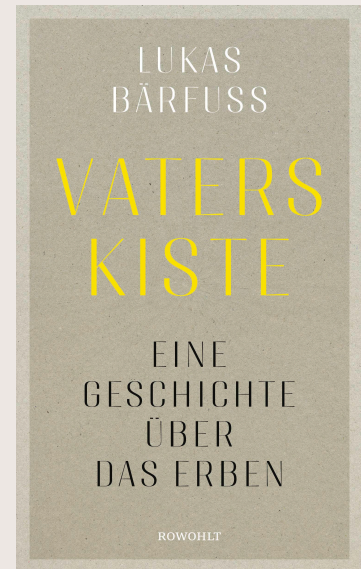


Lukas Bärfuss

FATHER'S BOX – A Story About Inheriting

Vaters Kiste

- Remembering his dead father, a reflection about what inheritance means, a militant appeal to break out of the trap of thought and behaviour that has no alternative.
- Lukas Bärfuss' previous novels were translated into 20 languages.
- The author was awarded a.o. the Berlin Literature Prize, Swiss Book Prize and the Georg Büchner Prize.



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Lukas Bärfuss rejected his inheritance from his father: primarily debts. But he has already passed on his father's distinctive nose to his own son. We cannot escape our genes, but what about an inheritance law that targets personal assets that, despite being barely one hundred years old, seems to us like a natural law? What about the responsibility beyond the family bond, what about the share of future generations whose fate we decide with what we leave them, our inheritance, our rubbish? We won't find any answers as long as policymakers ignore all the evidence that would lead us to ask the important questions in the first place: do we want to continue living the way we have been? And if not: then how?

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Lukas Bärfuss, born in 1971 in Thun, Switzerland, is a dramatist, novelist and pugnacious publisher. Previously he has worked as a tobacco grower, forklift driver, welder and gardener. His plays are performed around the world; his novels have been translated into 20 languages. Lukas Bärfuss is a member of the German Academy for Language and Poetry and lives in Zurich. He has received a number of awards including the Berlin Literature Prize, the Swiss Book Prize and the Georg Büchner Prize.

Lukas Bärfuss

FATHER'S CARTON **A story about inheritance**

English sample translation by Katy Derbyshire

A carton was left over in the clear-out. Twenty-five years previously, I had taken it from a dark apartment in the mountains to my place on Dufourstrasse and stowed it away unopened, until I'd moved to Aarwangenstrasse and later Bertastrasse. From there, I took the crate along to streets named for the three deities Apollo, Minerva and Neptune, then one hot summer to Mühlebach, then up to Asylstrasse, for a few months to Witikonerstrasse, and finally to my current humble abode. There it stood. An ordinary Del Monte banana carton. And I didn't know what to do with it.

The kids were grown up and a new chapter of my life was fast approaching, demanding space. The apartment contained all the flotsam of the past years, stuff that now served no purpose and had to be sifted, evaluated, thrown away or put in storage. I went through everything thoroughly, encountering in the process people dear to me, my years of becoming an adult, my first steps as an artist, the caesurae: marriage, birth, sickness, divorce, death; and above all I encountered myself.

I don't know how much this clear-out was driven by my own mortality. A friend had fallen ill in the prime of life, no prospect of recovery, and he passed away soon after. None of the men in my family had lived long; I would soon have caught up with most of them in age. There were no signs that things were heading for an end for me; I was happy enough with my health. And yet I wondered whether something within me knew that my hours were numbered, and therefore forced me to clean up. My doctor, when I troubled her with my concerns, carried out a thorough examination and then certified my impeccable state. I was just a little stressed, she said. Like everything else, she said, you could take clearing out too far. I was not to forget a

healthy balance and exercise, to give myself a break now and then; times were hard enough already.

I was relieved, at least a little. But that was no help with my carton. It was the last remaining evidence of a man who was said to have been my father. Like most people from my childhood, he had disappeared almost without a trace. I possessed half a dozen pictures of my mother, the same again of my father, and nor were there any traces of my younger self, any albums full of pretty family portraits, anything made in woodwork or art class. I occasionally received class photos sent by former teachers; once, a bag of old exercise books. But other than that nothing was left, no furniture, no jewellery, no books, although half of my relatives were buried by then. I had spent part of my youth on the street, no fixed abode, and when you don't have a house or a home you don't carry files around with you, you don't carry memories; the only paper is what you can stuff inside your sweater on cold nights. That was why my childhood was only available in fragments; and one of those fragments, an essential one, was that carton. It was a curiosity, an anomaly, with no purpose or use, and yet it contained a part of my origins and a chapter of my story. But since I had done everything to escape precisely that origin or story, I had avoided taking a closer look at it. I knew its contents, or at least I had thought so over the past twenty-five years and had seen no reason to verify my assumption.

But now I was seized by dangerous curiosity. I could no longer bear the carton's mute presence; it was the silence about my father that I heard in it. And I didn't want that silence to be passed on to my children one day. It was my responsibility to give the carton a place, in a safe, in a poison cabinet or in the trash. I was in the same boat with my inheritance as everyone else: we all had to take care of it one day.

