

FRAGMENT OF MEMORIES

NORTHERN NARRATIVES INITIATIVE



ABDULRAHMAN DALATU BUKAR

CULTIVATING
CREATIVITY



NORTHERN NARRATIVES INITIATIVE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my parents.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This collection of essays by Abdulrahman Dalatu Bukar is a stunning and intimate journey through a young man's life, characterized by resilience, grief, and connections of home. In "Checking," Abdulrahman captures a harrowing glimpse into the fear and uncertainty of life in Maiduguri, where military "checking" is a common, terrifying reality. The story is made all the more personal by his small, trifling act of defiance—spreading out his school books to prove his innocence—a detail that emphasizes the innocence of childhood in the face of grave danger.

Abdulrahman's emotional wisdom doesn't just stop there. In "Collapse", the reader is made to witness a heartbreaking account of immense personal loss, as the author recounts his family's struggle with the chronic illness and deaths of his two brothers. If anything, this essay reflects the power of friendship and human connection, as he describes how his "G4" friends offered a lifeline, pulling him out of his grief and academic and mental decline. This narrative endearingly illustrates that while sorrow is an arrival, it is a journey one does not have to take alone.

In "Fragments of Memories," Abdulrahman paints a clear, nostalgic picture of his childhood in a village of "expansive savannah wasteland". His enchanting descriptions of a grandmother's unconditional love and the simple joys of chasing palm nuts and swimming in the seasonal Gwaya river undeniably evoke a strong sense of belonging. From one scene to another, it celebrates the unique beauty of his Northern Nigerian heritage. Abdulrahman's writing is a moving tribute to the memories that shape and mold us, reminding us that even in loss, hardship, or suffering, the fragments of joy and love subsist.

Eniola Abdulroqeeb Arówólò
Nigerian Poet & Essayist

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CHECKING

Some people said the soldiers invaded our neighbourhood around 2 a.m., while others claimed that it was 4 a.m. Yet others argued that it was as early as midnight. What mattered most was their coming, armed heavily, as though they had come to foil a terrorist plan.

My father had just returned from subh prayer, and he informed us that there were soldiers in our neighbourhood, and the possibility of a 'checking'. This checking is a common practice by the military in Maiduguri. They usually storm an area with lots of troops, mostly by night with the hope of catching suspects that possibly belong to the Yusufiyya sect. This occurred through tips from informants or just by intuition. It was more rampant in areas with a lot of boys than in other places with fewer of them. If a person is found guilty (and in many cases people are wrongly found guilty), they would cause severe harm to them. If, at all, he made it to the barracks (where insurgents and non-insurgents alike are being detained), a greater brutality awaited him. We heard fragments of the story, mostly rumoured, and from others who were lucky to be discharged. All these had never happened in our neighbourhood before. We only heard it from far away. So, when they came that morning with their guns and hostile countenance, it brewed a fear that gripped us to the spine.

There is a thing I did, at the peak of that fright, which bemuses me when I recall it now, years later. That early morning when the soldiers knocked on our gate, I deliberately spread open my school exercise books in our bedroom and hastily joined my family in the middle of our compound.

My father opened the gate and welcomed them. He introduced himself, showing them his work identity card. They appeared to be quite friendly, seeing my father was in public service. Two soldiers stood with their rifles to keep an eye on us while three others were led by my dad to search the entire house.

We sat and waited, praying for this nightmare to pass, because the soldiers too can kill, because they have killed in other places. It felt like a decade before the soldiers came out, assured that there was nothing ominous in our house. A blessing. And since we, my siblings and I, were enrolled in Boko School (a western school), our names were struck out from the list of possible miscreants.

They finally left, but with a warning that none of us should venture outside until the checking is over. And after their departure, we were relieved that we were in the clear.

The quietness of the morning extended to noon. A hot, blowing wind replaced the cool morning breeze. We waited. At last, the operation ended. We counted about forty Hilux cars through the space between our gate and the pillar when the soldiers made their exit. Nobody thought of breakfast.

