

Translated excerpt

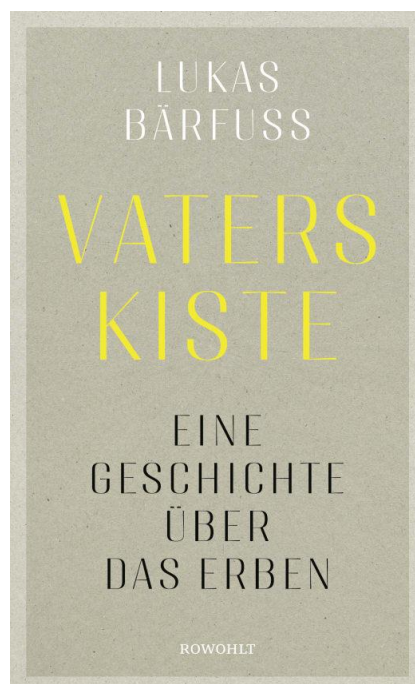
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Vaters Kiste
Eine Geschichte über das Erben

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Lukas Bärfuss
Father's Box
A Story About Inheriting

Translated by Caroline Waight



After I'd cleared up, a box was left. Twenty-five years earlier I'd brought it with me from a dark flat in the mountains to where I lived on Dufourstrasse, storing it away unopened until I moved to Aarwangenstrasse and later Bertastrasse. From there I took the box to streets named after three gods, Apollo, Minerva and Neptune, then eventually to Mühlebach one hot summer, then up to Asylstrasse, for a few months to Witikonerstrasse, and now at last I'd brought it here, to this front room. There it was. An ordinary cardboard crate from the Del Monte corporation. And I didn't know what to do with it.

The children had grown up, a new stage of life was being ushered in, and it demanded space. The flat was littered with the flotsam of years past, stuff that now had neither use nor purpose and needed looking at, evaluating, throwing out or putting into storage. I went through everything carefully, finding my loved-ones, my years growing up, my first steps into art, the caesuras – marriage, birth, sickness, divorce, death – and above all, myself.

I'm not sure to what extent my tidying was impelled by my own mortality. A friend had fallen ill in the prime of life, beyond recovery, and passed away soon afterwards. The men in my family didn't tend to reach old age, and it wouldn't be long before I'd caught up with most of them in years. Still, there were no signs my own end was nigh. I was satisfied with my state of health, although I did wonder whether something in me knew my days were numbered and was urging me to put my affairs in order. My doctor, who I'd been pestering with my concerns, gave me a thorough examination and issued me with a faultlessly clean bill of health. I was just a bit tired, she said. As with anything, you could go overboard with the tidying-up. I mustn't forget about balance or exercise, and I should give myself a break every once in a while. Times were hard enough.

I was relieved, at least somewhat. But it didn't help me with my box. It was the only evidence of the man they'd called my father. Like most people I knew from childhood, he had vanished almost without trace. I had half a dozen pictures of my mother, the same of my father, and virtually no relics of my younger self at all – no albums filled with nice family portraits, no clumsy handicrafts from school. I was occasionally sent class photographs by former teachers, and once a bag full of old notebooks. But those were the only things left: no furniture, no jewellery, no books, despite the fact that half my relatives were six feet under. I'd spent part of my youth on the streets, with no fixed address, and if you don't have a house and you don't have a flat, then you carry no documents, you carry no memory, and the only papers you own are the ones you stuff under your jumper on cold nights. So my childhood was material only in fragments, and one of these fragments, an essential one, was this box. It was a curio, an anomaly. It had no purpose or function. It contained part of my heritage and a chapter of my history, but since I'd done everything I could to escape that heritage and history, I had always put off dealing with it. I knew what it contained, or so I'd thought for the last twenty-five years, so I'd seen no need to confirm my assumption.

Now, however, I was seized by a dangerous curiosity. I could no longer bear the mute presence of the box. What I heard inside it was the silence around my father, and I didn't want that silence to be passed on one day to my children. It was my responsibility to allot the box a place: in the vault, in the poison cabinet, or in the bin. When it came to

inheritance, I was no different from anybody else: sooner or later, we've all got to face it head on.

But that meant I had to open the box and take a closer look at its contents. I was afraid to, or at least I only thought about it with reluctance. I was afraid because of the story attached to the box.

That December twenty-five years ago I was in northern Cameroon, in Waza, a reserve on the border with Chad. The Sudano-Sahel region was dry as dust; the last rainfall had been eight weeks earlier, and the next wasn't expected for six months. I had been searching for elephants and found them, as well as giraffes, Thomson's gazelles and buffalo – dangerous, because they move in herds – and I had seen the tracks of a lion.

