person point of view of a fish.

CityFish began as a simple story told by a simple fish, who was most unhappy about being caught, killed and offered up for sale, piled unceremoniously in a heap on a sidewalk fishmonger's stall on a hot summer day, on a narrow, crowded street in Chinatown, New York City. "What a fish, once was I," the fish reminisced. "A fish's fish, with fish's



¹ J. R. Carpenter, *CityFish*, <http://luckysoap.com/cityfish> 2010

thoughts inside my head.” Serious literary publications had no place for this fish story. Too short, for one thing, and not really a story, it was more of a parable, more of a rant. No one wants to read a talking dead fish rant, and no wonder. As the first *CityFish* bitterly observed, “No pity or gratitude or love or excitement is stirred by the sight of a fish.” Fish are far from us. Their stories breathe with gills, swim in deep cold water and are never still. They cannot help but seem strange to us. As Henry David Thoreau noted in *Cape Cod*, a book named after a piece of land named after a fish:


All that is told of the sea has a fabulous sound to an inhabitant of the land, and all its products have a certain fabulous quality, as if they belonged to another planet, from sea-weed to a sailor’s yarn, or a fish-story. In this element the animal and vegetable kingdoms meet and are strangely mingled.²

CityFish is a “strangely mingled” story, part classical parable, part children’s picture book, part literary fiction, part collage, part web art. *CityFish* has morphed and expanded over the years to more fully inhabit each of its referent forms. The line drawing was made into a rubber stamp, a paper bookmark and a transparent gif. The 35mm photographs taken in Toronto were scanned. More were taken in New York City, and hundreds more digital photographs were taken over the years in Chinatowns in New York, San Francisco, Toronto and Montreal. An archive of found images, maps, objects and quotations accrued. The very short story expanded in fits and starts into a regular-sized short story. The original city fish is still there, still pissed off, and still talking, but the point of view of the story has gradually shifted from first-person fish to third-person girl.

The protagonist of the latest iteration of *CityFish* is a Canadian girl named Lynne. During the winters, Lynne freezes in Celsius in the fishing village of Brooklyn, Nova Scotia (Canada) a few minutes walk from a white sandy beach.

² Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, Hyannis, Massachusetts: Parnassus Imprints, 1995

Summers, she suffers her city cousins, sweltering in Fahrenheit in Queens, New York (USA). By now Lynne knows everyone knows it's supposed to be the other way around. One very hot summer day in New York City, all the characters of all the different iterations of this story converge. The uncle, the aunt, the cousins and Lynne are walking around and around Chinatown looking for a restaurant that doesn't want to be found, and Lynne and the original city fish meet.

The web-based iteration of *CityFish* created in 1998 consisted of twelve serially linked HTML pages, each containing a small portion of text, an image, and a single navigational icon, a crudely drawn orange arrow. The arrow always  pointed forward. There was no back arrow. There was never more than one link per page. There were no opportunities offered for alternate readings. That *CityFish* made no attempt to tap into hypertext's potential for non-linear intertextual narrative fiction.

The orange arrow and four other images from that first web-based *CityFish* are reused in the new *CityFish*. Otherwise, visually, structurally, and programmatically the 1998 and 2010 iterations bear no resemblance. A dozen years have passed in between. The web, the world, narrative, and its readers have changed dramatically in that interim. Expansions, alteration and remediations of this story – made in direct response both to real and perceived limits in traditional literary print publishing and to the ever-increasing narrative possibilities presented by digital media – have transformed *CityFish*.

CityFish represents asynchronous relationships between people, place, perspective and time through a horizontally scrolling browser window suggesting a panorama, a diorama, a horizon line, a skyline, a timeline, a Torah scroll. This use of the horizontal scroll is informed by dioramas such as those found in the Museum of Natural History in New York City, and by Roderick Coover's Interactive Panoramic

Environments and Cinemascesapes, in particular, *Voyage into the Unknown*.³ The panorama and the diorama have traditionally been used in museums and landscape photography to establish hierarchies of value and meaning. Instead of painted backdrops, fake foliage and ethnographic artefacts, or, in the case of Coover's elegant work, Flash, *CityFish* uses basic HTML to combine contemporary short fiction and hypermedia storytelling forms, original, archival and found images, video and DHTML animation.