COLLAPSE

I was not prepared for Pharmacy when I got admitted into the University of Maiduguri to study it; I had only eyes for Medicine. I was always fascinated by the spotless white lab coat of the physician attending to patients in the hospital wards, the way the consultants flick through the medical records of the patients or lecture to young medical students or house officers, and my ambition was to become like these students, these house officers, these consultants. What began as a mere fascination, maybe an admiration, then became an ambition, an intense ambition that was never fulfilled. I can't help myself sometimes slipping back to those moments of unfulfilled ambition. It is a heartbreak that I haven't yet healed from.

To pharmacy, and not medicine, I was admitted. However, I didn't allow the impossibility of medical science I have ever longed to study demoralise me. I decided I was going to make the most out of what I was offered: Pharmacy. I'd browse the internet for hours, reading many pieces about the course, and connecting with many pharmacists and pharmacy students on Facebook. The first year was easy for me, but my troubles began in the second year.

When the waves of the COVID 19 receded, my brother, Mu'azu was diagnosed with Chronic Kidney Disease, after visiting the Specialist Hospital Maiduguri for a medical checkup. It was a devastating blow to my family. Mu'azu has been ill for most of the month preceding his diagnosis from what we initially thought was malaria, but after the full course of treatment from the usual antimalarial drugs, he felt no better. Cases of CKD were rampant in Maiduguri and we have lost some of our relations and neighbours to it, but none of us would have believed that a similar case would be confirmed in our very home. To make the matter worse, the disease progressed faster than usual. In the two months that followed, December 2020 and January 2021, our family went through a lot of stress, emotionally and financially.

Long before this diagnosis, our eldest brother has been diagnosed with diabetes. Even though he was quite consistent with his medical checkups and adhered optimally to his diabetic medications, CKD, secondary to diabetes developed in him too. Things became really hard, anxiety became our daily companion. Different members of my family had different views of Chronic Kidney Disease, myself not excluded, though with my basic medical knowledge, my views were not as extreme as theirs. But, it all boils down to the same thing: Death. Of course death. There is no cure for end stage renal failure.

Mu'azu was admitted into the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital a month after his diagnosis. Even with sufficient management, his condition deteriorated faster than we had imagined. During the four weeks he was on admission, I sat by his bedside in the daytime, while my other two brothers came over for the night, or sometimes alternated with my other three cousins living with us. During those vulnerable days of his, my bond with him seemed to deepen. The usual misunderstandings between siblings were all left behind. I knew what the near future holds. The anxieties, how weak this newfound bond rests on, threatening to snap at any time. Death is inevitable, but that fact does not console one in the face of the death of a relative, especially a young relative. I was confused, and at that time, my confusion, the muddled thoughts, seemed even therapeutic.

The day my brother died, I had left the hospital for home earlier than the usual time I leave. Since my mom and other relatives were present, I wanted to have some rest at home because the accumulated hospital exhaustion was having a great effect on me. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the body of the association of the teaching staff of Nigerian Universities, has just called off the eight months long strike and the management of University of Maiduguri has announced that the pending semester exams must be continued next week. We were in the examination period when the strike action started. I was asleep that day when I heard the sharp cries of women in our house.

Without being told, I knew what had happened. Glancing at my phone only confirmed it. Six missed calls from one of my brothers. The long, anxiously awaited fate had been delivered.

Within the week, my other brother Jibrin's condition took a turn too. Exactly a week later, he also died during the night, around 9pm almost the same time as Mu'azu. Our griefs and sorrows were beyond description. Every memory is a spike moment of pain, as though one's heart would erupt in a volcano, tears running like molten lava. But as days turned into weeks, and weeks into months and months into years, I saw the logic in the words of the very Reverend Stephen Kumalo, in Alan Paton's 'Cry, The Beloved Country', that "Sorrow is better than fear. Fear is a journey, a terrible journey, but sorrow is at least an arrival". Our loss was huge, the sorrow, very heavy. But sorrow is at least better than fear and anxieties.

School resumed amidst these emotional turmoil. I was not prepared emotionally to go over all the notes that have accumulated dust over the months. Like a lost sheep, I let myself drift off. My academic performances continued to deteriorate: missed lectures and failed tests. I gave up on trying and took onto myself a life of solitude. Things could have become worse, but then there was the intervention of coursemates, a group of 4 male friends (fondly called G4).

