

where is home?



The sun sets in the neighborhood in Lagos, Nigeria, where the writer lived between October 2018 and August 2021. Photo: Munachim Amah

I am from Nigeria. I lived thirty-two years of my life in Nigeria. I lived in small towns in southeastern Nigeria and then I lived in a large city thousands of miles away from where I grew up and then two years ago I moved to Iowa for graduate school and quite honestly I don't know where my life will take me from here.

I have been on the move all my life, I have never settled anywhere, I have never called anywhere home, and this is not without reason. Before I turned eight, my mother died of breast cancer. Before I turned nine, my family had lived in five different places. My father married my stepmother when I was eleven, and I attended eight schools between elementary and high school. There was so much change, so much disruption in my childhood.

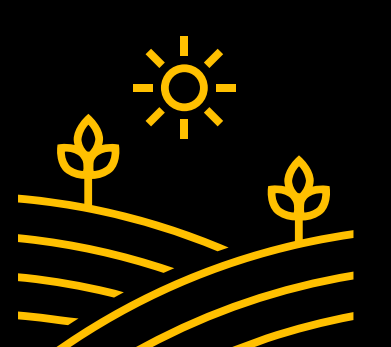
After attending one of my high schools for four years, and with only one year left to finish my high school education, I went home one summer and my father said I was not going back to my school. "You're going to a new school in September," he said. He bought me new books, new uniforms, a new bed, a new lamp, a new set of cutleries, new plates, new buckets, a new cupboard. I did not say goodbye to my friends and teachers. I did not go back to my school to retrieve my belongings.

Disappearing from a place like that leaves you with a convoluted sense of the value of human beings and possessions. I have never lived in a place for more than three years. I have never been in a romantic relationship for more than two years. I do not have any childhood friends. I do not feel deeply connected to my family. As an adult, now, I am not a stranger to living on the go.

Disruption is baked into the core of who I am, so when I ask myself the question "where is home?" I do not know what the answer is. Is home my father and my sisters and my brother and my stepmother scattered in different parts of Nigeria and the world? Is home my father's ancestral hometown that I visited once in two years for a couple of days during my childhood? Is home one of the countless places I lived during my childhood, teenage, and adult years? Is home my apartment in Iowa City where I currently live, the community of people in my graduate program, my small circle of friends?

In talking to people who feel some connection to places in Iowa, I wanted to understand what connects them to these places. What is it about a place that grounds them, that makes them feel they are home?

Two of the farmers I talked to have farmed and lived on their lands for over a quarter of a century. Another farmer has farmed a small piece of land for half a decade. I talked to a woman who moved to Des Moines in the early 1980s and lost her husband to a terminal illness, and when her family asked if she wanted to move back to Illinois, she said no. In her grief, she found a passion, a love for rivers and streams. She has lived in Des Moines for more than four decades and now calls Iowa home.



Where the treasures are



Robin Fortney talks about her passion for moving water at Walnut Woods State Park, Des Moines. Photo: Munachim Amah

Robin Fortney, born on the East Coast and now living in Walnut Creek watershed in Des Moines, has always loved moving water.

As a child, Fortney visited her grandmother in Tidewater Virginia on the Rappahannock River near Tappahannock Virginia, an estuary that was tidal and brackish. She would go down into the river through a ravine and walk barefoot through gum balls, and she would spend all day in water, hiking up and down the beach, looking for treasures.

One day, when Fortney was nine and had received a Girl Scout knife, she was running her hand over a clay bank that was about her height when she felt a bump.

“It’s hard,” Fortney said. “I look at it, and it’s bony kind of, and I start scraping away the clay and it keeps unfolding.”

What Fortney found that day was a giant shark tooth, which she said the Smithsonian in DC confirmed to be the tooth of the megalodon, the largest shark that ever lived.

Fortney said discovering that tooth opened up something in her. It made her incredibly curious about her environment.

Fortney has found many items from previous cultures in her exploration, like clay pipes, iron ingots, animal fossils. When she was a child, she would put these treasures on the little two by four ledges on her grandmother’s screen porch. Now, she collects them in her home in Des Moines, by Walnut Creek.

“There’s mystery,” Fortney said. “You don’t know what’s going to be around in the next corner.”

It’s why Fortney feels very protective of Iowa’s rivers and streams and wants people to care a little more about what happens to them.

“How we manage the land, how we live with the land, will affect how much water we have,” Fortney said. “We are water. No matter where we live, we have to have water. Whatever you discharge will go into a stream that then someone else gets to drink. So it’s kind of a neighborly thing to think about what you’re sending downstream.”