The entirety of *CityFish* is strung/hung along one long horizon line dividing the browser window into two halves: above, and below. This horizon is created in CSS. The "body" selector links to a tiling background file 1 pixel wide. The main HTML page is divided into named <div> tags ascribed fixed positions along this horizon line. The names of these sequentially positioned <div> tags describe their contents: "id=mapNYtoNS," "id=uarehere," "id=suitcase," "id=airplane," and so on. Each <div> is a narrative unit. Each paragraph, a building block; each image, a cutout, a layer, a leaver, a trapdoor, a flap. Approximately 140 <div> tags are laid out from left:0:px to left:23600px, comprising, in total, 328 inches, or, 27.3 feet. The top 300 pixels of the background file are white. This space may be read as sky, or as just plain empty. Below the 300-pixel mark the screen is a greyish blue. This space may be read as land, ocean, underground, or all three, depending on what's happening in the narrative. The below space is always harder to read. How far does below go? This question cannot be answered in pixels and does not depend on monitor size or screen resolution. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit suggests,

There's something fearful and mysterious about every body of water, murky water that promises unseen things in unseen depths, clear water that shows

³ Roderick Coover, *Unknown Territories*, <http://www.unknownterritories.org/> 2008

you the bottom far below as if you could fall into it, through though the water would buoy you in that strange space neither air nor ground.⁴

In *CityFish*, the horizon line is the story line, moving along inexorably linearly from left to right, while thoughts, images, associations and emotions jump about, crowd in and out, overlap and overstep the boundaries of the screen.

Formal changes to the narrative and media of *CityFish* have made apparent certain allegorical aspects of the story that had long been present but had previously only been alluded to. Most significantly, the shift of point of view from fish to girl made apparent that *CityFish* is a family story. The plight of the city fish – a sea creature on land, a dead creature among the living, an animal among humans – offers a point of entry into a discussion of how and why emotional and psychological conditions of displacement and difference emerging as a result of immigration create hierarchies of discrimination within families. These hierarchies are clearly illustrated in Aesop's *Town Mouse Country Mouse* fable.

Following the binary town and country paradigm of Aesop's fable, Lynne would be the country mouse and the city cousins would be the town mice. In *CityFish*, the city cousins are small fry, small fish in a big pond. Lynne is a fish out of water. In the country, her knowledge and experience of the city taints her. Her school friends swim as a school. Lynne is caught in the net of her family, hauled out of her peer group each summer to splutter and gasp on the airless deck of New York City. In the city, she is foreign. The city cousins believe she is a smaller fish than they, but the extent of her foreignness marks her as exotic and, individualism being a highly valued cultural currency in New York City, this may afford her a survival mechanism that the city cousins do not have.

⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Edinburgh, London, New York, Melbourne: Canongate, 2005, page 180

CityFish breaks from the *Town Mouse Country Mouse* paradigm with the introduction of a third figure, an animal amongst humans, an impossible thinking speaking dead animal contesting the hot, smelly, stupid real. The real city fish lies in a scaly heap on long ice-packed table on a crowded sidewalk on a hot and narrow Chinatown street. The city fish operates on the threshold of language. What Lynne cannot speak, the fish can think. None of the story's characters can hear the fish, but its reader's can. When thwarted orality argues with narrative intelligibility, only fictional animals will win. In *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, Akira Mizuta Lippit suggests,

By tracking the animal across the philosophical spectrum, one discovers the systemic manner in which the figure of the animal comes to portray a serial logic: the animal is incapable of language; that lack prevents the animal from experiencing death; this in turn suspends the animal in a virtual, perpetual existence. The figure of the animal determines a radically antithetical counterpoint to human mortality, to the edifice of humanism.⁵

There is nothing new about talking animals, which may be why serious literary fiction is reluctant to entertain them. The characters of Aesop's fables are often animals with human characteristics. Aesop himself is a quasi-mythical creature, part historical man, and part historical creation. He was almost certainly a slave in Greece in the mid-6th century BCE. Formidable historians including Aristotle, Herodotus and Plutarch each have him living and dying at different times and places. He was not born a slave, he became one by foreign capture. No one knows where he was captured from, only that where he was captured to became where he wrote from, though, of course, no one knows if he wrote at all. The tales Aesop told may have been just that – told. Far too many have been attributed to him for them to have all originated from him. In fact, it may be that none originated from him. None of his

⁵ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, London, 2000, page 73.

writing survives, but many of the tales he told have been found on Egyptian papyri written between 800-1000 years before his time. He may have been a Mother Goose of the ancient world – a compiler and reteller. Whether active or unwitting, he was a central participant in the transmitting and transmuting of fables from ancient to modern, from oral into written forms.

