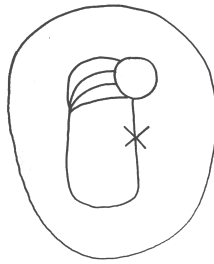


# GALLSTONES

by Rob Sherman



2009



This work is © Rob Sherman and his ancestors, of Bonfire Dog.

It is released under a Creative Commons A-NC-SA 4.0 International License. This implies that you may copy, modify and distribute my work as long as you make no profit from it, do not attempt to copyright it in a different manner yourself, and the original author, source and copyright are cited when used or modified.

Additional information on how you may use this work can be found at Bonfire Dog's Copyright page.

The artwork on the title page is the intellectual property of Sarah Alice; all rights rest with her, and permission must be sought for any usage separate from this work.

Do keep in mind that I have no method, power or funding to enforce these rules. I am, however, faithful to my vision of personkind in which you are all very mindful and very worried about upsetting anybody. Please don't disappoint me.

You're a top organism for looking through my work. I hope you enjoy it, and that it generates some curious neurons for you.

Originally published by Philistine Press.

He takes the glass up in one hand; shakes it. It moves syrupy within. It looks like Marmite, thick and black. He could spread it on toast. Should he spread it on toast? The bottle doesn't advise it, and so he pours a cap instead. It does not go down well: it shocks his teeth and clings onto his throat as if it had tiny caterpillar tracks, a tiny procession of little black tanks marching down the incline of him. That's enough for the day, the bottle says, and he places it down. The pain that the stones make might subside today, or later in the week; sometimes, when he can sleep, he wakes with the same grip on his shoulder blades, or down where he thinks his kidneys are, and it is as if it hasn't ended. He lies on his back in a layered morning light, wriggling, a fat, sad woodlouse, before his body decides to press whatever dripping and secret button it is that stops the agony, and he can rise, panting as he used to after sex, into the day.

His body holds:

- [ **10** trillion cells, approximately 3 billion of which are currently twice their normal size and on fire;
- [ **206** bones, one of which is watched by the others for signs of insurgence, as it holds an old fracture, set by a metal plate;
- [ **80** litres of water, which is ebbing from his muscles and pooling in his armpits as he sits in the chair. Something is being done about this.

He rises, the stretching and angling of his body shifting his gallbladder slightly so that its tiny, foreign teeth stop kneading him and instead lie like toads in the bilious swill. The fish in the tank blink as he passes, their eyes dusty and filmed against the dirty water. The kitchen is small, curved like a mouth, the appliances great, square molars with no grinding surface. He pours some water. His entire body feels thirsty.

But should he?

He limps back to the chair, the little Bakelite table, and the bottle. There is not much bile left; he can see the puck of glass at the bottom of the container glowing dully golden through the sparse fluid like a coin. He consults the tiny writing on the label. *No liquids for three hours after ingestion.*

No water.

He sits again.

Wolverhampton, and the doctors, are fourteen miles outside the window, and forty metres downwards. In his head he pictures a great eye sweeping over the gravelled face of the tower block, noting the individual flashes of features, washing and garden toys set on balconies. He watches the city, the sun digging into his barely-opened eyes. He needs to sit again. Turning, he sees the telephone. He doesn't know, but the eleven separate units of pressure that he puts on his index finger as he types his daughter's number lay the plans for infinitesimally small fractures that will directly influence the finger's breaking four years later, on a bad night when he hits his bedside table in anger after dropping his watch.

She picks up straight away. Her voice is low and sleepy.

“Alright, Dad?”

“Yeah, alright. You?”

“Yeah, alright thanks. What's up?”

“Just calling to see how I am.”

“What?”

“I mean, you are.”

“I'm fine. How are you? How are the stones?”

“Fine, yeah, fine. There's more of them, now.”

“They hurt?”

“Sometimes, yes. I'm sort of used to them.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“I haven't been.”

Her voice changes slightly, for the first time, dipping at first and then vibrating and rising in alarm like a bee taking flight.

“Don't you think you should go?”

“Nope.”

“No? Why not, Dad?”

“Sarah. They'll just tell me I'm too fat, or that I like a steak, don't I, big boy, and that I'm petrified of water, and they'll point their raygun at my back and they'll still come back. They will, I know they will.”

“You're an idiot, Dad.”

“I'm not doing nothing, Sarah. I've got this stuff.”

