

Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases

Lars Gustafsson

Lars Gustafsson was born in 1936 in Vasteras, Sweden, and studied philosophy at Uppsala University, receiving a Ph.D. in 1978. He edited the influential *Bonniers Litterara Magasin* from 1961 to 1972. His early reputation was mainly that of a lyric poet, but he has since received acclaim in nearly all genres: short fiction, novels, nonfiction, drama. Perhaps his greatest achievement is considered to be five novels given the overall title *The Cracks in the Wall: Mr. Gustafsson Himself, Wool, The Family Party, Sigismund, and **The Death of a Beekeeper***. Other works include his collection *Sonnets, Stories of Happy People*, and the novel *Bernard Foy's Third Castling*. He continues to be one of the most productive and versatile of writers.

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Translated by Yvonne L. Sandstroem and John Weinstock

He came from one of the small farms up by the woods; strange things come from there now and then.

Tumbledown barns in the meadows, sometimes with the ridge of the roof broken right in the middle, small cow barns made from cinderblock, unusable after the milk trucks got too wide for the small roads.

And the road into the woods: like a green tunnel. When he was a boy, he played between the barn and the house and was always forbidden to go behind the barn into the woods.

The woods were marshy, with all kinds of mushrooms and toadstools, a place rich in different species the way it sometimes happens where the shadows linger a long time and different kinds of rock mingle.

It was quite a small place; his brother and sister were both older, by two and three years.

His first school was the woodshed; his brother and sister were often there, whittling boats and cars out of wood. They were practising their way into tools. He himself had a horror of them, perhaps due to some unsuccessful early attempts, a horror of the sharp edges of the chisels that could cut into your nail like a knife into butter, the axes and the big timber cleavers with their worn handles, and, worst of all, the saws hanging in a long row on their nails, from the big two-handed lumberman's saws with their bows and clasps to the crosscut saws, the joiner's saws with their buckle pegs that clattered so merrily when you released the tension, the one-man crosscut saws that, oddly enough, were called "tails" although they had nothing to do with tails—grownups had such funny names for their things: that was their peculiarity, and they had a *right* to all those names which he didn't have. He always laughed awkwardly and crept into a corner when his brother and sister tried to teach him those names.

Those things belonged to them: dovetail saws, punches. The old wooden mallet used for pounding in fence posts, made from curly birch, battered by tens of thousands of strikes of wood against wood, impossible to lift.

And above them all, hanging majestically: the ice saw, absolutely forbidden to touch, a cruel giant with dragon's teeth, a magnification of the other saws, crueller than they, but also silent, waiting, never used.

He would dream of the teeth of all the saws.

Sometimes they hit him, but not very badly. Anyway, they hit him when he came from the woodshed with wounds and gashes from the tools in the woodshed. They were afraid that he'd really hurt himself. They wanted to keep him away from the tools.

His brother and sister, who knew how, were allowed to handle them. It gave him the feeling that the words, too, belonged to them.

Sometimes they might send him to fetch tools that did not exist, "bench marks," things like that.

It gave him a feeling that it would always be vague and uncertain which things existed in the world and which did not. Evidently using words was harder than you might imagine.

They always laughed loudly, doubled up with laughter when he returned empty-handed, or when they had fooled him into going to the far end of the barn searching for impossible objects.

In actual fact, the strong decided what words should be used for.

Mushrooms were better. They didn't care about having names. They had smells instead, strong, earthy smells, smells of decaying leaves, of heated iron, of oxidizing copper, some of them like rotting animals and some with mysterious smells that didn't exist anywhere else.

And their shapes: most of them round, but all of them round in different ways. Some had a depression in the middle, as if the whole thing had been rotated around the midpoint at enormous speed, just once, then solidifying; some had indentations, wavy shapes; some had tall, narrow stems; some had a collar; some, delicate gills under the cap, so fragile that they crumbled at the slightest touch. And there were some with organworks of fine pipes.