The earliest known story with talking animals in it is the ancient Greek fable of the hawk and the nightingale from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, written in the 8th century BCE. A hawk carries a nightingale,

high up among the clouds, gripped fast in his talons, and she, pierced by his crooked talons, cried pitifully. To her he spoke disdainfully: 'Miserable thing, why do you cry out? One far stronger than you now holds you fast, and you must go wherever I take you, songstress as you are. And if I please I will make my meal of you, or let you go. He is a fool who tries to withstand the stronger, for he does not get the mastery and suffers pain besides his shame.' So said the swiftly flying hawk, the long-winged bird.⁶

No fool, Lynne does not try to withstand the onslaught of her city cousins. They are stronger for being more in number and they are on their home turf. Instead, Lynne resists them by mentally retreating from them. She follows the uncle, the aunt, and the cousins (they always appear in that order) without audible complaint. She entertains herself. "She practices her limping for later; a blister already blooming on her left heel."

Even Lynne's New York family are tourists in Chinatown. They spend an hour on the 7 Train to walk around and around Chinatown in 98-degree heat hunting for a hole-in-the-wall restaurant certified "authentic" by the New York Times. Inside the restaurant, Lynne feels both claustrophobic and exposed, as if in a fish tank. To escape, she peers through "the web of red Chinese words on the hole-in-the-wall's one

⁶ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/HesiodWorksDays.html#Fable>

grim window.” She identifies with a man outside, across the street, spraying a swath of ice-packed sidewalk-display fish.

His wishing-he-were-somewhere-else rolled off of him in waves, like stink off shit, like dead off fish. He couldn't escape the street, the flies and the endless shoppers, their plastic bags bumping him as he stood - too hot, too tired, too wet - lost in enormous rubber boots, furious, alone with his limp green hose.

The thoughts of this man, of the city fish, and of Lynne are literally and literarily elsewhere. *CityFish* is set, for the most part, in New York City. But it does not quite take place there. The narrative resonates between the real and the imaginary, between land and sea, and between Brooklyn, Nova Scotia, and Queens, New York. This confluence of place names undermines the locus of the story. New York and Nova Scotia both have new in their names. That Lynne’s mother was originally from New York and immigrated to Nova Scotia makes Nova Scotia seem the newer of the two places. The city cousins further this insinuation with their taunts: “Do they even have restaurants where you live?” and “How far is it, farther than Far Rockaway?” Their assumption is that because Brooklyn, Nova Scotia, is smaller than Brooklyn, New York, and far away, it is raw, unfinished, under-developed, and thus newer somehow. Yet the first over-winter settlement in North America was made in Nova Scotia, making it the older of the two New places, by European reckoning, anyway.

One thing Aesop’s *Town Mouse Country Mouse* fable never makes plain is how this family of mice came to be separated in the first place. Why does one cousin live in the town and the other in the country? The emigration of Lynne’s mother is made insensible by a general tendency to think of emigration directionally, moving from the old world to the new, from the country to the city. Further, her emigration does not follow the traditional logic for leaving a place. It is neither economically nor politically motivated, nor is it part of any larger diaspora. She is a casual, almost

accidental migrant. She visited Nova Scotia once and liked it so much she stayed.

“Why couldn’t you have gone to Paris?” Lynne complained.

The emigration of Lynne’s mother separated Lynne from her family’s history. Ironically, her family’s history is one of immigration. Through assimilation, the New York family has repressed their difference. Their casual cannibalistic consumption of their own cultural heritage, through its public monuments, symbols and traces, creates an alienating conundrum for Lynne. The Statue of Liberty, prototypical symbol of the American immigrant experience, totally eclipses Lynne’s Canadian immigrant experience. At one point in the story, “Lynne escaped having to climb the 345 steps of the Statue of Liberty for the third time in her life thanks to a family funeral, at which, Lynne knew no one.” Lynne experiences her own family as an amnesiac might. Their well-worn narratives are new to her. She hears their stories in a way they cannot. Likewise, their passage through the city is so familiar to them as to be unintelligible to them, whereas for Lynne, each event is noted with the alacrity of the stranger.

In the episteme of the pedestrian articulated by Michel de Certeau, Lynne’s family are ordinary practitioners of the city. They live “below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – [...] they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read.”⁷ Lynne follows in their wake, through the murky grey-blue below space of the browser window, through downtown streets, underground tunnels, and half buried histories.

The aunt’s idea of a good time was an overcrowded street festival in what the uncle kept referring to as “the old neighbourhood” even though, as far as Lynne knew, her family had never been Italian.

On the corner of Mott and Grand the aunt raised her smoking hand, waved and raved, “All this used to be Jewish.”

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984, page 93.