We'd been travelling in a wine-red Opel Kadett, eminently unsuitable for the area, a joke, yet somehow the only vehicle we'd been able to get our hands on.

Our driver, a heavy-set middle-aged man, had a cold. He tossed one snotty Kleenex after another into the savannah, leaving a trail of white behind us, and when – in my Western European environmental presumptuousness – I pointed this out to him, he grabbed a stick and jabbed the cellulose into the cracks in the parched earth until they were gone.

In the dry season, all that grew in the savannah for miles was a scrawny weed with woody stems. The hot air above the plain painted castles on the horizon; here and there were bushes, acacias, and inside them small birds, a species of tit that weaved basket-shaped nests in the trees. Termite mounds, again and again.

On one occasion we had a flat tyre. But we didn't have a spare, so I spent an uncomfortable night under the African sky with two snoring men in an Opel Kadett. A lion roared not far away, and I remember pressing the button that locked the doors from the inside. I'm not sure now if even then I couldn't help laughing at the thought of a lion opening a car door. Regardless, another vehicle came that same night to take us back to the resort.

We'd spotted the elephants earlier in the day, visible on the horizon as a cloud of dust, and the tracker promised they'd come to the watering hole at some point during the day. There we saw bald-headed vultures, creatures from another age and in another age, mighty beasts, light in the air but heavy as soon as they touched the ground. Somewhere, a skeleton.

Then there they were, grey monsters, eating machines that had to content themselves with straw, moving here and there, cows with their calves, creatures that could not be more alien, and it was precisely this alienness that stirred my admiration and delight. The feeling is colonial, maybe, an emotion of conquest and exploration, but I can't say I felt like a conqueror or an explorer, more like a nobody, without a clue what I was doing there. I was homesick and a long way from Switzerland, where no one was waiting for me, no employer and no school, no parents – maybe a couple of friends, who would no doubt get by without me for a while.

The camp was abandoned, the boukarous empty, and myself the only guest that night. It had been a long time since we'd seen any tourists. The area wasn't safe. After dinner, I sat on a rock. Above me was the starry sky, the clear air, the Milky Way as I had never seen it before, a small European man who had decided to be a writer but had no idea how to become one. It was a moment of lostness that connected me in some enigmatic way with the universe, its component parts – the stars, the Earth, the people, the animals – as lost as I was.

I'm not sure what happened that night, but I was struck by the abrupt realisation that my time there was up and I had to go back, back to my world, to my responsibilities. I had to face up to my life, to my problems. It was a restless night, and I could hardly wait for the next day to bolt.

I set off early next morning, back to Maroua at first. It was fifteen hundred kilometres to Yaoundé, the capital, half of which had to be covered in an overcrowded Toyota HiAce, on a road that only occasionally merited the word. The stretches of tarmac were actually the most dangerous. The driver put the pedal down, even though there were potholes in the road the size of bathtubs, and I remember the Koran being recited on the radio, and I remember a stretch of forest where a fire had broken out, so that animals had fled out onto the tarmac, most of them birds, including a species with turquoise plumage, and the driver didn't take his foot off the pedal even then; and I remember a flapping noise and the smell of burning wood.

Then the journey across the Bénoué plain, up the Falaise, the climb that leads up to the Highlands, to Ngaoundéré, last stop on Cameroon's railway line, and a town where fog gathers in the morning and the moto-taxi drivers ride the streets wrapped in Arctic jackets, hoods tightened up to their noses. The nights there were cold, mist lingering among the houses, and at the station I boarded the train, got into my compartment and rode further south overnight, to Yaoundé, the capital, to my friends at the theatre.

When I got there, however, a message was waiting for me. This was during the final decade of the fax machine. I recognised my mother's handwriting immediately. My father had sadly died, she wrote. The message was three weeks old. I made a few calls home, but got no answers to my questions, and because the conversations were expensive, I decided to defer the explanations and make myself ready to leave.

At home there was snow, a clear cold winter, the new year barely a week old, and I began searching for my father's ashes. My relatives had left everything disorganised, and nobody knew anything about a burial. My father had been the black sheep of the family, and they wanted nothing to do with him, not even with his remains. As a young man he'd found himself on the wrong side of the law, doing stints in Witzwil and Thorberg, prisons once known for their harsh conditions. It followed him around for the rest of his days, even though he tried to live a decent life after serving his time. He remained in the area, making a modest living as a waiter at middling inns.