“This world isn’t just about us,” Fortney said. “We’re not the only ones here.”

“Bloom where you’re planted”

Originally from Alabama, Shaffer Ridgeway first moved to Iowa after graduation to work with the National Resources Conservation Service and thought he would stay in the state for only two years.

Twenty-five years later, he has lived all over the state, he has a wife, he has three kids, he owns Southern Goods LLC, which grows a variety of southern vegetables and produce for the Waterloo community, and he has set down deep roots in Waterloo, Iowa.

Ridgeway hadn’t planned to be a farmer but found increasingly that in his work as a conservation officer he wanted to be able to teach farmers by experience.

“They seem to receive that better when you have an experience that you can share with them,” Ridgeway said. “It was about the experience and being able to show farmers that you can build soil, and you can have a healthy soil and it could be productive and you don’t have to have all the chemicals and all that stuff that we do now.”

So, Ridgeway and his wife decided they would grow vegetables they grew up eating as part of their “soil health research project.”

“We wanted vegetables that we grew up with,” Ridgeway said. “We knew there was several people here from the south, and so we felt like that could be our target market.”

Now, he grows as many as twenty vegetables, including okra, winter squash, and zucchinis on the 2.5 acres of land he rents in Waterloo.

“My wife says this, right?” Ridgeway said. “She says you have to bloom where you’re planted. Wherever you’re planted, you have to bloom there. You can’t be trying to do it in Alabama and you’re here. So, wherever I am, first of all, I believe that I’m called to that place for a purpose and so it is my responsibility to make sure that that purpose is carried out wherever I am.”



Shaffer Ridgeway harvests baby potatoes from his farm during our visit. Ridgeway sent us home with fresh vegetables from his farm. Photo: Richard Frailing

“We are not alone”

Growing up on a farm that had been in his family since 1938, Dick Sloane watched his father rotate oats and alfalfa with row crops. His father, who also raised animals like cattle and swine, practiced biodiversity and conservation, installing grass waterways and practicing conservation tillage.

So, when Sloane got his own farm just outside Brandon, Iowa, in 1988 and started farming it, experimenting was second-nature to him. Now, he grows cover crops, practices no-till, plants prairie strips, uses as little fertilizer as possible, and tries to diversify what he grows on his farm.

“What you should do is what is going to be of long-term benefit to everyone in the community,” Sloane said. “We can’t think of everyone as being separate.”

Sloane’s philosophy comes from a rich Buddhist spiritual practice, which compels him to see the interconnectedness of all life forms, even the organisms in the soil that we can’t see. He cares about unseen organisms as much as he cares about human beings and thinks of himself as intrinsically connected to everything and everyone else.

“It’s like everything, you know, the rocks are even a part of me, because you look at them and it’s like, well, here’s fossil, and here’s air that was breathed, and there’s water that has always flown through this system, and it’s a water planet,” Sloane said.

For Sloane, home is wherever he finds himself, not a particular place or piece of land. Most importantly, it’s a feeling he gets from working on his farm and caring for other people.

“When I’m out working, it feels good,” Sloane said. “Land is a very existential kind of thing.”



Dick Sloane poses for the camera during a visit to his farm by Brandon, Iowa. Photo: Richard Frailing

Thriving in Complexity and Chaos



A tractor rests idly on Laura Krouse’s farmland at Mount Vernon, Iowa, as the sun sets. Photo: Richard Frailing

If you were just driving by Laura Krouse’s home in Abbe Hills Farm at a specific time on a late Thursday evening in June, you might wonder if someone actually lived there. There are no manicured lawns. No signs of human activity. Only prairie and tall trees growing indiscriminately around a small white house, the house itself nestled directly under a hill and tall bushes. A lone house in the middle of nowhere.

Her corn and soybean farm is up the hill, above the homestead. She grows vegetables down the hill, close to a three-acre wetland she started by the road that takes water off Krouse’s and other farmers’ lands. Krouse is proud of this practice that helps retain water in the uplands. She is proud of achieving biological diversity on her farm.

“This is a home for insects and birds and lots of things,” Krouse said. “I like that a lot.”

Yet, Krouse has struggled with moments when she feels she hasn’t done what is best for the land. She uses cover crops when and where she can on her farm but she also does a lot of tillage—and Krouse wishes she didn’t have to do this.

Tilling, Krouse says, destroys the soil, and it takes many years and a lot of soil life to bring it back to health, but farmers are faced with a difficult decision. They have to pay mortgages for their farm, and sometimes that means tilling the land to prepare it for corn and using nitrogen fertilizer so the corn can actually grow.