Sometimes they were covered with slime that made you pull your hand back quickly. Sometimes they were dry, brown, friendly to your fingers, as if they'd pulled the sunshine into themselves and still preserved this sunshine like a secret force under the skin.

And then those strange things that came up late in the fall, smelling like mushrooms but still not looking like mushrooms but like something else: a red finger groping its way between two rocks, a strangely solid pat of butter forgotten on a cranberry leaf, something indescribably gray fermenting, growing, turning in the fissures of a rotting tree trunk.

He felt a kinship, a friendship between himself and these cool objects without names that changed day by day and which always disappeared again like formless clumps of decomposing life in the moss.

He minded the ban on going to the mushrooms more than the ban on going to the tools.

The fall when he turned seven and was going to start school turned into a disaster.

It was a small school, down by the lake, a one-room school with a single teacher, a small, broad man with gold-rimmed glasses and strong, blunt hands.

Decades later, he could still remember the teacher's broad, strong fingernails with a kind of approval. They looked like those objects that really exist.

He was going to learn to read, and the teacher was both kind and helpful. He sat for a long time on a chair beside him, smelling of strange smells, tobacco and Palmolive soap.

The letters were easy to tell apart, but he never got any words out of them. They didn't want to speak.

That wasn't anything to wonder at. He didn't have any words to counter them with, nothing to meet them with. Nothing at all. He tried copying them, and they turned into mushrooms.

It seemed natural that he should walk around by himself during recess, digging with a stick in the gravel, while his brother and sister played with their friends.

There was nothing that wasn't completely self-evident, and he simply couldn't understand what he was doing in school. It was noisy. It bothered him to hear too many children laughing and shouting to each other at the same time.

He was homesick, and when it got to be afternoon, a wind came through the big ash trees outside the schoolhouse.

The trees are so happy, he thought, when the wind comes. That gives them something to do.

Actually he only went to school for a week.

What he could remember of it afterward was that it was where he first smelled a smell that would later become very familiar to him: the smell of scouring powder and disinfectant, the smell of hospitals, the smell in the waiting room at the county doctor's, strong in some places and weaker in others, but always the same, varying in one way or the other: *the smell of those who wanted something from him.*

The lunch music and the voices on the radio. The voices on the radio became important to him later on; they affirmed his continued existence, they hovered around him, especially at dinner time, cheery, sometimes persuasive, voices that filled the air, music that filled the air and didn't want anything from him.

That was later. After they'd come to get him.

They came and got him one afternoon that fall. His parents evidently were expecting it, his mother in her good dress and with a cardboard suitcase tied with a piece of string (he would encounter it again and again for a couple of decades; at last it became identified with his mother); wartime taxi with a producer-gas unit rumbling dully in the rear, roads and carsick vomiting on the way to the city.

Then the House, large, white, behind trees and a fence. And the smell of those who wanted something from him.

All new smells. The aides, in their dresses with high collars and maternal aprons—they were often older women, round and sturdy—had a different smell. The food smelled different, was different, starchy, gravyish, floating, wetter than at home in the woods. It was eaten in a common dining room during terrible rattling and spilling. Some of his new schoolmates had a hard time managing their spoons. Some of them let the food run out of the corners of their mouths.

He was afraid of them.

They didn't do anything to him. Most of them moved slowly; some were so deep in their own worlds that nothing could have disturbed them.

They were all so far beyond language, the language of the others, the foreign languages, that there was nothing for them to quarrel about.

They shared the same living space, and there was enough food for everybody.

The food was important: it was like a maternal outflowing, a welcoming smell, a connection to the other world which was not a prohibition.

That took time to discover.

The first fall he was too paralysed to feel such things. He still missed his own world, the woodshed, his mushrooms, the smell of milk strained in the barn while it was still warm; the funny, wet snouts of the pigs, the laces high up on his father's boots, always muddy, swinging rhythmically around the bootlegs when he went out in the morning.

