The afternoon was cloudless, a brief window of calm in an otherwise hectic spring semester. Alejo and I sat in the backyard of the Dudley Cooperative house, regarding the pots of planting soil and trowels before us. That morning our house tutor had dropped 50 seed packets on the dining-room table and ordered us to treat them better than we’d been treating ourselves: “Nothing grows that way,” he’d said.

My friend shook a packet of marigold seeds. The antidote to the stressors of the past few months was almost certainly not inside. Two days earlier I’d found him in the kitchen, glumly beheading a mound of carrots. He’d just come from another job interview—a recruiter from McKinsey, the latest in a series of high-strung encounters, each leaving him more frustrated than the last. He’d asked the interviewer how she reconciled the company’s partnerships with autocratic regimes and human-rights abusers—she’d mentioned Saudi Arabia—with the day-to-day requirements of her job description. It was not a question meant to provoke, he told me, pushing a carrot with the tip of a knife. But the tone of the interview immediately shifted. “You ought to try someplace else,” the recruiter said curtly, “for that kind of work.” She made it seem as if it were impossible to both pay the bills and live a more than unethical life.

Our circumstances were different, but I understood my friend’s dilemma on principle. With barely a month left in the term, my inbox was flooded with reminders for late library books and notices of the Office of Career Services’ office hours, the very last of our college careers. I had so far avoided any reckoning with the latter. To my parents, friends, and the space in my diary generally reserved for the truth, I’d offered a circuitous answer: I’ll figure that out when it’s over.

It seems that a lot of Harvard graduates end up siding, at least for a while, with Alejo’s recruiter. According to The Harvard Crimson’s annual senior survey (just under half my classmates responded), 34 percent were headed to consulting or finance positions, consistent with the past several years. But with my garden conversation fresh in mind, I went to knock on my House tutor’s door. I’d like to request more than marigolds, I told him—specifically, advice on my next few years.

I had thought about law school. I grew up in California’s Central Valley, where municipal warnings confirmed the toxicity of bad-air days:

Don't play outside. Limit driving and A.C. usage.

Even in winter, when the polluted air dissolves into rain, I felt tightly sealed in, specimen-like, beneath a cap of air. During the past year, I had watched news reports as smoke from the Butte Fire blanketed my community.
city, bearing advisories that fluctuated between “Very High” and “Serious,” a distinction between severely aggravated asthma and premature death. Friends posted photos of childhood homes, blackened in the blaze or simply disappeared. Images of farm workers picking fruit against a beet-red sky were shared and re-shared: people who couldn’t simply move away, or find a new home.

Those images might have incited despair, anger, or apathy, as they did for some of my friends. But I could read their larger meaning, because at the activities fair my freshman year, I’d found a group of people who seemed “environmental” about their display was a tiny hand-drawn image of Earth. The students, Naima and Sidni, began to talk about “divestment.” Had I heard of the campaign? (I had not.) They continued, undeterred. Dis-investment, or divestment, draws on a long history of boycott tactics. Rather than rely on any one individual’s purchasing power, the campaign tries to flex participants’ collective muscles from within an enormous corporation. If Harvard, the wealthiest university in the world, could be persuaded to stop investing its endowment in fossil-fuel industries, it would send a powerful political and economic message.

The most liberating thing about the campaign, Naima added, was that it enabled students to represent their communities within an institution: to convert the advantages of attending a large university, which so often meant complicity, into action. Naima came from New York City, recently savaged by Superstorm Sandy. That disaster, combined with her work at a Harlem community-resiliency organization, had informed her decision to join the divestment campaign. Three years later she would accept a place at Harvard Law School to study public-interest law.

But this was getting too far ahead. Did I want to come to a mixer?

This past year, I stood on the other side of the recruitment table. I was the one distributing buttons and analogies to anyone who would listen. Now, the students I spoke with were a little more familiar with the case. More than 400 graduating seniors pinned orange squares on their caps for a joint protest by the campus fossil-fuel and prison divestment campaigns, together interrupting the Class Day exercises with their calls to “Disclose, divest, or this movement will not rest”; a standing ovation greeted Al Gore’s exhortations for immediate climate action [see harvardmag.com/gore-19].