A strong domestic demand for corn used for animal feed and fuel ethanol has led to high prices, incentivizing farmers to increase corn acreage. Iowa leads in corn production in the United States, with many Iowa farmers shifting acres away from less-profitable crops and doing whatever they can to increase yield including tilling in the fall and using nitrogen fertilizers.

But tilling reduces soil life, which in turn depletes nutrients in the soil, and nitrogen fertilizers added to the soil wash away into streams and rivers, causing water pollution.

“People don’t want to cause pollution,” Krouse said. “But we do. We can’t risk the outcome if we don’t. If we don’t use the nitrogen fertilizer, there’s a pretty high probability that we won’t get the high yields. So, what are you doing to do?”

Krouse says it’s a systems problem: the system incentivizes farmers to grow corn.

“Nobody is negligent on purpose,” Krouse said. “Nobody is malicious. Nobody wants water pollution. Everybody wants to do their best. Everybody wants to keep the soil on their farm. Everybody wants a healthy ecosystem. But the model in which we practice agriculture doesn’t allow great ecosystem health outcomes. It’s just designed for yield. And so people including me make decisions that aren’t optimum for the environment every day of the week. I do something dumb every day of the week.”

Notwithstanding, Krouse loves her farm and what she has done with it. The shape of the land has allowed her to be creative, to try things she wouldn’t be able to try in other places. Its imperfect asymmetry allows for complexity, what Krouse calls “managed chaos.”

Why do we care about a place?

On Friday, June 30, my colleague Clara Reynen and I drove over hundred miles, past long stretches of corn and soybean farms, to Des Moines, Iowa, to talk to Alicia Vasto, Water Program Director at Iowa Environmental Council.

I discovered Vasto’s works during my preliminary research on water quality and was curious about how she situated her life story in this work.

Vasto, who grew up in a small town in Iowa, by the Racoon River, said only after living outside Iowa for about a decade did she develop a deeper appreciation of Iowa’s lands and waters.

No matter where she went, Vasto said, she always felt like an outsider and was always taken aback when people asked where she was from. “I just felt called back to Iowa.”

Its culture and land are more familiar to her, but after a few years of living in North Carolina, where water is substantially cleaner and clearer, Vasto has returned to Iowa clear-eyed and ready for a change.

“I think there’s a major disconnect between people and where their water comes from and their relationship to water, especially here in Iowa,” Vasto said. “There’s not a lot of places to go and enjoy the water, get in the water, get close to the water.”

Like Vasto, many others across Iowa—farmers, community organizers, residents—care about what happens in Iowa’s lands and waters.

But why do they care? Why should anyone care?



Throughout my conversations with Robin Fortney, Laura Krouse, Shaffer Ridgeway, Dick Sloane, and Alicia Vasto, I wrestled with this question. But I also realized that in predicated my inquiry on care, I was seeking answers for my own life: as a black man living in Iowa, as a Nigerian living in the United States, as a thirty-something-year-old man always on the move. Where and who do I care for? Why do I care?

There’s no one answer to this question. Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the beauty and inherent value of the place itself that we care for, however we define that value.

But a significant part of the answer lies within us: where we have come from, and our life journeys, which shape who we are, what we believe, and how we live our lives.



The BlueGAP summer team explores a tributary of the Mississippi River that flows through the Swiss Valley County Conservation Park, west of Dubuque. Photo: Kate Giannini



BlueGAP supported a total of 12 summer graduate Arts and Humanities students with partners at the University of Iowa, providing interdisciplinary training on issues related to water quality and nitrogen pollution. The 2023 and 2024 cohorts of students were tasked with producing an individual, independent project that represents a range of approaches to storytelling in the service of public outreach and engagement. BlueGAP seeks to make visible that which is invisible – nitrogen, of course, but also the larger systems of economics, law, and society that amplify its presence in our waters to degrees that are unhealthy and unsustainable. A key insight of BlueGAP is that any meaningful response to these problems requires storytelling as much as data, poetics as much as politics, aesthetics as much as engineering. What the student projects sought to provide was an aesthetic connection to the problems of nitrogen pollution.

Munachim Amah’s “Home” is part of a multi-part photo essay with an experimental combination of traditional fact-based reporting, creative nonfiction writing, and poetry that showcases Munachim’s personal preoccupation with the theme of home in relation to people’s relationship with water. (Munachim Amah is a PhD Student in Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Iowa.)

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