hat does summer mean to you?

For one young girl, summer is the season of no school, of days spent at the pool, and of picking golden limes off the tree. But summer doesn’t start until her lola—her grandmother from the Philippines—comes for her annual visit.

Lola is special. She fills the house with the aroma of mango jam, funny stories of baking mishaps, and her quiet, sweet singing in Tagalog. And in turn, her granddaughter brings Lola to the beach, to view fireworks at the park, and to catch fish at their lake. When Lola visits, the whole family gathers to cook and eat and share in the happiness of another season spent together. Yet as summer transitions to fall, her lola must return home—but not without a surprise for her granddaughter to preserve their special summer a bit longer.

Ages 4–8

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Jacket art 2021 © by Aaron Asis
Jacket design by Rachel Zegar

courtesy Michelle Sterling
courtesy Aaron Asis
To all my family, past and present
—M.S.

For my grandmothers, whose beautiful stories enriched my sense of wonder
—A.A.
How do I know summer is here?
Summer smells like stone fruit ripening on the kitchen counter and jasmine on the bloom everywhere in the neighborhood.

Like my baby brother finger-painting out on the deck, and like trouble brewing on a day of absolutely nothing to do . . .
It smells like mango jam simmering on the stove—the first thing my lola makes after she flies in for her summer stay. It smells like the sampaguita soap she uses: a scent both familiar and far away.

Summer smells like a tumble of dried squid, milk candy, and wooden beads as Lola unzips her old leather suitcase.
It smells like cassava cake covered with smooth and glossy custard, sliding out of the hot oven as Lola tells us a story about the first time Mom made this cake and confused the sugar with salt.
It smells like chlorine from a million swimming lessons at the pool, like blue silence when I’m finally able to float by myself for the first time ever.
Summer smells like a freshly opened can of tennis balls to bounce against the side of the house and gooey sunscreen and salt-soaked swimsuits at the beach.

It smells like suman steaming on the stove for afternoon merienda and tiny red chilies spilling into sizzling sisig as Lola lets me stir, reminding me to scrape the flavorful bits off the bottom of the pan.
Summer smells like standing under crisscrosses of tree branches with an apron full of small golden limes. Like kalamansi pie and fireworks on the Fourth of July.
It smells like rolling hundreds of lumpia and mixing together pinches of garlic and sharp vinegar.

Like warm banana leaves being laid onto the table for . . .
Kamayan.
Summer tastes like stuffed milkfish and brown-sugar bananas grilling on a balmy evening, just like Dad always ate when he was a kid.

Summer smells like the earliest hours of morning, our lines cast into the lake.

Smells like we just caught dinner!
It smells like an unexpected, warm, sticky summer rain and getting drenched while saying goodbye to Lola at the airport.
Our house is a little grayer without her soft, sweet singing in Tagalog and Ilocano.
And the bitter melon tastes extra bitter in tonight’s dinner—not like how Lola makes it at all.
It feels like chilly bits of evening blowing through the kalamansi trees. Leaves are starting to pile up in the spot where Lola used to sit next to me.
Summer smells like a letter to Lola sealed in a mint-flavored envelope, with bubblegum-scented ink, wishing that I had a bowl of her arroz caldo to settle my butterflying stomach.
Summer feels like the last golden hour of the day drifting into an indigo night.

And it smells like melting cherry ice cream cones as we race our scooters around the block one last time . . .
Until finally it smells like freshly sharpened pencils, a stiff new backpack, and the last sweet bits of summer—in Lola’s mango jam.