

ALUMNI

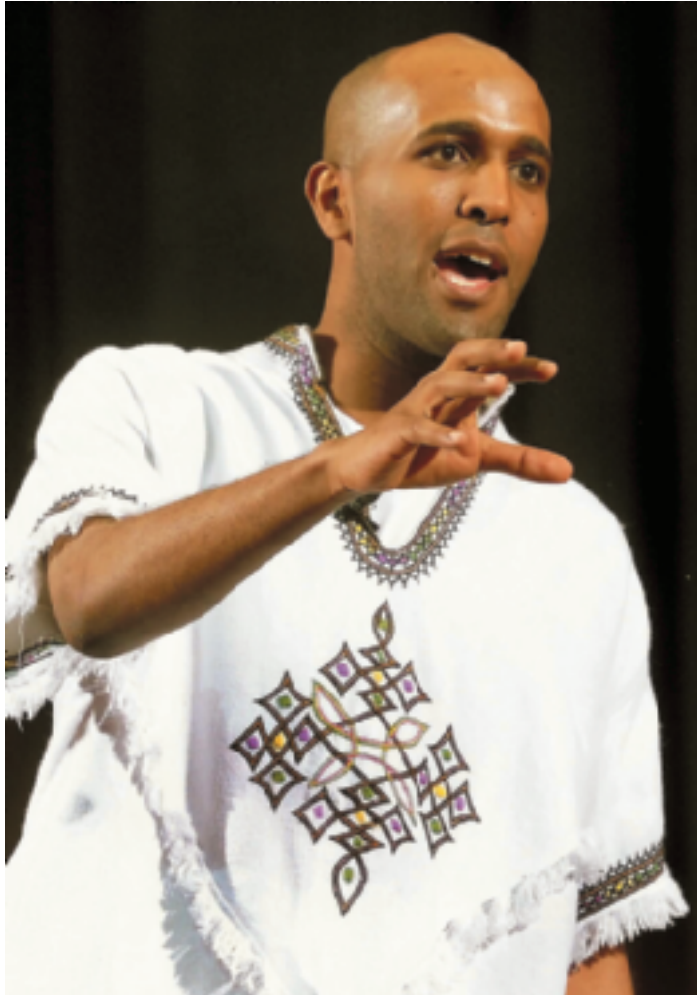
His Story in the Making

by SARA HOUGHTELING '99

MOST CLASSMATES thought Selamawi “Mawi” Asgedom '99 was just another kid from outside Chicago, a history major and resident of Pforzheimer House. He flashed a 1,000-kilowatt smile, waved to everyone in the Yard, and peppered his speech with hip slang: “What’s up? Yeah? That’s cool.” Yet Asgedom’s story—which he barely revealed before delivering the senior English address at his Commencement—is extraordinary. By the time he emigrated to the United States in 1983, at the age of seven, he had survived famine and civil wars in his dual homelands of Eritrea and Ethiopia and spent five years in a Sudanese refugee camp. Years later, once settled in the United States, both his father and older brother were killed by drunk drivers in accidents only a few years apart.

In many people, these events would have engendered toughness, depression, or even hate. But as Richard Marius, the late, longtime director of Harvard’s expository writing program, noted in a *Boston Globe* story on Asgedom, “There’s a gentleness that has come from the horror. You and I might become bitter...But Mawi has become very gentle as a result.”

Just as fine dancers can make the most awkward of partners feel light on their feet, so, too, does Asgedom impart grace to those who engage with him. Energetic, funny, and courteous, he is aware of the conversation’s balance and never wants to usurp its focus. “Magnetic” is the word that comes to mind. Yet he would be the



Far from Chicago: “Mawi” Asgedom’s journey from Eritrea and Ethiopia to Cambridge and beyond has fueled a career of imparting grace to others.

last to use it. Much of his time is spent speaking to high-school students across the nation about his family’s history and what he has learned from it: the importance of respect and self-respect, the need to find one’s passion—be it for track or trigonometry—and the heartbreaking perils of driving drunk.

This sort of open, public communication did not come naturally. “In my language we have a saying,” he says: “Keep

the mysteries of your home and your family to yourself.” But now thousands—even millions—of people have heard Asgedom’s tale: the audience of 30,000 at Commencement, readers of his autobiography, *Of Beetles and Angels* (Megadee Books, 2000), or viewers of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, where Asgedom appeared last October.