“What stuff?”

He pauses, remembering what his daughter is, what she is like, and hesitates. She repeats the question.

“Just some stuff. Some... alternative medicine, or something. Chinese.”

“What?”

“It's some sort of bile product.”

“Bile?”

“Yes.”

“Where did they get bile from?”

“I think...”

“From bears? From those black bears you see on the news, Dad?”

He winces.

“Yes, from bears, I think. It's an internet thing, you know. I downloaded them from the computer.”

He knows this will get her.

“Dad...”

“Look, Sarah, this'll help, it was on Youtube and there were all these testimonials -”

“I can't believe you, Dad.”

She is angry now.

“Do you know how they get that shit *out* from the bears? Did you read around this at all?”

“They said that it didn't hurt at all, that there weren't any side effects -”

“Doesn't hurt *you*? No, maybe not. That's fine then. This is just like you, to-”

She pauses. He can hear three thousand miles of flesh-warm electricity between them, every last yard.

“Whatever, Dad. Are you going to stop taking them, or is this it from now on?”

“Why should I stop, Sarah? It helps me out, it really does.”

“OK. Give me a call sometime next week.”

“Of course. Why are you so upset?”

“I'm not, Dad. Bye.”

“Love you.”

“You too.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

The number stops at odd; the phone is hung up and he coughs, chest sinking and rising in judders. He stifles the rude noise, before some hidden black duct inside him squirts something into his bloodstream that reminds him that no-one else lives in this flat. He stands and rummages in his post, a small heap by the expensive, secure front door, for the pamphlet that came with the bottle. It is as he expected. Nothing untoward. Nothing heinous or hidden. The bile is taken from Asiatic black bears, their gall bladders siphoned and slowly milked, and the resulting ooze shipped to the West, or any place where people clutch their sides, complain and can't see a doctor for love nor money. There is an information panel along the bottom edge of the bottle's label, with small writing next to a grainy picture of a grain of a shadow, a black lump in a lit doorway. The small writing, in a small way, reassures him that the bears do not die from the process; they are just like cows or sheep being milked for their cheese.

That night he dreams of nothing, the air hot and his head empty. But the night after he dreams that he is in a cool forest. It is, as dreams are, as if he had been dumped there; he wears his favourite jumper from his teenage years, the one he always wore clubbing, and in skate shoes he moves over dewy rocks and lancing bamboo. There is light, and the unfamiliar crackle and spit of an open fire. He finds himself in a wide, clean clearing, the sky open and full of stars; he expects no less. In the middle of the clearing is a huge cauldron, blackened and scaled with soot deposits, wide steps leading up to its rim. A small, old Asian man stands at the top in trousers made of sacking, his pinched and lean abdomen steeped in sweat. He smiles like a goblin, wide and stupid. The man's mind in dream folds like an accordion, trapping the fluff and waste that his eyes see in its bellows; the Asian man is a fisherman from Guilin that the man had flicked past in National Geographic fourteen months previously. The fisherman waves, and beckons the man closer. He asks the sleeping man whether he wants a Curly Wurly, and he says he would. It appears, and the sleeping man is pleased at the convenience. As he chews on the sweet, he sees the fisherman lower his eyes to the wall of the forest edge, some way behind him. There is something there.

And as he turns he sees that it is more than something, but many things, humped shapes undulating like knuckles performing a coin trick. Hundreds of bears, moving in procession out of the forest. They are old, their eyes crinkled like old burnt film from the cataracts, and their fur is whitening at the tips. They move with difficulty, almost pitching over with every step. They amble with solemn politeness to the base of the wide steps, and the first begins to climb. It seems to take it an age, but it reaches the top. It raises its great blunt head to look at the fisherman, and he bends, gently, and kisses it on the snout. It blinks its eyes, and turning to the cauldron falls in, making no splash or noise. It is gone.

The scene moves and turns around. There are no bears left, and a warm, heavy smell, like that of his mother's lasagne, drifts into him. Even in dream he is aware of his nose moving with tiny reeds that organise scent, his ears sifting through a clicking insectile hum of thousands of sounds. The fisherman looks sad, scared even, and beckons the sleeper to climb the stairs. He does, clumsy with their lowness and width, and reaching the top he sees that the cauldron is full of black, bubbling liquid, smoking and erupting. The old man licks his finger and dips it into the scalding mess, and holds the glazed thing out to him. He does not question it, and licks the mixture. It is hot, but has that same bite, that same horrid progression down his throat. The cauldron is full of bile.