He missed a world.

He found a spider under his bed that he used to play with silently in the evening, until he happened to pick it apart, leg by leg.

He was too interested in seeing how it was made.

The boy in the bed next to him was shapelessly fat, wet his bed regularly, and cried in his sleep. When he had the chance, he made little paper balls and ate them. He could tear them out of a magazine someone had forgotten in the dayroom, or tear strips from a bag left

behind on a table in the large, dark hall. He tore at the wallpaper by the door until someone told him he wasn't allowed to do that.

Sometimes he'd feed the boy paper. It was fun to see how fast it disappeared.

The boy in the bed on the other side of him wasn't much fun. He was silent.

But the wallpaper, especially in the morning, with its faded blue and pink lines, the wallpaper was almost the first thing that comforted him. The lines crossed and veered apart again; they made shapes. You could make trees, big, intricate trees with limbs that branched off and then branched off again, all the way up to the ceiling.

You could let one tree copy another, so that there were two mirror trees opposite one another on each wall, one in the shade and the other in the sun.

He could lie like that for such a long time, building trees, that they thought he was sick in the morning.

He was just making a tree that was reflecting itself inside itself when the aide came and made him get up. She looked curiously at his sheets.

He belonged to those who washed themselves. He had a habit of sucking the celluloid handle of his toothbrush for a long time.

The knots in his shoelaces were the worst. The knot was a small, evil animal that the lace passed through. The lace and the knot weren't the same thing, for you could make the same knot with different kinds of lace.

His knots were always terribly complicated.

Spring came, and suddenly, in the space of one day, they were all sent home. It was April 1940, and the House was going to be used for something else.

His mother came. She praised him and said he'd grown.

She had coffee with the aides, and it sounded as if they were talking in pretend voices.

At home, the snow was melting. His brother and sister had grown a lot more than he had, and the old horse had died and was buried by the pasture.

He'd never liked it. It had large, yellow, menacing teeth, and it had a way of tossing its head around in the half-light of the barn that scared him.

It was gone, and that was as it should be.

After he'd been home a week, he almost drowned in a brook when he went too far out on the crumbling edge of the ice close to a waterfall. He got a good hiding.

It was his brother who pulled him out. One of his red boots stuck in the mud. His brother poked around for it with a fence pole for quite some time, while the boy stood there shivering. He cried, for he knew that the worst was yet to come.

The water still stung in his nose; water you inhale deeply has a strange way of stinging.

The first coltsfoot was growing beside his own foot, which was heavy with mud. His nose was running, he shook with cold, his thin overalls smelled damp and putrid from the brook water. He stood quite still, freezing, and someone somewhere owed him infinite love.

Not a trace of mushrooms in April.

The spring of 1945, just when World War II was ending, he learned to masturbate.

He thought he had made a fantastic discovery: he could surprise himself.

He rubbed the thing which grew more and more like a mushroom, preferably against the right side of his bed, and pondered his wallpaper trees, went deeper and deeper into them, and had done it many times with increasing desire, with excitement, a feeling that the world was becoming *denser* that way, the first time he discovered that there was an ending. The first time it scared him: his body knew something he didn't know it knew. It could do something he'd never believed it could do.

How many such secrets did it hold? How many new, secret pockets could it open?

And was he the only one in the world who could do it? In a way, it was the happiest spring of his life.

They made it clear to him that he was doing something forbidden, especially the older aides, who had a way of being *disgusted* by it. But they weren't too severe. It was to be expected.

Now he had himself for a playmate, for a mirror. He was no longer alone. He started to grow and got quite tall. Mirror and reflection grew together and couldn't be separated. And still they had their secret conversations. The trees in the wallpaper acquired depth.

At this time, between 1945 and 1950 approximately, he was very close to something that might have been an awakening.

He was moved to another room—without wallpaper—and stood in the door of the wood shop, following with an interested gaze those who could carve.