He didn’t start out seeking a wide audience, or a spot on a top talk show—goals often associated with American tales of success. Versed in American history at Harvard and unsure of what to do after graduation, he decided to seek temporary employment in his hometown, Wheaton, Illinois, but had trouble finding a suitable job—even Target turned down his application. His much publicized Commencement address (“Wheaton grad a Harvard class act,” the *Chicago Tribune* crowed) led to an invitation to speak at his old high school, with his former teachers standing proudly in the back of the auditorium. This led to several more engagements at local schools.

“The audiences always said, ‘You should write a book,’” Asgedom recalls. And so he did. “I wanted to show students that it is cool to see beauty in other people, to treat all kinds of people with respect... No one has written about the experiences of a black refugee family from a third-world country. I wanted to show my people’s courage, to show that politics is less important than a lot of awesome things that my culture has,” he explains. “I hope that, because I am half

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Ethiopian and half Eritrean, readers will be forced to consider the others' perspective a little bit."

Of Beetles and Angels "is a personal story," he says. "It's about sharing the story of my brother and father." He chose to self-publish the memoir in order to retain control over the marketing and cover art (a black and white photograph of his brother and sister, Tewolde and Mehret, as children). "I didn't want it sensationalized," he notes. "Telling the story, to me, was more important than picking the best way to promote it, or using shocking effects to sell a lot of copies." Yet 10,000 volumes have sold and the book is in its third printing.

Writing about his father, Asgedom charts the orphaned Haileab Asgedom's self-education in a Coptic monastery, his medical training, and his successful bid to move his family to Illinois, where the former doctor and revered community leader became a custodian. Welfare checks supplemented his meager salary. In the book, Mawi draws on Kafka, likening his father's experience to that of Gregor Samsa in his sudden transformation from man to insect. Daunted but not defeated, the elder Asgedom endured diabetes-induced blindness and insisted his children join him at five o'clock every morning to run around the local track. He emphasized the importance of hard work and a college education, and preached that his children should never "add hurt to the hurting." Haileab Asgedom was also so intent on being a good neighbor (he regularly raked neighbors' leaves), that when the family moved to a housing project near a lake, he attempted to clean up all the leaves around it—an enormous task that culminated in his setting a bonfire, much to the chagrin of local firemen.

Throughout *Of Beetles and Angels*, Haileab Asgedom speaks in capital letters. His son explains: "I had read John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Owen Meany's speeches are always in capital letters, even though he's a tiny guy who almost seems like he's inconsequential. Words in capital letters say to the reader, 'You've got to listen up.'" He adds, "When my father came to this country, a lot of people didn't value him by looking at him on the outside, but I wanted to let everyone know that this man's words are important. As with

Owen Meany, the capital letters gave his words an otherworldly or divine feeling."

Yet the book's stories are also compellingly human. Mawi's brother, Tewolde, also took their father's talk of good deeds to heart. Mawi describes sorting through his dead brother's belongings and finding a picture of a five-year-old South American child with a card from Compassion International thanking Tewolde for sponsoring the boy. He did it despite the fact that he had almost no money and was struggling to save for college and help his own family. Mawi also reports his and his brother's youthful misadventures, which include relieving young neighbors of their Halloween candy and an attempt to purloin a fortune in quarters from a wobbly parking meter. Once the brothers succeeded in knocking over the meter, they carried it—filled with quarters and with a 100-pound cement block attached to its base—toward a secret tunnel they destined as their hiding place, only to be quickly followed by a policeman. The young boys outran the officer, leaving their booty behind.

Asgedom does not glorify the act. "Those chapters are made for middle-school and high-school students. After they read them, kids love the rest of the book. They think, 'He stole a parking meter, he must be cool,'" Asgedom laughs. "I've had school administrators shaking their heads at me while I'm reading or speaking, afraid that there'll be an article the next week in *USA Today* saying, 'Cities report an alarming rise in parking meter vandalism.' But you've got to get kids on your side, you have to establish a good rapport in order to get them to want to hear what you want to say. No one studies the lives of black refugees, and now they're studying it."

