my friends as we left school and headed into the summer between sophomore and junior years. “It just seems like it goes so fast,” someone else said. “Can you believe that two years ago, we hadn’t done any of this?” And two years from now, the summer after our own commencement will be over, and we won’t be returning to the College at all. The amazement doesn’t come from the fact that we’re half done. It’s that the halfway point came so quickly. No matter how many grueling nights and endless weeks were involved in getting here, it’s hard not to think, “It’s half over...already?”

What makes it hardest is the realization that there are so many things you’ll never get to do. In that summer before freshman year, it’s easy to daydream about taking biochemistry and nineteenth-century French art history. In September, you go to the activities fair and imagine how you’ll simultaneously write for the Advocate and refurbish used scientific instruments for third-world hospitals. The world seems to hold limitless potential, and it makes you feel a little omnipotent, albeit in a bewildered kind of way. You think, “I could do any of this!” You may not be able to find Robinson Hall, but being tinker, tailor, soldier, and sailor seems well within your compass: you could be an ROTC engineering concentrator in the knitting and sailing clubs.

Two years later, the world feels smaller. The summer after the sophomore year of college is one of those occasions when you become aware not just of the passage of time, but of an uptick in its velocity as it hurries past. You realize how many remarkable professors there are from whom you might never take a class, and how many smart, talented, kind students graduated before you ever got a chance to meet them. You question the decisions you made about how to spend your first two years, and then you contrive to squeeze the most from the two ahead. Halfway through college is when you truly know—on the level not just of fact, but of unnerving gut feeling—that sometimes opportunities, once missed, never come back.

But it’s not such a melancholy thing. Even though that limitless, unbounded energy you have at the beginning of college is fun, it doesn’t mean very much. It’s shapeless, unapplied, and inexperienced. During the next two years, you start to learn your limitations and, through those decisions, you start to develop a sense of self. When you realize that you find biochemistry duller than you’d imagined, or your smoke allergy gets in the way of your self. When you realize that you find biochemistry duller than you’d imagined, or your smoke allergy gets in the way of your joining the Advocate, these things turn out not to be so bad. It’s a humbling process to learn that you can’t do it all—you can only do some of it—but it’s also what separates you from an incoming freshman. You learn, among other things, that growing up doesn’t mean learning to be good at everything. Growing up is the translation of potential into reality, and decisions are the means by which that happens.

Right now, I’m trying to choose among three very different languages that correspond to three different parts of what I do. Should I take Greek, the other foundational language of the West? Or German, which would open up a rich intellectual and artistic tradition that complements the English and French I already work with? Or Hindi, the language of the “jewel in the crown” of the erstwhile empire I study and which has so much of a past of its own, in which so much scholarship remains to be done?

I asked around about language classes this past spring, and I was reassured when a friend who decided to start Spanish last semester told me, “The introductory language classes are great, and you should absolutely take one if you get the chance.” All three languages I was considering now offer “intensive” tracks (which move at twice the pace of the standard courses); I was seriously considering this option until another friend informed me that “taking intensive Greek is the single hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life,” involving at least two dozen hours of work per week. As

New Fellows

Harvard Magazine’s Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows for the 2010-2011 academic year are Madeleine Schwartz ’12 and Sarah Zhang ’11, who were selected after an evaluation of writing submitted by nearly two dozen student applicants for the two positions. The fellowships are supported by Jonathan J. Ledecky ’79, M.B.A. ’83, and named in honor of his mother; the fellows, who join the editorial staff during the year, contribute to the magazine as “Undergraduate” columnists and initiate story ideas, write news and feature items for print publication and harvardmagazine.com, and help edit copy.

Schwartz, of New York City and Kirkland House, is pursuing a joint concentration in history and the classics. She interned at the New Yorker this summer; in Cambridge, she is an editor for the Harvard Advocate and a writer for the Crimson. Zhang, of Acton, Massachusetts, and Lowell House, is a neurobiology concentrator. She has written for numerous campus publications and is a supervisor of student volunteers at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. During the summer, she lived in Cambridge and worked in a neurobiology laboratory while participating in the Program for Research in Science and Engineering, a community of undergraduates pursuing hands-on laboratory experiences.

Photographs by Stu Rosner

Madeleine Schwartz (left) and Sarah Zhang

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