Four years ago, such support seemed impossible. In 2016, the Crimson editorial board opined that “Divestment is a profoundly hypocritical answer”—arguing that societal change is impossible until complete individual change is made. And although the editorial board reversed its stance on divestment this past spring, the popularity of their earlier reasoning remains.

Sometimes, the counterarguments slip out as a kind of first-world elitism. In my section for Earth and Planetary Sciences 20: “Earth Resources and the Environment,” after students pointed out that nuclear energy should replace our dependence on carbon-intensive fuels, someone raised the environmental and human price associated with the technology. “Easy,” said the boy across from me. “Just ship the waste to Africa. They’ll use it for development there.”

In grappling with such casual and unconscious environmental racism, I wrestle with a split I have

New Fellows

Joining the editorial staff this fall as the 2019-2020 Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows are seniors Julie Chung and Drew Pendergrass. They will contribute in print and online throughout the academic year, taking turns writing the “Undergraduate” column, beginning with the November-December issue, and reporting on other aspects of student and University life, among other responsibilities.

Chung, a proud first-generation collegian from Los Angeles and Adams House, is a social anthropology concentrator who interns at the Harvard College Women’s Center, served as assistant editorial editor for The Harvard Crimson’s editorial board, and writes personal essays and short fiction as well. She spent the summer in Honolulu, at the University of Hawai’i medical school’s Department of Native Hawaiian Health, where she investigated the relationship between traditional Polynesian canoe voyaging and health while conducting senior-thesis research on making scientific knowledge more accountable to people.

Pendergrass, of Huntsville, Alabama, and Pforzheimer House, is a joint physics and mathematics concentrator with a secondary field in English. He has served as publisher and assistant U.S. politics editor of the Harvard Political Review and as associate editor and comp director of Fifteen Minutes, the Crimson’s weekly magazine. He does research at the Harvard Chan School, analyzing the way droughts change the global food-trade system, and has published as lead author research he did at the Harvard Paulson School on the impact of climate change on air pollution in Beijing. He spent the summer in Princeton, where he ran climate models on a massive supercomputer cluster for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

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 harvardmag.com/ledecky.
felt throughout my time at Harvard. Peers, faculty, and community members might vote for climate-change referenda and fill the Yard at rallies. They might place little squares of fabric on their mortarboards. But as soon as there is profit at the other end of the equation, the calculus gets a little more lopsided. Leaders of the College call on students to view themselves as thoroughly capable of launching tech start-ups, participating in major research projects, helping develop educational programs: in short, considering ourselves as empowered actors in every way—so long as we do not question our own entanglement in the institutions around us.

At Harvard, would-be student change-makers must funnel their voices through the echo chamber of the Undergraduate Council, or bring their concerns to the frequently closed doors of Massachusetts Hall, as organizers with the Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign (HPDC) did this past year. By the time I joined the climate campaign in the fall of 2015, its activists had already tried both options. Neither the results of a sweeping successful student referendum nor appeals to President Drew Faust had broken any ground. The following spring, the campaign decided on another tactic. Four students, including my friend Naima, sat in at Harvard Management Company’s office, where financial decisions about investing the endowment are actually made. All four were arrested.

It’s easy to misunderstand the two active campus divestment campaigns as comprising student agitators either unappreciative of their education or willful in misconstruing the financial realities of the endowment. Administrators, professors, and even fellow students often express the sentiment that the administration must know best. “Civil discourse” is advocated, as a means of blunting the emotional appeal of “belligerent” students. But that spring 2016 sit-in, and a long-sought meeting with members of the Board of Overseers that finally followed it, taught me differently.

We met in October of my sophomore year, at which point I’d begun to visualize the hours in my day as an increasingly full set of buckets: one for divestment, one for literary comp meetings, and one reserved for tips from my job as a campus tour guide. Anything that didn’t make it into an existing bucket just soaked my feet and clothes. A meeting with the Overseers would overfill the divestment bucket, yet there wasn’t much choice: like any other undergraduate club or team, we lost key players every year, so by fall of 2016 I was tapped to sub in.