And people do respond to him; his message is not lost amidst tales of delinquent pranks. Sometimes a teenager in his audience will raise a hand and say, "I'm new to this country, and my family had a hard time getting here," notes Asgedom, who then calls that child up to the microphone to relay his or her history. "Growing up, refugees are made to feel bad for being different. I'm impressed by kids who can talk about it," he says. Asgedom, it seems, is partly telling his own story so others may be told.

Although his brother and father occupy important roles in *Of Beetles and Angels*, Asgedom pays tribute to many other "angels" as well—including his mother, Tsege, who bears the scars on her shoulders from carrying him, then a sickly child, from Ethiopia to Sudan. He also cites the high-school track coach who bought him new sneakers and school clothes when he had none; the guidance counselor who encouraged him to apply to Harvard when he had set his sights on a local college; the dining-hall worker at Pforzheimer, also named Tsege, with whom he spoke Tigrynia; and Harvard lecturer on social studies Benjamin Berger Ph.D. '01, a former resident tutor willing to stay up until four in the morning to help Asgedom on a paper for Moral Reasoning 22: "Justice."

The next few years will likely bring more speeches at schools, another book—on self-esteem and success strategies for high-school students—for which Asgedom has a book contract, and perhaps a screenplay for *Of Beetles and Angels*. That vision is a far cry from the days—not so long ago—when he had so many copies of his book that they filled his closets and much of his mother's house. In the living room, he piled them into a tall square and covered them with a cloth, pretending he had a solid wood table. In the same way, Asgedom has taken the many disparate things life has given him up to now, bound them together to make them whole, and transformed his experience into something solid for the nourishment and use of others.

Sara Houghteling '99, one of this magazine's former Berta Greenwald Leducky Undergraduate Fellows, is pursuing a master's in fine arts in fiction at the University of Michigan.

A Romantic Swim

IN MAY 1810, the poet Byron swam across the Hellespont, a narrow channel separating continental Asia from Europe. He was imitating Leander, who, in the myth, would swim the mile and a half distance each night in order to be with his mistress, Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite at Sestos on the European side. One night, when Hero's signal lamp had been extin-

guished by the wind, Leander drowned. This was Byron's second attempt to emulate the heroic lover who died for passion, an earlier swim in the opposite direction having been foiled by the roughness and coldness of the sea. Leander, he wrote, "swam for Love, as I for Glory."

The Hellespont is named after Helle, who fell from the Golden Ram (source of the famous fleece) as it flew toward Colchis; she drowned in the waters below. Now called the Dardanelles, it is almost the narrowest point separating Asia and Europe, where the waters of the Black Sea rush down a deep channel and enter the Aegean. It was there, in 480 B.C.E., that Xerxes constructed a miraculous bridge of pontoons for his army to cross over to invade Greece. Alexander's force passed over the same spot on its way to conquer western Asia. The Hellespont remained the main station of east-west exchange until the city of Byzantium grew up in the early centuries of the common era.

Last July, about to celebrate a fiftieth birthday and the publication of a book of poetry that I had worked on for almost 16 years, I wanted to commemorate the moment. I have always admired the Roman-
tics more than I do the Modernists, in



terms of poetry at least, and repeating Byron's swim seemed a good way to represent this moment of transition for me. Like Leander, I chose to go from Asia to Europe. I prepared well for the crossing, spending many hours a day in southern Greece swimming in high seas.

I arrived at the Turkish town of Canakkale, just south of ancient Abydos, on July 23, tired from two days of traveling on ferries and fishing boats and buses. Although I had once lived in Greece and consider myself a philhellene, I have always loved Turkey for its sophisticated culture and traditions. Also, as a Sanskritist, I spend a great deal of my life teaching Westerners about the East. This crossing between Orient and Occident is intrinsic to my professional livelihood.

BECAUSE THE DARDANELLES are among the busiest shipping lanes in the world, I faced a major problem from tankers, especially the southbound ships that had the benefit of about three knots of current under them—not a danger that troubled my predecessors. That afternoon an intense etesian wind was blowing from the north. To swim then would be laborious and slow; the waves were too strong, and my heart sank. The only hope was that the wind would drop by dusk and not come up again until mid-morning the next day.

As I wandered about the port, I noticed a marine chart hanging inside the office of the *Capitainerie*. I went in to check the distance; it was about a mile and a half, but

I knew that the force of the current would cause me to swim a minimum of two miles. Soon, I found myself in conversation with a young man who introduced himself as Aydogan. He was to become my agent and the instrument of the whole endeavor. I told him about my plans. No, it was not possible, he said, you need a permit, it takes a year, forget it, it is too dangerous. My heart sank even further.

