

Of These Maypops Blooming



LaTanya McQueen

As the boy he was, a child who loved and was loved, and if only they'd seen him as this and not whatever it was they saw instead to warrant what they believed, maybe then they would have thought to ask themselves the question of if he could have even done it, if a boy that small could have beaten those two girls to death and dragged them into the ditch, if it could have even been possible for him to have had the strength to do the horror of what he was accused, and how could he have done it anyway, this child, a Black child no less, living in the Jim Crow South, how could he have committed such a crime with daylight shining and no one seeing, because someone had to have, and let's suppose not just that they had seen (no, no, no, not a person but the right person—someone who would be listened to, who would be heard), but seen and told, told of him not just saying he didn't know about the maypops to them girls and going inside to his house straight away, or suppose he'd known the answer to their question and had spent the afternoon picking the fruit the sisters were said to have asked him about—there would have been no Bibles used as boosters to prop him in the death chair, he would never have been known as the Black boy the state killed, the youngest ever, no he would not have been known as anyone beyond being a child from Alcolu, one who'd lived and then was forgotten except to those who'd once known him, who when asked, would tell stories of summers he'd go out to the passionflower fields, lush and green, his hand reaching for the bluish purple blooms searching for the fruit, of seeing those fallen off the vine, ready and waiting to be plucked from the ground, and he'd gather the maypops with his tender hands, placing them at the bottom of his shirt he'd pulled out to hold them, then running home after, careful as to not drop any along the way and hear the popping sound they'd make once fallen, he'd run as fast as he could to deliver them to his brother and sisters, and they'd stand together underneath the summer sun, sweating and smiling as they grabbed at the fruit, tart and sweet, breaking through the skin to get at its center, laughing in the briefest of moments where children like them could just simply be.

LaTanya McQueen is the author of the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* (Harper Perennial) and the essay collection *And It Begins Like This* (Black Lawrence Press). She teaches in the MFA program at NC State University.

Artwork: “Wedding Bouquet” by Nataliaia Burmaka

Acrylic on stretched canvas, 65 x 90 cm