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An Age to Remember

Six acclaimed writers reflect on their most memorable years, from 4 to 64.

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Age 18

Imagine a hummingbird, a drab one with a body that suddenly becomes iridescent in sunlight; wings a blur, moving fast in order to stay suspended. In the summer of 1986, the hummingbird was my feeling of anticipation, that exquisite moment before the beginning of something new.

I had just graduated from high school in suburban Houston—a behemoth institution centered around football and cheerleaders. In less than three months, I would be headed to Yale University, in New Haven, a town that sounded like a beautiful promise.

My high school was where my young soul (or at least self-esteem) could have easily shriveled up and died. I wasn't, shall we say, physically gifted. I wasn't golden in hair or in temperament. I wasn't full of cheer. I had a voluptuous brain, though. I used it to devise Janus-like strategies for escape. Externally, I embraced nonconformity. My hair was a black, tangled mop, my clothes came from thrift stores, and my friends reeked of cigarettes. Inside I was a grade-conscious overachiever who had memorized the top-10 universities and the SAT scores that I would need to get into them. The former was my quick-fix refuge. The latter was my long-term salvation.

When the envelope from Yale arrived, my mother got to it first. She waited for me at the front door of our house, identical to so many of the other houses in our subdivision except for the colors of the shutters, and she waved it up and down, like a wing.

Summers in Houston were hot and humid, and there was never anything to do, and that summer was no different. I was different, though. Or I was about to be. If I could go back, I would take a photograph of myself, and then an X-ray. I like to think I would see the small bird, humming inside.

Monique Truong, 42, is the author of *Bitter in the Mouth* and *The Book of Salt*. She lives in Brooklyn.

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Brian Cronin

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