We sat at a nearby café and talked about his life at sea, its trials and ordeals, and I told him about my own years in Cambridge, about poetry and Indology. Well, he said, you could do it, with a lot of luck—and, well, let me see. We soon negotiated a price for a boat, for Aydogan was going to try to find a fisherman. He vanished for an hour as I sat there drinking cold water in the shade. Then he returned, smiling. I handed over the currency and off he went again.

In another hour a small fishing *caïque* came alongside the quay. This was the *Döstler* ("friendship"), and its skipper, Zafir; they were to accompany me during the swim and would play a crucial role as support vessel. At this point I had barely eaten for 48 hours—I was so charged up with the impetus of my project. It was not a moment for hesitation. I grabbed my bag and hopped into the boat to the cheers and waves of assembled fishermen—word of my plan had spread. Suddenly I began to feel not valiant, but rather foolish and grandiose.

As the afternoon became evening, we motored slowly out of the harbor north-



Poetic inspiration lured Kevin McGrath to take the Hellespont plunge.

ward to the rocky headland of Abydos. I changed into trunks and sat in the stern, eyeing with great dismay the traffic that steamed up and down the strait. By then the wind had decreased to about six knots, but there was still a strong sea running. We reached the point, now a military base and hardly the idyllic shore that I had imagined. It was deserted and ominous, with two enormous gun emplacements. I half expected a shot to ring out as we closed with the shore and idled in the shallows. (Except for a brief shipboard view during a Harvard Alumni Association cruise two years earlier, I had done no preliminary reconnaissance.)

Zafir, who had been timing the ship traffic, suddenly shouted "GO!" and with a quick invocation to Allah—"Bismillah!"—I went like an arrow over the side, keeping up a fast pace in the warm water until I began to tire, then settling to a steadier and more sustainable stroke. A flock of low-flying terns passed close before me.

So this was it! I could not quite believe my fortune. I tacked in a northerly direction, at least 40 degrees off a rhumb line, since I knew that the current would swing me round and that I would land as many degrees south. With my eyes only inches above a hectic sea, I could not gauge the speed of the shipping and had to trust absolutely in the judgment of Zafir. Aydogan had supplied Zafir with an umpire's whistle, which he blew vigorously when he wanted to attract my attention. He then indicated what direction I should change to with hand gestures.

Where those I emulated, Leander and Byron, had to deal with storm and high seas, I had to face modern leviathans full of crude oil. Once Zafir miscalculated and I found myself too close to a Yemenite ship called *Congratulation*—a title nicely symbolic but too threatening to be ironic. The crew gathered at the rail to wave and cheer at this unusual creature in the water. Another time we underestimated the way of a large tanker and I came far too close to the vortex of its propellers. I was counting the marks on its hull before I turned and fled. A powerful and turbulent wash swamped me and threw me about.

Nor was there any way to anticipate jellyfish. I could feel them passing across my body and the sensation was extremely

disquieting; I had trouble ignoring them but after a while they ceased to distract me. Fortunately they were not poisonous.

The swim lasted between an hour and a half and two hours—I had leapt into the sea without noting the time, being too focused on the current and shipping and my stroke. The stench of diesel fumes from ships' engines hung over the waves as the wind fell, but the sea itself was remarkably clean, considering that several million people lived close upstream.

As the sun went down over Europe, the water became calmer and at last I felt myself nearing the shore: not the fabled tower of Hero, but the ruins of a small Ottoman fortification. The hills were gently inclined and the sky, as twilight came on, was an apricot and topaz color. By the time I reached the western shore a slender young moon was low over the continent. Zafir swung the boat round and threw in an anchor as I touched the stony coast with my feet.

Aydogan was making tea on a small Primus stove as I climbed back into the *Döstler*, and Zafir went off to collect mussels. Elated, delighted, I sat in the stern and watched the day vanish. On the east-

ern side, back in Asia, lights were coming on—Canakkale was already a mass of yellow brilliants. We ate the mussels, my companions drank some *raki* and cut open a melon, Zafir put a cassette into a player, and we relaxed.

