This summer, I set out to rediscover my hometown through the lens of fictional short stories. Lewiston-Auburn has a curious history—of immigration and emigration, of economic wealth as mill towns and economic hardship as mill-less towns, of the first Ku Klux Klan march in the country and, years later, a town-wide demonstration in support of the Many and One Coalition. Currently, Lewiston-Auburn is home to a number of thriving, divergent communities—the longstanding Franco-Americans, the recent refugee seekers and immigrants from Africa, and the Mainers, among others. I sought to explore these communities and the relationships between them, whether they be tense or tolerant, whether they ignite clashes or prompt readjustments. I collected spaces and events for setting and plot—the condemned apartment buildings set on fire this past spring, The Ice Storm of ’98, the fields and farms at the outskirts of the cities, the Balloon Festival, a high-fenced playground, the lookout over The Falls. Alongside these pursuits, I proposed to engage with questions of genre: How can research into a non-fictional place be translated into the stuff of fiction? Can the “truth” that non-fiction promises also be the driving force for a collection of fictional short stories?

The research portion of my project was made up of conversations with locals as well as extensive reading. I spoke with a documentary filmmaker, a city councilor, the head of Lewiston’s social services, team members of Refugee and Immigration Services, members of the board of directors for the Franco-American Heritage Center, the Deputy City Administrator of Lewiston, the head of the Bates’ French Department, and members of the Catholic Charities of Maine. I volunteered with the Telling Room, a creative writing nonprofit for children, and helped a Lewiston Middle School summer class write stories about themselves, about their lives in these twin cities. In less formal circumstances, I met people who have never left the state and those who have only recently arrived, people who speak French or Swahili or Somali at home, people who grew up without plumbing and people who grew up in the middle of a civil war. These people allowed me to expand my understanding of the diverse cultures present in Lewiston-Auburn and recognize the myriad of perspectives that can exist of a single place. In addition, I have read books such as Everything Matters! by Ron Currie Jr., Officer Friendly and Other Stories by Lewis Robinson, Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Stout, Consider the Lobster and Other Essays by David Foster Wallace, Among the Missing by Dan Chaon, Babylon and Other Stories by Alix Ohlin, and many others.

The act of writing gave me the opportunity to synthesize all of my research in attempt to create an accurate and honest representation of the place. My approaches ranged—from straightforward, linear narratives to a story in which the only text is the fictional transcript of a deposition. I experimented with form as a means of conveyance, especially in a piece that dealt heavily with linguistic and cultural miscommunication. I sought to engage both the good and the bad aspects of my hometowns, to convey a three dimensional setting. In the process, I found that no one story could cover the complexities of Lewiston-Auburn effectively. And so, with each story bringing forth a different aspect of the towns, I came to understand that these stories must be taken as a unit, as pieces rather than individual wholes. The chance to spend the whole summer listening, writing, and revising has been invaluable to development as a student and a writer.

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