I was eating buns with a zobo drink that afternoon under the Tree of Life at Mama Chioma's Kiosk, lost in thoughts, when I noticed them standing over me. "We need to talk to you after our lectures," one of them, Waheed, said. The meeting was the beginning of me joining their clique, and the long friendship that brought me solace.

“Abdulrahman, we know that you were one of the dedicated students in our 100 level, but we don't know what happened that you no longer take your studies with seriousness,” they said. “Is there any help we can render to help you as a friend, any kind of help?”

Over the months that followed, I became like a primary school pupil, with the G4 supervising what I have read, ensuring that I did not skip lectures. With time and their help, I got over my grief and took my studies seriously.

I lived in the same hostel, Adobayero Hall, with Waheed. The moment I joined the G4, he became my supervisor. He would check up on me in the hostel often, and soon enough, I started reading with him during the night in the Multi Purpose Lecture Halls.

And sometimes, we had to stay back in the faculty to read long into the evening, and every member was assigned a particular topic to read and explain in detail to his colleague. I never left the faculty without learning something new—a more detailed explanation to what I have learnt during lectures. Over a few years in school, our clique grew to ten members, ten young pharmacists!

With G4, I became the centre of focus, and I was soon able to gain back my emotional strength and all I had lost to grief.

FRAGMENTS OF MEMORIES

Whenever I think about my village, I think of the expansive savannah wasteland, the hot windy landscape with alternating array of fields: short slender grasses that turn brown in the dry season, and shrubby fields that are dotted with many solitary baobab trees and clusters of tamarind trees. Each alternating landscape extends to almost a kilometer, before giving in to the other. The long, narrow, red earth and un-tarred road, adorned with gullies and anthills, laid upon this savannah wasteland, and the narrower footpaths that branch like tributaries thereof, to other remote settlements.

Somehow, these days, the memories of the village kept surging through my mind like a loop of a video cassette slowly being rewinded, evoking a strong feeling of nostalgia in me.

My earliest recollection of my village starts with my grandmother when a cousin's marriage took me and my mother to Kafa when I was barely seven, although I had been taken there many times as a child. We went there that morning when my mother had just returned to Maiduguri, after the wedding. I made no scene because I had agreed to staying in the village. Though short (about three months long) that was the longest I had ever been with my grandmother.

After a few weeks, I transformed into a typical village boy, a pampered grandson of an old woman. Truly, I was much pampered then, as most children are with their grandparents. What bolstered the mischiefs in me was the unconditional love I was shown. It was undeniable that my grandmother doted on me the most amongst all her grandsons. In a big extended family house as ours, this of course cannot pass without being noticed. It often made some in-laws—mothers of my cousins—to voice out their displeasures.

Being the matriarch of the extended family, my grandmother hut or house stead (the architecture of her hut with adjoining structures like toilets and a veranda-like shade are different from other common buildings) was perched at the centre of the household. There was an ante room, an enclosed veranda-like structure before the main room. Adjoining the ante room is another enclosed shed that contains the water pots and a narrow corridor that leads to the bathroom. Surrounding it were other houses of my uncles, cousins, and their daughters-in-laws.

When it's lunch time, trays of food were brought to Iya from not less than ten houses, including those of my four uncles and other relatives. Same also applied to dinner and in all, I always had to choose what I wanted to eat, before the others were distributed to some of her aged friends. She didn't eat much, but as custom demands, where daughters-in-law must have to bring food for their mothers-in-laws, the foods were brought to her from all those fifteen or so places. I can vividly remember the different Buwur, traditional bowls carved from desert date wood, took much part of the ante room. Though locally made, those utensils have good heat retention and keep the foods hot.

As I learnt much later, of all my grandmother's children, my Dad was the one who stayed with her the least. He was sent to the city at a young age for studies and has lived there since. For all my mischievousness, nobody dared to touch me, and if I must be punished, it was just a brief rebuff from Grandma.