Like all the conversations since with the Board of Overseers, this one was off the record. I cannot relate the details, but I can describe exactly how it felt. We students spoke about our futures: the places we’d like to see and the lives we want to lead; the children we hoped to have, but think we might not; and the fact that we considered ourselves not only students or future parents, but also members of a global community.

The Overseers were polite. They shook our hands, twice. Our convictions, they said, were admirable. Really, they were right there with us. But they couldn’t make the change we ask for. It wasn’t in their power.

On commencement day, a photographer snapped a picture of my decorated mortarboard and asked, “What does it say?” I held
up the cap, hoping that the lettering—"Make my degree, fossil fuel and prison free"—would make it into one of the official streams of graduation coverage. “What is this for?” I asked. “The Gazette,” she replied, naming the University’s in-house publication, and snapped a second picture. “Of course they can’t publish any of it now, but you know. It’s like in the ‘80s, or in ‘69. Good for the records.”

I did know. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Harvard strike fueled by antiwar efforts and the historic struggle for an academic department devoted to African-American studies [see “Echoes of 1969,” March-April, page 53], a moment that caused students to protest by the thousands. It had been impossible to ignore the photographs of that moment, which seemed to be everywhere this past spring: a Yard filled with striking students, fists raised.

So when protestors, students, and friends gathered at the steps of Memorial Church at the culmination of this year’s Heat Week, in April, it was impossible not to notice the police officers who flocked to the edges of our celebration like late guests to the party. Three of them stood in the doorway of Sever Hall, an uncertain barricade. Who were they intending to stop? The organizer from the labor union who spoke about learning Spanish only two years before, in order to advocate for her family? The Youth Climate Strikers who had begun cutting their high-school classes every Friday because for them the reality of a wrecked planet is not a fat paycheck, but rather a drowned classroom?

Some members of the class of ’69 had joined us at the rally. It began to rain, and the crowd, initially attracted by the music and speeches, began to dwindle. I wondered whether our event seemed pitiful by comparison.

In my tutor’s office, I related this anecdote as proof of my failed capacity as an organizer. He cut me off. “Why don’t you try it in the real world?” I looked at him. “Not possible, in the real world?” I asked. “Not even a hint?” He looked at me. “What is this girl doing here?” I thought for a moment. “She is doing everything in her power to create a livable world. That is what it means to be a member of the Youth Climate Strikers.”

I thanked the tutor. I walked downstairs, into the kitchen, where the bell above the fireplace was ringing to announce dinner, where we would sit down to eat, discussing this day, and tomorrow, and then the next.

Isa Flores-Jones ’19 now works for the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led climate campaign to win good jobs and a livable future, and is trying to enjoy the present.

SPORTS

No Doubt

Linda Liedel ’21 always knew how good she could be.

At four years old, Linda Liedel ’21 decided she wanted to play soccer, following in the footsteps of her older brother. Her parents said sure, go for it.

The trash talk started immediately, not just from opposing players, but also from their parents, who made it clear that a girl didn’t belong on a field of boys. “They were like, ‘You should not be playing this sport, what are you doing here, this is the wrong gym,’” Liedel recalled. She remembers her mother’s shock at the taunts—were they really saying that to her daughter?

Most players fight for playing time. Liedel, born and raised in Mainz, Germany, had to prove she even deserved consideration. “If a guy plays, it’s like, ‘Okay, he has probably worked out, has the talent,’” she said in a spring interview. “For me, the assumption was always, ‘What is this girl doing here?’” (Soccer is Germany’s number one sport, Liedel clarified, but mostly for boys. Most cities, like Mainz, didn’t have girls’ teams; to getting noticed by scouts and was selected for the “Southwest” state team, one of 21 regional German squads with teams in each age division. Once a year, the states gathered for a massive tournament, with prominent German coaches in conspicuous attendance, searching for the best athletes. When she was 13, she received a call-up for the U-15...