A new teacher came, a lean, rather tall young man with gentle brown eyes who allowed him to straighten up, to sort pieces of wood in the lumber room from the very beginning; who didn't let on when the older students laughed at him.

He was not allowed close to the saws and the chisels, but he was allowed to use the sandpaper and to help hold the glue clamps when they were put around pieces of wood on which the glue was still bubbling from the heat in the pot.

The new teacher—he never knew his name—was almost as silent as he was himself. He moved with calm, determined steps between the tool cabinets and the benches, kept the paint cans and the lumber in order. He always looked him in the eye when he gave him something to do, a board to carry, a floor to sweep. He looked him in the eye and let it be known that he actually existed. When he handed him a pail of wood shavings to empty, it became a living sign saying that he existed.

The students in this workshop were of different kinds and different ages. Some things happened that frightened him a bit and that amused him almost as much. Clumsy as calves, older and younger boys moved around each other, joked, butted each other. Jokes and taunts occurred, glue pots in the hair and boards nailed to the floor when you went to pick them up.

It disturbed him and frightened him when it was directed against him.

The laughter was something they tried to force on him.

The board in the floor was a surprise directed at someone they wanted him to be. Something to laugh at. But that wasn't where he was.

The new teacher knew how to quiet such things down; with a calm hand, without harsh words, he separated the combatants when the boys got into a fight, dragging each other around a bench, keeping a strong hold on each other's hair. Patiently, he showed that you can't plane a board from both directions without ripping up the fibers. He never allowed dirt to accumulate under his short, broad nails.

He was, in a way, the center of the world.

In a world that had no center, he reigned like a quiet monarch, too self-evident ever to feel that his own order was being threatened, too rich to demand anything from the poor, an envoy in chaos serving an order so noble that it was also able to accept the necessity of disorder.

There were those who urinated in the pails of wood shavings because they didn't have time to get to the toilets inside the main entrance.

They had to clean it up themselves, but no harsh words were spoken.

It was somewhat different with the women aides. They were so divided between disgust and maternity, or locked into a maternity which was disgust at the same time, that they always created anxiety.

They smelled different. Their large, white forearms, often a bit reddened, fascinated him, and he often tried to touch them, but they nudged him gently aside. He was "in the way," as they called it.

He suspected great secrets in them, sniffed out that he was only seeing a narrow strip of their lives, but he wasn't able to formulate it.

They changed often, so that there was no possibility of keeping a face in your memory: as the years passed, their faces merged into a single face, and it was gentle and mute.

He himself slipped away, too. The wood shop teacher moved after a couple of years; the shop was closed, since the students who had worked there moved to another kind of institution. Quite a few disappeared, and only the hopeless ones remained.

The traffic along the road increased during those years. In the spring of 1952, a trailer truck loaded with grain lost control swerving to avoid a youth on a Husqvarna 125 cc; the trailer went through the loose sand on the shoulder of the road, and the whole thing turned over in their hedge.

The driver climbed out, a bit shaken up, and saw two hydrocephalic boys tumbling like little seals in the yellow grain that filled the ditch.

He thought he'd landed in another world.

The salvage went quickly, but they scooped up wheat for weeks down in the ditch, played with it, filled their pockets with it. The aides found wheat under the beds, in the pillow cases, everywhere.

It was a mysterious gift, and it came from outside.

It was the last big event for a long time. His senses were asleep: there was nothing that made enough of a claim on them. He lived for mealtimes, and when he was around thirty, he became grotesquely fat. His blue carpenter's pants with suspender buckles had to be let out.

Traffic along the road increased. He was always led across the road when he was going to help in the apple orchard on the other side. He wasn't much use. For the most part he walked around raking, and often he would rake under a single tree until the ground was all torn up and some laughing foreman came and moved him.