But that meant I had to open the carton and take a look at its contents. I was afraid to do that, or at least I only ever thought of it with reluctance. That was down to the story linked to the carton.

When I got to my friends' place in Yaoundé, a message awaited me. It was the last decade of the fax machine. I immediately recognised my mother's handwriting. She was sorry to say my father had died. The letter was three weeks old. I made a few calls back home but received no answers

to my questions, and because calls from Cameroon to Switzerland were expensive, I put off my enquiries and readied myself to leave.

At home there was snow on the ground, a clear cold winter; the year was barely a week old and I began to look for my father's ashes. His relatives had not taken care of anything, no one knew anything of a funeral. My father had been the black sheep of the family and they wanted nothing to do with his mortal remains. He had been a bit of a grifter in his youth, ended up in Witzwil and Thorberg, prisons that were still called houses of correction back then. He could not shake that off for the rest of his days, even though he tried to lead an orderly life after jail, stayed in the area and settled for a modest existence waiting tables in medium-sized restaurants.

I found their contempt for my father petty; he was dead, after all, and would no longer harm anyone. But it was my duty; his relatives told me a son must take care of his dead father, and I couldn't deny they were right. In a way that I experienced for the first time, I was really responsible for something. It seemed absolutely natural, inherent to my existence as a person, for me to pay my dues to the dead and live up to my duty to my ancestors. But to do that, I first needed his ashes.

He had lived the last of his life on the street, spending cold nights in the Salvation Army's temporary hostel. One Tuesday morning at the beginning of December, he had collapsed not far from the station. The infarction ripped a hole in his heart, which he survived for less than a minute. The hospital he was taken to worked with various undertakers, as they informed me, but they couldn't say which of them had my father's casket; they merely gave me a list and I had to make a few strange phone calls, a son looking for his father's remains, rather embarrassing.

At some point I found the casket. I took it back to the place where his last flat had been, at the end of a valley in the mountains. There were four of us there, if I remember rightly. It was cold, January, bitter, nasty. There was no speech by a pastor; I felt obliged to read a few lines of Job, verses 27 to 31 of chapter 30, which I had had printed on the bereavement circular. 'My bowels boiled, and rested not; the days of affliction prevented me. I went mourning without the sun: I stood up, and I cried in the congregation. I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls.' Rather unsuitable as a farewell, but I was not in the mood for consolation. Once I had finally placed the casket in the niche I felt a great sense of relief. The old man had found a place, he could stay here undisturbed for all eternity, although that eternity was to turn out shorter than I thought at the time. His remaining belongings had been removed to the landing of a bleak

housing block on the edge of the estate. Clothing, shoes, personal effects, nothing of any value, no furniture; the landlord had kept that as collateral. My father had owed him several months' rent, as the upstanding man admitted with tears in his eyes.

He could not understand how a man as nice as my father could be so unreliable. How often he had promised the rent arrears, how often he himself had believed him, given him another extension, he told me, until he'd lost his rag and turfed him out on the street, which he now regretted bitterly. It was his fault, he said, that my father had died homeless.

I left the man alone with his self-pity and packed the things into Andy's Saab. Then we drove to my place on Dufourstrasse, where I wrote a short story that I dedicated to my father, a story which had nothing to do with him or with me or with what had happened.

Of course, I disclaimed the inheritance; I wasn't crazy. I wrote a letter to the district governor publicly announcing that I refused all claims.

And so all I had left was the carton. My father's ashes had found their place but this stuff here, this had no home. The carton belonged with me and yet didn't belong with me, it belonged to me and yet didn't belong to me. Over the past decades I had emancipated myself from it, from the squalor, but before I could liberate myself once and for all from it and its history I had to face it, and that meant daring to look inside. I was still hesitant; I had heard of certain boxes best kept closed, like Pandora's for instance.

Some receptacles were filled with all evils, which would then escape; but at the same time, I thought ancient myths would not be helpful for this matter, and superstition was ridiculous and irrational.

Eventually, I began my examination. I didn't put on rubber gloves, although I had some: a full box of sempercare single-use examination gloves, latex-free, in sky blue. We were going through a pandemic, which was why I'd bought them and never used them.

The carton was dusty, dirty, it smelled musty but its contents were dry and undamaged by bookworms. On the very top, I found the green folder containing the bereavement circular, which I had written back then and tossed in the carton and forgotten, after the funeral. I found the fax in which my mother had informed me of my father's death, the list of undertakers – the documents articulated a time gone by, a distant era, the twentieth century in its last decade. In

terms of technology, social affairs, culture, I lived in a different world to the young man of back then.

Beneath that, the box was genuinely filled with many evils. Knight, Death and the Devil appeared here in the form of numbers and letterheads: district magistrate, insolvency court, unemployment offices and savings banks, social security offices, specific genres of correctional organs, the seizure notices, the discharges, the debentures.