Almost two centuries earlier, somewhere nearby among the olives and umbrella pines, Byron had walked this land. How lovely it must have been then: idyllic, pastoral, before motors and wires and mechanical noise. Then there were virtually no roads, only landscape and sea. Yet the company I now enjoyed was likely to have been as friendly as his, and the accomplishment as rewarding. For Byron, the swim had been something that he was extraordinarily proud of: "I plume myself on this achievement more than I could possibly do on any kind of glory, political, poetical, or rhetorical," he was to write in a letter to his mother. The next day, I would be writing a few letters and stanzas of my own.

Kevin McGrath, Ph.D. '01, who filed this report, is an associate of Harvard's Sanskrit department and poet in residence at Lowell House. Maleas, his most recent collection of poetry, has just been published.

Duty Calls

BALLOTS FOR Overseer and for elected director of the Harvard Alumni Association will arrive in mid April and must be returned by May 31 to be counted. All Harvard degree holders are eligible to vote. The following list of nominees—all selected by the HAA's nominating committee—was up to date as of February 1, when this issue went to press.

For Overseer (six-year term, five to be elected)*:

Rozlyn L. Anderson '77, J.D. '80. New York City. Senior vice president, Merrill Lynch Trust Company, and director of wealth management strategies, Merrill Lynch Wealth Management Services.

Frances D. Fergusson, Ph.D. '73; B.A. '65, Wellesley. Poughkeepsie, N.Y. President, Vassar College.

William F. Lee '72; J.D.-M.B.A. '76 Cornell. Wellesley, Mass. Attorney; managing partner, Hale and Dorr LLP.

Richard I. Melvoin '73; Ph.D. '83 University of Michigan. Belmont, Mass.

Head, Belmont Hill School.

Penny Pritzker '81; J.D.-M.B.A. '85 Stanford. Chicago. President and CEO, Pritzker Realty Group; chair and CEO, Classic Residence by Hyatt.

Jaime Sepulveda, M.P.H. '80, M.P.T. '81, S.D. '85; M.D. '78 National Autonomous University of Mexico. Mexico City. Director general, National Institute of Public Health; dean of the School of Public Health of Mexico.

Thomas C. Werner '71. Los Angeles. Co-owner, Carsey Werner Mandabach Co.; founding Partner, Oxygen Media.

Richard N. Zare '61, Ph.D. '64. Stanford. Marguerite Blake Wilbur professor in natural science, Stanford University.

For HAA Director (three-year term, six to be elected)**:

Peter A. Carfagna '75, J.D. '79; M.A. '77, Oxford. Cleveland. Chief legal officer, general counsel, and senior staff vice president, IMG Worldwide Inc.

Walter K. Clair '77, M.D. '81, M.P.H. '85. Nashville. Cardiac electrophysiologist

LONGTIME ASSOCIATE DEAN of freshmen William Clinton Burriss Young '55 died on January 8 in Cambridge; an obituary appears on page 880. He retired (to some extent) in June 1998 after influencing thousands of undergraduates during his 37 years in the freshman dean's office (see "The Making of Burriss Young," July-August 1998, page 78). A memorial service in his honor will be held on May 12 at 3 P.M. in Memorial Church.



Burriss Young

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and assistant clinical professor of medicine, Vanderbilt Page-Campbell Heart Institute.

Angela K. Dorn '87, J.D. '90. New York City. Managing director and general counsel, Fletcher Asset Management Inc.

Melita M. Garza '81. Chicago. Journalist, *Chicago Tribune*.

John F. Irving '83, M.B.A. '89. St. John, New Brunswick. Vice president, J.D. Irving Ltd.

Joan Z. Lonergan, Ed.M. '84; B.S. '74 University of New Hampshire. Palo Alto. Head, Castilleja School.

Andres W. Lopez '92, J.D. '95. San Juan, Puerto Rico. Attorney; senior law clerk to U.S. district judge Jay A. Garcia-Gregory.

Eleanor Greenberg White '67, Loeb Fellow '79 (Graduate School of Design); M.P.A. '75 Northeastern University. Watertown, Mass. President, Housing Partners Inc.

Stephen R. Wong '81, M.B.A. '85. San Francisco. Chairman and CEO, Embarcadero Technologies Inc.