I found this contempt for my father petty; he was dead, after all, and no longer any harm to anybody. But I had a duty: I couldn't just ignore my relatives' insistence that dead fathers were a son's responsibility. In a way, it was the first time in my life I was truly responsible for anything. It seemed natural, somehow, an inevitable part of my existence as a human being: I was performing a service for the deceased, doing my duty to my ancestors. But first, I needed his ashes.

In the last months of his life he had lived on the streets, spending cold nights at hostels run by the Salvation Army. He had collapsed one Tuesday morning in early December, not far from the railway station. The infarction tore a hole in his heart, killing him in less than a minute. The hospital where he was taken worked with several different mortuaries, I was told, but they couldn't say which one might have my father's urn. They simply handed me a list, and I ended up making a few strange phone calls – a son searching for his father's remains. It felt awkward, somehow.

Eventually, I found the urn. I took it back to the place where he'd last rented a flat, in the mountains, at the far end of a valley. There were four of us, if I remember right. It was cold, January, piercing and unpleasant. No priest, but I felt compelled to read a few lines from the Book of Job, verses 23 to 31 from chapter 30, which I also had printed on the service sheet. '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.' Not the most appropriate goodbye, but I wasn't in a consoling mood. When at last I placed the urn in its niche, I felt a tremendous sense of relief. The old man had somewhere at last, somewhere he could rest undisturbed for all eternity, even if eternity turned out to be shorter than I realised at the time. The rest of his belongings were in the stairwell of a dreary block of flats on the outskirts of town. Clothes,

shoes, personal effects, nothing of value, no furniture – the landlord had kept that for appropriate disposal. My father had fallen several months behind on the rent, as the worthy man explained with tears in his eyes.

He couldn't understand how a nice person like my father could simultaneously be so unreliable. Again and again he'd promised to pay the back rent, again and again the landlord had believed him, set another due date, until at long last he'd reached the end of his tether and turned him out onto the street, something he now bitterly regretted, he told me. It was because of him, he said, that my father had died homeless.

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

I turned down the inheritance, of course. I wasn't crazy. Writing a letter to the local governor, I officially waived my claim.

And so I was left with just the box. My father's ashes had their place now, but whatever this was, it had no home. The box belonged with me and yet it didn't; it belonged to me and yet it didn't. Over the decades I had emancipated myself from it, from that misery, but before I could liberate myself from it and its history once and for all, I had to face it head on, and that meant plucking up the courage to look inside. I was still hesitant, because I'd heard of certain boxes that were best kept closed – Pandora's, for example. There were containers that were filled with all the evils of the world, just waiting to escape; but at the same time I didn't think that ancient myths would help me here, and superstition felt absurd and foolish.

At long last, I set about my examination. I didn't bother with rubber gloves, although I had them at the ready, a full box of sempercare, *single use examination gloves, latex-free*, in a shade of sky blue. We were in the middle of a pandemic, so I'd bought but never used them.

The box was dusty, grimy, musty-smelling, but its contents were dry and showed no signs of insect damage. At the top I found the small green folder with the service sheet, which I'd printed out then tossed carelessly into the box after the funeral and forgotten. I found the fax in which my mother had informed me of my father's death, and the list of mortuaries. In those documents was the sound of a bygone age, a distant era, the twentieth century in its final decade. Technologically, socially, culturally, I lived in another world than that young man had then.

Underneath, it turned out the box was filled with evils after all. Knight, death and devil took the form of letterheads and figures: district judges' offices, bankruptcy judges' offices, unemployment accounts and local savings bank accounts, welfare offices, penal and judicial institutions and their various specific genres of writing: notices of forfeiture, dismissals of objection, promissory notes.

I knew it all so well. Too well. I felt at moments as though those letters were written not to him but to me, and I had to double-check to make sure the addressee was my father. The only difference between us was our first name. In those same years I too was on the verge of sinking into debt, poverty and criminality. My whole existence, like his, was under threat. I had no security, no reserves, no safety net, and nobody to fight my corner. Like my father, I lived on the fringes of society. It didn't really bother me – I wasn't unhappy – and yet I was aware at every moment that one tiny mishap, one silly accident, one chance arrest, one unplanned interrogation, and I would have become irretrievably entangled. I would have ended up in jail, in a cell, a room, a pen; I would have been a case, a clinical history, a memorandum, unfit for further social use, as my Swiss Army service record put it. I could have hoped for pity or understanding or mercy, but I wasn't stupid enough for hope. My family would not have helped, and nor would social services.