Upon waking the man notices three important things about his physical make-up that have changed since the day before:

His head feels prised open, thirsty and sick.

His right hand aches,  
the muscles pumping off  
sparkling envelopes -----|  
to the brain.

His gallbladder has stopped hurting.

It is gone. It had become such a part of his life that now a dull, cavernous boom fills his lower body, an absence that he welcomes. His body swarms like bats in the cavern (or so it feels) that the stones have left. He rises, the air hot and oscillating from the sun that has been up for several hours. He fumbles for his cigarettes, and lights one, his bronchia snapping and gummed like morning mouths in anticipation of a first glass of water. This does not remind him to drink any water.

It is gone. His brain relays the message, but much of the body knows already. Since the pain ended the muscles have ceased their rictus, the fat that striates them stretched no longer. His rectum and anus no longer hold themselves tight and shut as harbour-side shops. He no longer feels the acid steadily, intelligently trickle upwards, away from gravity, with planning and foresight and determination, into his throat.

Should he say something? Normally, he would think nothing else of it, or perhaps thank his doctor briefly the next time he visited him. But this time there was no doctor. There was only the bile, the bears dried out and smiling in a forest somewhere, and him.

He decides against it and goes to find breakfast. Pulling on the ribbing of his puffa jacket, he struggles with the monolithic door until it swings silently open, and he makes his way through the thick lattice of the building's floors, the lifts thick with other people's evenings, out into the street.

It is closer to lunchtime, but he revels in that luxury of the unemployed to eat when they wish. The gallstones, and the pain they brought, made it impossible to swallow anything but a thin gruel of ice cream and mashed potato, and now the man is filled with a need to chew. He heads for his favourite internet café, a English place owned by a Greek man with late-onset throat cancer. It is nearly empty, and he revels in the lack of pumped music. He nods to his friend behind the bar, the throat puffed and red as if for some display, and settles himself at a computer. A coffee and a baguette choked with falafel is placed in front of him, and he logs in. The timer starts running, a small counter in the corner of screen, with a smiling face and a watch.

He checks the news sites, contemplates a visit to a gambling forum but feels lazy and decides against it. He remembers his conversation with his daughter, and his dream, the two memories mixing unpleasantly in the cocktail sauce that fills his brain. He decides to check and make sure.

He loads a website. Enters the terms.

`"Bile bear gallstones cure"`

Images. Images first.

He is not really sure what he sees, to begin with. His mind is trained to see the pixels of images in straight lines, with the top being upwards and the bottom being downwards. It takes him a few seconds to realise that he is viewing a bear from underneath.

The bear is divided into tiny sections; the man thinks that it has been dissected, split into tiny, constituent examples, when it dawns on him that the black lines are the panel-work of a cage. The space is tiny, this much is plain – the bear is hunched into a begging position, its paws raised and fed through the letterbox hole towards the right of the picture. Patches of its dark fur are missing, the skin puckered and plucked beneath. A waffle of drool and shit coats the wires of the cage, and a great, weeping gash, pussy and crisp at the edges, erupts from the bear's side. Like a weak, pathetic limpet, the long white pump of the bile reservoir burrows into the wound. The next image is similar. And the next. The text that goes with it is not surprising, and after a while he cannot repress it. He nearly vomits but clamps his stomach shut by the force of some small glottis or valve.

Bears lie in their own filth, chewing their paws, their teeth removed, looking like great

retarded grandfathers, crying and crying and crying. He knows the process, the needles stuck in their side, the wan sacks like colostomy bags, the bile pumped into plastic teats. One sits next to a copy of *The Radio Times* at home.

He moves to a dining table, focuses on the paper. He goes back for his coffee and baguette, and rinsing himself with a sip of the dark liquid he begins to chew at his sandwich.

His stomach heeds the approaching food and starts to milk itself, bile giggling forth into the gallbladder. It squeezes, and contracts, the thick black-green soup ready to exit. It sloshes around the stones, as large as teeth or dice, that bunch and kick and nibble at the flesh wall. They are bigger than before. They begin to knock against each other in the tide of bile, the thick, black juice, and they grind, stones in the sea current against a cliff, wearing him away, down into dust.