During the rainy season, after stormy and heavy downpour during the nights, I, together with my cousins and friends, used to go to some of the households with date palm trees or Doum nut palms in our neighborhood and some parts of the village for the palms and nuts that could have fallen down during the night. While some houses were receptive, others pursued us. There was an incident in which one old man in white tunic pursued us with Kangale, a dried corn stalk.

The house, with its very old drooping danga –the fence made with corn stalks– was in the neighborhood of Alhajiri. Our object of attraction, the tall palm tree, was behind the old man’s house. One cannot pass unnoticeably to get at the fallen fruits. As if in readiness for us, the Baba came after us the moment we were in the compound.

My first recollection of witnessing the beautiful colours of the rainbow was also in the village. Kemarma, as it is called in Kanuri, first appeared at the start of the rainy season. Although I don't know what this name connotes, it might be perhaps from the folk talk about how the rainbow patiently waits for a drink only in the rainy season, sustaining it for the whole year. “It eats small children,” said the older ones among my cousins and I remember scurrying down to the safety of Iya’s hut. Their malicious laughter was the tradeoff for our fright. Peering at the sky fearfully, holding onto the wooden hedges of the anteroom entrance, I saw the rainbow gracefully spreading its beautiful colours in a curved pattern at the horizon.

Another memory of the rainy season at the village was going to the river to wash clothes with one of my Aunts, Ma Buworam. The Gwaya river is a seasonal river that floods during the rainy season and a tributary to the Ngadda river which rose from the plains of Cameroon and follows labyrinths of course, through several places down to Lake Chad. As Ma did the washing, I swam with Modu, my second cousin. “Don't go into the deep waters,” she would caution from time to time, while washing our clothes, while Modu and I would continue to splash water on ourselves and play. The river bank also contains many tadpoles, the fishlike creatures we play with.

There were Fulani milk hawkers that used to come from some ruga settlements not far away from the town. They bring fresh dairy milks in big calabashes, effortlessly and well balanced on their heads with the help of small circular rolls made from palm leaves. These women usually bring these milk to my grandmother who also gives them dried tuwo that's made from millet or maize, and sometimes she would add Ngeskena –the heath dried portion of tuwo that sticks to the food. Even though my grandmother's food was brought to her by her in-laws, she sometimes likes cooking by herself.

Out of malicious intent, one of my cousins one day told me that the Fulani used to bring donkeys' milk and give it to Iya who would in turn give it to me. And so, I stopped drinking the milk. But an aunt fortunately came to my rescue. She had a flock of goats and personally milk from the nanny goats, added sugar and gave it to me.

The village market day was on Saturday, so every Saturday became a festive period for us. After putting on our colourful clothes and caps, we would go to the market square early in the morning to buy boiled pasta to which palm oil and yaji had been added. In our childish exuberance, that was a delicacy for us that we long for, week after week, in the village.

My brief stay with my grandmother came to an abrupt end when the water currents became high and news of children drowning in the river became rife. Cautious that such a fate shouldn't befall me, a cousin of mine, Fanagana, was asked to take me back home to Maiduguri.

In Maiduguri, I saw that many things had changed during my absence. A big gate had been put in our house and other things, most of which I have forgotten now. The year I came back from the village was also the year I was enrolled into primary school. A few years later, Grandma became sick and was admitted into the Specialist Hospital in Maiduguri, where she died after a few days.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ABDULRAHMAN DALATU BUKAR

Abdulrahman Dalatu Bukar hails from Maiduguri, Borno State, and holds a Bachelor of Pharmacy from the University of Maiduguri. His journey into writing was sparked by childhood exposure to storybooks like *Ruwan Bagaja*, *Magana Jarice*, and *Eze Goes to School*, eventually leading him to novels. As a pharmacist and early career researcher, Abdulrahman's passion lies in creative nonfiction, a genre he finds allows him to harmoniously blend creative and academic writing, serving as an effective channel for science communication. He aims to leverage this unique opportunity to learn extensively from his highly inspiring mentor and to complete a chapbook. His long-term aspiration is to apply the acquired experience as a stepping stone for future opportunities, ensuring the lessons leave a lasting impact on his creativity.

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