side and the trout are peckish. It’s choosing what among the things you care about you’re willing to forfeit.

I could have foreseen this. There was a point in my childhood—I’m sure of it—when I was passionate about everything, before things started dropping off. Once, years ago, there was a boy who loved Melanie Price. They had the same piano teacher and walked a similar route to school. When the boy told his parents that he would marry Melanie Price, they told him that he would not, that he would one day forget about her altogether. So the boy promised never to change the way he felt. He’d buck the system, and commit to the things he loved. I will, he vowed, love Melanie Price until the day I die. But today he no longer plays the piano and he cannot remember if the girl was in his grade at school.

Those graduation orators get ahead of themselves. There’s a cold truth behind passion no one’s talking about and it has left the term rotting. Passion is something teenagers write about on college apps to tell admissions committees that they’ve got a plan and they’ll stick to it. According to the College Board, high-school seniors use the word passion more than any other noun in their essays. (I did it, too, albeit with a synonym because I was afraid of sounding clichéd.) It’s the same after college. Passion has become one of those empty qualifications you put on résumés or eHarmony profiles or when trying to sum yourself up to a new acquaintance.

I interviewed at only one hedge fund; they were looking for a writer to make their RFPs and due-diligence reports sing. I had a day of one-on-ones in a conference room with weary men in lovely suits whose most frequent question was, Are you passionate about corporate asset management? Where does one find the unbidden desire to market stock portfolios? I wish I knew. How nice it must be to feel so passionately about something that pays so well.

Perhaps I was correct to spell passion wrong, for the word, subject to overuse, has lost its original oomph—has been left dumb, clichéd. Passion used to signify unequivocal want, luring us into bed sheets, inspiring art, bringing peace and the most horrific wars at once. And now it’s a word my neighbor uses to describe her fondness for craisins.

It is both a sad and honest deflation. I hope I’m wrong and epiphany will strike. There’s a scene in Stanley Crouch’s Kansas City Lightning where a stumbling, teenage Charles Parker Jr. hears Lester Young wailing on his sax at the Subway. “As Parker was listening,” Crouch relates, “he began to understand what the tenor saxophonist was doing, and he broke out into a cold sweat.” I’ve often pictured myself, right at the moment I make a big life decision. Sweating coldly, I suddenly become aware of my passion. I see the play and make the right call. There are worse mistakes to be made than spelling errors.

Does passion greet you from the hole of a horn? Or does it fill up from beneath like well water? In the 1600s in France, when an apprentice got hurt, or tired, the experienced workers would say, It is the trade entering his body. For them, passion was possession, something whispered by God. I listen and listen and listen. But He is not saying anything to me so let me guess: What would He say if He did whisper? pouring into a cold sweat.” I’ve often pictured myself, right at the moment I make a big life decision. Sweating coldly, I suddenly become aware of my passion. I see the play and make the right call. There are worse mistakes to be made than spelling errors.

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Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Noah Pisner ’14 will soon be moving to New York City, where it is hard to be a fisherman, but harder to be a writer.

New Fellows

This magazine’s Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows for the 2014-2015 academic year—selected from among nearly 30 applicants—will be Olivia Munk ’16 and Melanie Wang ’15. The fellows join the editorial staff and contribute to the magazine during the year, writing the “Undergraduate” column and reporting for both the print publication and harvardmagazine.com, among other responsibilities.

Munk, of Bellerose, New York (in Queens), and Leverett House, is concentrating in English and pursuing a secondary field in mind/brain/behavior. She is an associate editor of The Harvard Crimson’s magazine Fifteen Minutes and a member of the features board of The Harvard Advocate, and an active director in the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club. She spent the summer in Berlin, enrolled in Harvard Summer School classes in film theory and documentary filmmaking.

Wang, of Wayland, Massachusetts, and Eliot House, is pursuing a social-studies concentration, focusing on gender and labor in the United States. She has been co-editor of Manifesta, the campus feminist magazine, and on the board of Tuesday, a literary magazine, and performs as a spoken-word poet. During the summer, she worked in Chicago organizing and conducting oral-history research with Walmart employees through Columbia University’s Summer for Respect program.

The fellowships are supported by Jonathan J. Ledecky ’79, M.B.A. ’83, and named in honor of his mother. For updates on past Ledecky Fellows and links to their work, see http://harvardmagazine.com/donate/ledecky-fellowships.