According to Freud, emotional impulses are converted to fear by being repressed. “The frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns. This species of the frightening would then constitute the uncanny, and it would be immaterial whether it was itself originally frightening or arose from another effect.”⁸ If the uncanny can result from the re-emergence of a repressed collective memory, then Lynne’s glimpse of a Jewish Grand Street in the midst of what is now Little Italy constitutes a frightening. What was supposed to remain hidden has been revealed. “The old neighbourhood” is an uncanny site, an *unheimlich* place, and, for Lynne, doubly un-homed. The idea of the double is central to Freud’s theory of the uncanny. “A person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own.”⁹ The doubling of sites creates an equally uncanny effect.

In a conversation with Gustav Janouch reprinted in Emanuel Frynta’s *Kafka & Prague*, Kafka describes how the memory of “the old neighbourhood” continues to haunt the site of the new:

“The dark corners, the mysterious passages, the boarded-up windows, the dirty yards, the noisy beer-shops and the shuttered inns still live in us. We walk through the broad streets of the newly-built town. Yet our steps and our glances are unsure. Innerly we still shiver as we did in the old streets of misery. Our hearts still know nothing of the re-sanitation that has been carried out. The sick old Jewish town is much more real to us than the new hygienic town now surrounding us.”¹⁰

The confluence of the place names Brooklyn, Nova Scotia and Queens, New York, the reappearance of the old orange navigational arrow in the new site, and the repetition of a number of images through out the timeline all contribute to an uncanny effect in *CityFish*.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, Penguin Classics, 2003, page 124

⁹ *ibid.*, 147-148.

¹⁰ Franz Kafka in conversation with Gustav Janouch, from Emanuel Frynta, *Kafka & Prague*, London: Batchworth, 1960, p60.

One of the repeated images in *CityFish* is of suitcase. It first appears as Lynne is preparing to leave Nova Scotia to spend the summer in New York City. Again. “Room for me in your suitcase?” her school friends jokingly implore. In *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture*, Irit Rogoff observes, “The suitcase signifies the moment of rupture, the instance in which the subject is torn out of the web of connectedness that contained him or her through an invisible net of belonging.”¹¹ The suitcase reappears further along in the narrative at another moment of rupture, which is also a repetition. Disgusted by the city cousins’ behaviour in the hole-in-the-wall restaurant, Lynne mentally retreats from them and New York altogether. He thoughts return to the point of her departure from Nova Scotia.

If only her school friends knew. How hot it gets. How loud. How horrible the cousins. They wouldn’t beg: “Room for me in your suitcase?” If the heat didn’t get to them first, the city cousins would eat the school friends alive.

In another instance of repetition, a hand-drawn map of the North Atlantic underlines the relative proximity of New York and Nova Scotia. Worlds apart though they may be culturally, they are joined by a continuous coastline. This coastline is an edge, a ledge, a legible line caught in the double-bind of simultaneously writing and erasing itself. The first time this map appears it is overlapped by a smaller image – a red five-point star containing the words “You Are Here.” This star reappears numerous times in the narrative, each time in relation to a different physical location. Clicking on any of these “You Are Here” stars transports the reader to a new location in the story. Just as one coastline implies another, implores a far shore, the “Here” in “You Are Here” always implicitly refers to an elsewhere.

This map appears again, further along in the story. Nearby, the “Your Are Here” star overlaps two adjacent images. One is of a Canadian postage stamp bearing

¹¹ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture*, London & NY: Routledge, 2000, pgs 37-38

an engraved image of the Bluenose schooner, the symbol most synonymous with the south shore of Nova Scotia. The other image is of the back of an airmail envelope bearing a black and white photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge. In this instance it is impossible to say where the “You Are Here” is referring to. The stamp and the airmail envelope are designed to travel. Both, in these images, represent where they come from, but offer no indication of where they might be at present. The postage stamp is a currency of exchange, a cost of communication. The airmail envelope, like the suitcase, circulates in culture as a “cipher of memory,”¹² not a message in and of itself, but containing a message, a packet travelling through an information network encoded with two locations – where it has come from and where it is destined. The airmail envelope will always reside between and thus confuse two places.

The postal associations of the airmail envelope from Brooklyn, New York, is echoed further along in the narrative by an image of a postcard depicting a black and white photograph of Brooklyn, Nova Scotia. Rogoff argues, “the postcard is a complex artefact in which image and text are reversible, in which public and personal collapse.”¹³

That Lynne lived up the road from a fishing village called Brooklyn, that was not the real Brooklyn, was a sad fact the Flushing cousins would never let Lynne live down.