By the age of twenty-five I had no training and no certifications, but I did have six months' salary's worth of debts and a good working knowledge of dunning levels.

Everything up until the second reminder was harmless, but from the third one onward, action was required. I paid in instalments, as punctually as I could, sticking closely to the contracts. It was no guarantee I'd be saved. I could still be caught out, but I learned how to minimise the risk and improve my chances of escaping my fate, my heritage, jail, the cycle of debt, the clinic and the cemetery, where a solid proportion of my social circle had since ended up. Making adjustments helped, but it wasn't a magic bullet. There was no margin for error. Mistakes were out of the question. They would have killed me.

My debts were millstones, and the path to a better life was long and thorny. Eventually I got a job as a bookseller. The pay was lousy because I had no qualifications, but for the first time in my life I had a steady salary and a job I actually liked. It took me until my mid-twenties to pay off the last holdovers from my blighted, wasted youth, doing everything I could to escape my origins. And I succeeded. I created a name for myself with my writing, claimed the right to define my life on my own terms, and met people who became part of my chosen family. I considered myself lucky, because in literature I had found something I could never exhaust, something that challenged me and thrilled me and ultimately even nourished me. But now my past was back, in the shape of this ugly box, a box of poverty. And part of me was still at home there. I knew the frantic calculations scribbled into notebooks, the shopping lists with the weekly budget in the margin so he wouldn't be seduced by offers and would stick rigidly to potatoes, pasta and tinned meat – seeing it all again was heart-breaking, and I felt a lump in my throat. I felt the fear and the vivid memory of what it was like to live such a life, a life in the dirt, in poverty, on the edge; a life I had escaped by a hair's breadth, by dint of work and good luck – outwardly escaped, at least. I was fine, as I said, I had no complaints, but a bitter residue remained, a taste in my mouth; the aversion to cold nights, the humiliations, other people's contempt, all that was still there, alive before me and in me. You can take the boy out of the cycle of debt, but you can't take the cycle of debt out of the boy.

I wasn't ashamed of my story, but I mostly kept it to myself. When I did talk about it, I abbreviated it, condensed it, expanded it; in a word, I shaped it, summarising it until it only distantly resembled what I had felt and experienced. I had to. The details were impossible, the big picture too big. The short version didn't bother me. I didn't agonise about it. I thought there would be an opportunity one day to tell the whole, huge thing, real and entire. When that day might come didn't really matter. Time was on my side. As an author, I wanted to write my own story, but I still didn't think I was mature enough to give direction to something so awful, to wrest meaning from the accidents of origin, to turn that horror into gain. And that was the task before me. To tell a story is to undergo a transformation. It could save or it could destroy, and there were no guarantees either way. For a long time I thought the latter was more likely, and I wasn't prepared to take the risk. I didn't think I was strong enough, and once I was, once I could have told the story, there was no longer any need.

Some boxes you don't open just like that, and I was seized with an aversion to heritage – not my own, no, but the idea of heritage itself, this obsession with defining ourselves by our ancestors. Should I simply throw the box away? That would have been sensible. I hadn't looked at it in twenty-five years. It was more a symbol than an archive; I wasn't expecting knowledge from its contents, I wasn't expecting insight. I could have destroyed it without losing anything – more than that, if it had fallen into the wrong hands, it could have caused a lot of damage. You had to be able to read the box, and in some conceited way I believed I was the only one who could. As both witness to the events and their archivist, I alone possessed the information needed to decipher the documents inside. Both witness and archivist insisted on keeping it. Vestiges of those days were rare, and rare

things, so the logic goes, must be valuable. But the more I turned it over in my mind, the more puzzled I was by my own thinking. The box posed questions, and the most important one, which I couldn't answer, was to do with family. Why did I think I belonged to that family? Why did I feel a duty to my parents? They had given me the gift of existence, sure, but beyond that I had nothing to thank them for but bad examples. When I passed the exam to get into teacher training college, which was a miracle given my education, my mother took the stipend money and ran off, and I ended up on the streets. My father had treated me better, but he hadn't actually cared about me, had never been interested in me. My parents had shaped me through their negative precedent. I'd never expected anything from my family but trouble and aggravation, and judging by the books I read, I wasn't the only one. So when I heard that human rights legislation made specific provision for families, and that the family was the 'natural and fundamental unit of society', I realised why we were in such dire straits. But what exactly was the problem with the family?