He had a profound horror of the motorized cultivator that arrived in 1956: one of the regular gardeners had got his foot caught that spring, and it looked awful: toes hanging loose, blood flowing, but that wasn't what frightened him. It was the helpless cry when everyone came running. After that, he refused to stay in the orchard when the cultivator got going and rushed back to the Home, across the road. They let him be.

He didn't want to hear that cry again.

He had another peculiarity which amused the men in the market garden: he was afraid of birds.

Not birds flying, not flights of wild geese and cranes and swifts tumbling high in the air in the summer evenings.

It was birds that flew up suddenly out of bushes that frightened him, sparrows fluttering up from a new-plowed field would make him beside himself with terror. Even after he had turned thirty, he would still, in spite of all prohibitions, run into the kitchen, babbling incomprehensibly.

Good-natured aides would try to comfort him with a piece of coffee-cake: he could sit for a long time, trembling and stiff, until his terror slowly wore off.

He had no words for the world, and birds' suddenly flying up was one of the thousand ways in which the world would turn *unreliable*.

The bird wasn't something that fluttered through the world, the bird was a corner of the cloth of the world which had worked loose and started to flutter.

Of course there was terror in it, but also liberation: the dream he was dreaming would have an ending.

At the end of the '50s, his parents died. Nobody tried to explain it to him, and he didn't know in what order they died or when, but when he hadn't seen them for a few years—his mother would visit him regularly twice a year and always brought him candy and apples, an anxious lot of apples, as if the lack of apples were his problem—he started to miss them, in some vague fashion, about the way you might all of a sudden long for mustard or honey or a certain kind of floury gravy with just a taste of burned pork.

He remembered the buildings better than he did his parents—the horse, the woodshed—the only thing left of his parents was the sound when they shut the door to the porch and stamped the snow off their boots in the winter.

But this sound was an important sound. It meant that the lamps would be lit, that the atmosphere in the room would change.

At the end of September every year, the willow herb, the evening prim-rose, has no more flowers left, but its seed pods ride on the wind, and if they get into a yard, they respond to even the slightest changes in temperature by rising and falling rhythmically. And at last they settle down, in small, quick drafts, which the wind can easily carry off again.

That was the way September was that year, in 1977.

He was sitting in the dayroom in the new Home, sixty miles from the old one, which had been torn down in 1963.

He had his favorite spot by the window. Here was an asphalt yard, without trees, without flowers, only a wilted flowerbed edging the drive and the three parking places.

Here the seeds of the willow herb came drifting in. It was the kind of September day when the air is *quite still and waiting*.

He was shapeless in his lounge; he swelled over its edges. For ten years he had been quite empty.

The drifting seed pods, unbelievably light, moved on winds so slight that no one could discern them.

Slowly the shadow of the curtain moved across the polished floor of the dayroom.

The hourglass-shaped ribbon of light moved across the surface of the planet, dawn line and dusk line rushing forward like great wings across distant plains and mountains. Slowly or swiftly, depending on how you chose to measure it, the earth moved in its orbit and would never return to the same point where it had once been. Slowly or swiftly, the solar system moved in its orbit, and with silent, dizzying speed; like a disk of light, the galaxy moved in its mysterious rotation around itself.

In the wombs of the mothers, unborn embryos were growing, membranes and tissues folded and pleated themselves cleverly around each other, exploring without sorrow, without hesitation, the possibilities of topological space.

Of this he knew nothing: heavy and huge like a boulder in the woods, he sat in his chair, moving it with effort a few inches every hour so that it always remained in the patch of sun.

He was as slow as the galaxy and as mysterious.

In the shadows of the leaves which moved more and more insistently against the wall, he saw the old mushrooms growing once more, from the first soft mound shooting up through the moss to the last black-brown pyramid of shapeless, pungent tissue in December.

For years, he allowed them to grow freely as he sat there; he made them more and more remarkable, more and more fantastic; each and every one the only one of its kind, saw them live and die; knew since long ago that all time and everything that grew were as mysterious and great as he was himself.

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