How far away is it? They taunted.

Farther than Far Rockaway?

It's farther than Fulton Street, where the Chinatown fish comes from. It's farther than you can see from the torch arm of the Statue of Liberty. Lynne and her mother lived up the hill from the far edge of a raw grey ocean that spread out for days and days.

This ocean is a liminal space, a grey area, a raw emotion. Lynne and the city fish are its transgressors. Lynne flies over it. The city fish is pulled out of it. Both have known another life than this moment they now find themselves in. Lynne

¹² *ibid*, 38.

¹³ *ibid*, 52.

remembers when boats still fished from the wharf at Brooklyn. The fish was once alive in the liquid element. Now they ride the subway together, under ground, under water, under the East River.

The subway tunnels through this story. The elevated train scars its surface. The 7 Train cuts through everything; it divides the world in two. It takes you into the city, out of the city; it offers up a view. In the far distance: a rare vista, the Manhattan skyline, the city's infrastructure, its bridges and buildings, its spine. Nearer: candy stores, newsstands, flower shops, strip clubs and restaurants careen past the el train's fixed screen windows. Up close: fellow passengers, split-second glimpses into second-floor bedrooms, laundry lines, graffiti tags, turf wars, rooftops. And below, life goes on as if there isn't a train screaming past every few minutes, never far from your mind, twenty feet from your head. The elevated trains' steel superstructures buttress soft absences. Shade embraces empty spaces. Stories fill them. As Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes, in *A Coney Island of the Mind*, "The penny-candy store beyond the El / is where I first / fell in love / with unreality."¹⁴ The story of Lynne and the city fish unfolds in this strange horizontally scrolling world of absences and empty spaces – beyond the El, below the river, across the ocean, over the phone – furious, intimate, and surreal.

¹⁴ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, NY: New Directions, 1958, page 35.

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ABSTRACT

CityFish is a hybrid word, title of a hybrid work, tale of a hybrid creature. Part classical parable, part children's picture book, *CityFish* is a web-based intertextual hypermedia transmutation of Aesop's *Town Mouse Country Mouse* fable. Winters, Lynne freezes in Celsius in the fishing village of Brooklyn, Nova Scotia (Canada), a few minutes walk from a white sandy beach. Summers, she suffers her city cousins sweltering in Fahrenheit in Queens, New York (USA). Lynne knows everyone knows it's supposed to be the other way around. Lynne is a fish out of water. In the country, her knowledge of the city separates her from her school of friends. In the city, her foreignness marks her as exotic. Meanwhile, the real city fish lie in scaly heaps on long ice-packed tables in hot and narrow Chinatown streets. *CityFish* represents asynchronous relationships between people, places, perspectives and times through a horizontally scrolling browser window, suggestive of a panorama, a diorama, a horizon line, a skyline, a timeline, a Torah scroll. The panorama and the diorama have traditionally been used in museums and landscape photography to establish hierarchies of value and meaning. *CityFish* interrupts a seemingly linear narrative with poetic texts, quotations, Quicktime videos, DHTML animations, Google Maps and a myriad of visual images. Combining contemporary short fiction and hypermedia storytelling forms creates a new hybrid, a lo-fi web collage cabinet of curiosities.

BIO

J. R. Carpenter is a writer of poetry, very short fiction, long fiction, non-fiction and web-based non-linear intertextual hypermedia narratives. Her electronic literature has been presented at museums, galleries, conferences and festivals around the world including: Muse de Beaux-arts (Montreal), Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto), Arnolfini (Bristol), Inspace (Edinburgh), Machfeld Studio (Vienna), Jyvs skyl Art Museum (Finland), Web Biennial 2007 (Istanbul), Cast Gallery (Tasmania), Rhizome ArtBase at The New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York), DrunkenBoat.com, Turbulance.org, Interrupt Festival 2008 (Brown), the Electronic Literature Organization Conference 2008 (Vancouver, Washington), Media in Transition Conference 2009 (MIT), E-Poetry 2009 (Barcelona), Electronic Literature Collection Volume One and the forthcoming Volume Two. She is the winner of the QWF Carte Blanche Quebec Award (2008), the CBC Quebec Short Story Competition (2003 & 2005), and the Expozine Alternative Press Award for Best English Book for her first novel, *Words the Dog Knows*, published by Conundrum Press in 2008. Her second book, *Generation(s)*, a hybrid code narrative, was published by Traumawien in 2010. She serves on the Board of Directors of OBORO, an artist-run gallery and new media lab in Montreal and is a PhD research student at University College Falmouth in the UK. <http://luckysoap.com>