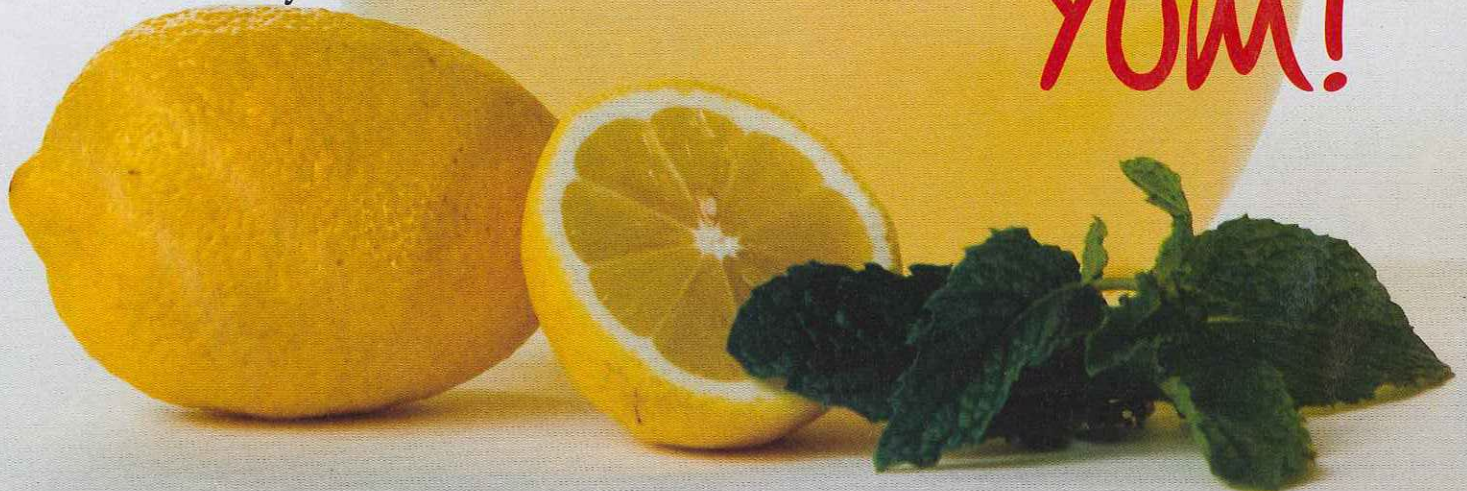


DELICIOUS SUMMER READ

15 Writers on the Foods of Summer

Patricia Berry
Katherine Checkley
Alice Elliot Dark
Louise DeSalvo
Laura Zinn Fromm
Susan Korones Gifford
Martin Golan
Sam Kissinger
Christina Baker Kline
Scott E. Moore
Linda P. Morgan
Dawn Porter
Pamela Redmond Satran
Susan Tepper
Nancy M. Williams

YUM!



THE COLORS OF POPSICLES



by Nancy M. Williams

MY SUMMER POPSICLE RITUAL AT Rolling Hills Swim Club began with a pilgrimage to my mother. At nine, I led my younger sister, Ann, as we trotted across the scorching pool deck. Mom sat under the *ramada*, a porch with concrete floor.

"Mom, can we have a popsicle?"

She fished two dimes from her purse.

"That's it until Monday."

"Oooh-kay," I said, a compliant moan.

I vowed I would never become like Mom. Not only would I shower my children with popsicle dimes, I also would lead a joyful life.

Cross-legged on towels, Ann and I peeled cellophane wrappers off our popsicles. Vapor swirled around my hand, as though giddy from baked-hot Arizona air. My teeth scraped ice, and I tasted slushy grape. Skirted in frost, my popsicle top shone a royal purple. Vibrant reds, saucy oranges, glowing limes—I relished popsicles' colors just as much as their cooling sweetness.

Under the ramada, Mom slouched in a pool chair, wearing rumpled shorts over her bathing suit. Her expression was stony. At home, Mom wept about living far away from her Pittsburgh family. She reminisced about her days as a scholarship student at Carnegie Art Museum with a sad pull to her mouth. Why would anyone bother, she complained aloud, to paint Tucson's spare desert landscape?

The week before, through my bedroom wall, I heard Dad lamenting that no one loved him, followed by Mom's dissenting murmurs. Familiar with Dad's drunken all-night rants—they flared every few months—I wrapped my pillow like large muffs around my ears. Come morning, my parents sat on the porch wearing yesterday's outfits. Dad, still talking in a querulous voice, sipped a fresh beer. I hated how the woven porch seat sagged under his body. I couldn't stand how he kept Mom up all night.

I prayed Dad would stop drinking, but three summers later, the miracle that rained down was that Mom, after a

twenty year hiatus, set up her artist easel and oil paints.

On weekends, I liked glimpsing her in the small bedroom she had converted to a studio, one hand resting on her cheek, the other brushing canvas with quick strokes. Turpentine's sweetly acidic smell wafted from the room. Gritty Lava soap, useful for paint stains, dribbled down the kitchen sink like popsicle spit on my sister's chin.

When fall arrived, Ann revealed why Mom slept until we left for school in the mornings.

THE MIRACLE THAT RAINED DOWN WAS THAT MOM, AFTER A TWENTY YEAR HIATUS, SET UP HER ARTIST EASEL AND OIL PAINTS.

"She stays up until two a.m. painting."

"How often?" I asked.

"Every night," Ann said.

Twenty-five years later, Mom has become an accomplished Southwestern artist. Much to my stepfather's delight, patrons recognize her in movie theater lines.

Now a mother myself, I have tried to imbue my own family weekends with lighthearted fun. At our own swim club last summer, after I jumped in the pool and yelped at the cold, Charlie and Gracie paddled to me. Their grinning faces filled me with bliss – the kind of happiness that still has eluded me with Mom.

Halfway through Mom's visit this past April, she and I shared a late supper. At the table, she sat slumped. Her eyes flat, gaze averted, skin puckered above pursed lips, it was as though she had crumbled into her former self under the ramada. I felt an old despair. Where was the grandmother who clapped during checkers or the artist who chatted up gallery owners? Alone with me, Mom meted her newfound fulfillment as though rationing popsicle dimes.

"You're always unhappy!" I said.

She claimed not to know what I was talking about.

The next morning, we boarded a train with Charlie and Gracie, bound for New York's Museum of Modern Art. Digesting rich hues in the "Color Chart" exhibition, neither Mom nor I had much appetite for arguing.

After Mom departed for Tucson, I consider how the museum visit allowed us to slip into a new corridor, the past cordoned. With Mom soon to turn 73, I

imagine that in ten years I'll look back upon her cross-country visits as a luxury. At her age, she is unlikely to admit that during my childhood, bereft of her art and depressed over her marriage, she did not lavish enough on me.

Perhaps I'm the one who needs to lavish now. I promise myself I will be more affectionate on her next visit. Arms around her shoulder, I will kiss Mom's cheek. I will tell her how much I love her.

Not long after my resolution, an unexpected and majestic gift from my mother arrives: a Sonoran desert scene painted in thick acrylics. A deep purple night sky unfurls over the darkening desert. Tucked between two background Catalina foothills, the descending sun heaves up its last bright orange rays. Two stalwart saguaros in the foreground glisten with lime green highlights. I savor her Welch's purple, her mandarin orange, her soothing lime: the summer colors I have longed for. ☼

Nancy M. Williams is a writer who lives in Montclair, NJ with her husband and two children.