*Nominations of one or more additional Overseer candidates may be made in each year by holders of Harvard degrees. Such nominations must be made on an official nomination form furnished by the Secretary of the Board upon request to qualified applicants, and for 2002 had to contain at least 259 valid signatures. Such nominations, addressed to the Secretary of the Board, had to be filed at his office, 17 Quincy Street, Cambridge 02138, by 5 P.M. on February 11, 2002.

**Additional nominations for HAA elected director may be made by certificate, signed by regular members of the association in number not less than three-quarters of one percent of the average votes cast in the previous three

elections. For the 2002 election, the number of signatures needed was 255. Such nominating certificates had to be filed at the office of the association, Wadsworth House, Cambridge 02138, by 5 P.M. on February 11, 2002.

The Old Stomping Ground

"RETURN TO HARVARD DAY," on April 17, offers alumni of all College classes, and this year's reunion classes, their spouses, and high-school-age children, the chance to visit while the academic year is in full swing. Participants may join undergraduates in class and meet faculty members. The HAA will send a brochure to reunion classes in the Greater Boston area. If you do not receive a copy, and would like to attend the event, contact Orquidea Martinez, 17 Dunster Street, Suite 214, Cambridge 02138; 617-495-2555; or e-mail orquidea_martinez@harvard.edu.

Comings and Goings

LOCAL HARVARD CLUBS host numerous lectures and social gatherings. What follows is a list of some of the events planned this spring. For further information, contact the HAA's clubs and programs office at 617-495-3070 or visit www.haa.harvard.edu.

On March 2, Loeb professor of classical art and archaeology David Mitten discusses Alexander the Great at the

Harvard Club of the West Coast of Florida. Also traveling to Florida in March is the Reverend Peter Gomes, who speaks at the Harvard Club of the Palm Beaches on March 4 and at the Harvard Club of Central Florida on March 5. The Harvard Club of Maryland hosts sociologist Christopher Winship and criminal justice researcher David Kennedy on March 5 for a lecture on "Cops and Ministers: Boston's Crime Solution." On March 7, economics professor N. Gregory Mankiw highlights "The Challenges Facing Economic Policymakers" at the Harvard Club of Fairfield County. The Harvard Club of Naples invites members to hear retired University Health Services psychologist Douglas Powell talk about "Meeting the Changes and Challenges of the Third Age of Life" on March 19. John Stauffer, assistant professor of English and American literature, examines "Slavery and the Meaning of America" for the Harvard Club of Cincinnati on March 26 and for the Harvard Club of Central and Eastern Kentucky the following night. And on April 17, the HAA's executive director, John P. Reardon Jr., answers "What's Happening at Harvard?" for members of the Harvard Club of the Research Triangle.

A SPECIAL NOTICE REGARDING COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 2002

MORNING EXERCISES

To accommodate the increasing number of those wishing to attend Harvard's Commencement Exercises, the following guidelines are proposed to facilitate admission into Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement Morning:

Degree candidates will receive a limited number of tickets to Commencement. Parents and guests of degree candidates must have tickets, which they will be required to show at the gates in order to enter Tercentenary Theatre. Seating capacity is limited; however, there is standing room on the Widener steps and at the rear and sides of the Theatre for viewing the exercises.

Note: A ticket allows admission into the Theatre, but does not guarantee a seat. The sale of Commencement tickets is prohibited.

Alumni/ae attending their *major* reunions (25th, 35th, 50th) will receive tickets at their reunions. Alumni/ae in classes beyond the 50th may obtain tickets from the Classes and Reunions Office, Wadsworth House.

Alumni/ae from *non-major* reunion years and their spouses are requested to view the Morning Exercises over large-screen televisions situated in the Science Center, Sanders Theatre, most of the undergraduate Houses, and the professional schools. These locations provide ample seating, and tickets are not required.

A very limited supply of tickets will be made available to all other alumni/ae on a first-come, first-served basis through the Harvard Alumni Association, Wadsworth House.

AFTERNOON EXERCISES

The Harvard Alumni Association's Annual Meeting convenes in Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement afternoon. All alumni and alumnae, faculty, students, parents, and guests are invited to attend and hear President Lawrence H. Summers and the Commencement Speaker deliver their addresses. Tickets for the afternoon ceremony will be available through the Harvard Alumni Association, Wadsworth House.

~Richard M. Hunt, *University Marshal*