I knew it all well, only too well. As if these letters were addressed not to him but to me, that was how it seemed sometimes, and I had to check twice whether my father or myself was the addressee. Only the forename distinguished us. In exactly those years, I too had been floundering in debt, poverty and criminality. Like his, my existence too was at threat, I had no security, no savings, no safety net and no one who might have stood up for me. Like my father, I was living on the margins of society, which didn't bother me fundamentally; I was not unhappy. And yet I was aware at every moment: one minor mishap, a foolish accident, a coincidental apprehension, an unplanned interrogation, and I would have talked myself into unstoppable trouble, ended up in jail, in a cell, a room, a dorm, as a case, a clinical history, a note in a file: unfit for further use in society, as the Swiss army's military service booklet put it. I could hope for sympathy or understanding or mercy, but I wasn't stupid enough to hope. My family wouldn't help, let alone social services.

At the age of twenty-five, I had neither vocational training nor educational qualifications; what I did have was debts equivalent to six months' wages and practical knowledge of dunning levels. Everything up to the second payment reminder was harmless; from the third, action was required. I paid by instalments, each one as punctually as possible, sticking to the contracts. That didn't guarantee my survival. I could still get caught out but I learned how to reduce the risks and raise my chances of escaping my fate, my origins, incarceration, debtors' prison, the clinic and the cemetery, where a good part of my people had meanwhile ended up. Corrections were effective but not all-powerful. I couldn't score a bogey. Mistakes were verboten. They would have killed me.

The debts clung firm to my feet, the path to an orderly existence was long and thorny. At some point I'd found a job as a bookseller, on lousy pay because I didn't have the right qualifications, but for the first time in my life I was getting regular wages and doing work I actually enjoyed.

Up to my mid-twenties I paid off the debts of my depraved and wasted youth, doing everything to escape my origins. And I managed it. I made a name for myself through my writing, claimed sovereignty over my life and met people who became my chosen family. I considered myself lucky to have found literature, something I would never exhaust, which challenged and inspired me and eventually even paid my bills. Now, though, my origins faced me again, in the form of the ugly carton, the cardboard box of poverty. And part of me was still at home there. I knew the desperate calculations on the backs of envelopes, the shopping lists with the sums available for the week so as to stick strictly to potatoes, pasta and tinned meat and not to be led astray – seeing all that again pulled at my heartstrings and I felt a lump in my throat, the fear and the vivid memory of how a life like that felt, a life in the gutter, in poverty, on the brink, a life that I had escaped only by a hair's breadth, though work and good fortune – escaped it on the surface, certainly; I was doing well, as I've said, I had no reason to complain, but a bitter residue was still there, a taste in my mouth, my aversion to cold nights, the indignities, people's contempt, it was all there, vivid before me and inside me. You can take the boy out of the debtors' prison, but you can't take the debtors' prison out of the boy.

In the end, I had to look for my father's ashes a second time. We happened to be in M., the place where he is buried. It is at the end of a valley, in a basin, with waterfalls, a glacier high above the village. I had promised to show my daughter the niche where I had placed the casket twenty-five years previously, long before she was born, on a bitterly cold January morning. But now there was nothing to be found in the cemetery wall behind the church, no stone plaque, no name, nothing; it was as if he had never existed. And as so often when dealing with my father, I felt like a fantasist, an imposter.

A last resting place was kept for twenty-five years here, which made sense to me for graves, since they took up a good few square-metres of ground and if a hundred people died a year in this area, the dead would occupy a football field within four years, which was irresponsible in an area where cultivated land was in short supply. A niche for a casket, however, was barely of consequence; it was high-density construction in the realm of the dead. The cemetery wall was far from fully occupied so there was no need to clear my father out.

I felt strangely offended and confirmed. Offended because the administration ought to have informed me, because this place had thrown my father out once before, back when he'd been alive. They had treated his ashes as they had his person, seeming to begrudge him his peace, and when I got back home I hoped very much that I was wrong about the matter and they had merely moved him.

I didn't dare to call the cemetery administration and ask what had become of his ashes, and still haven't – although, as I've said, I have experience of making such calls, or rather not *although* but *because* I have that experience. Looking for one's father's ashes is a strange task, and above all, I would fear the possible answer here, once again. I don't know what they do with the leftovers of human lives, whether there is an appropriate protocol for them. It was an earthenware casket, unglazed, made of clay; it would not stand out in shards on a pile of debris, but not everyone has to humble themselves in this way; many of course choose a brass casket or some other metal, and one would like to know what happens to the material in that case. After my experiences of twenty-five years ago, as I've said, I am reluctant to make that phone call. I know what reaction to expect. Even after such a long time, the memory of my father might not prompt only good feelings, and there is some doubt as to whether I am all that popular and welcome with the relevant authorities.

He has no grave now, but he has found a place after all, here in this story, which of course is in no way the story of his life. The man who is said to have been my father was very different, and I found nothing about his actual existence, how he loved and how he suffered, in the carton.

My origins remain uncertain. I couldn't be happier about that. They say home is where your dead are buried. My mother died on an island in the Caribbean where she had spent the last twenty years of her life. A case of economic migration in the opposite direction to usual. As an old woman, she could no longer afford to live in Switzerland. Her ashes were scattered in the Lanmè Karayib. From the Alpine firm to the Caribbean Sea: that should be just broad enough as the span of my origins.