

Dirty Knees

Thérèse Ferreria

“Chinese, Japanese,
dirty knees—
look at these!”

These are the songs
they sing at me on the playground
to the slap of the rope
on the four square
while boys taunting “ching-chong-wing-wong” wait with their arms
crossed
wanting to play...

Daddy kneels on the ground
as if praying
to pick weeds
between neat little rows of green.
Thick dark hands
pluck in silence
to the rhythm of a song in his head...
Hopscotch
Jump rope
Fifteen minutes of recess
is an eternity
when nobody wants to play...

“Chinese, Japanese...”
Should I tell them I’m Filipino?...
“dirty knees...dirty knees...”

Daddy loves the earth
says that it is life,
clutches it in his fist and lets it out slowly
like sand in an hour glass
For dis I come to America—
Dis mine! he declares
Black soil
white dreams
“...look at these!”

The recess leader turns her back to the chatter
She hears children singing, being joyful,
but she doesn't see me.

“Chinese, Japanese,
dirty knees—
look at these!”

Why does the rhythm
make me wanna dance and run away
at the same time?
Or should I sing along
because I want to play
because I'm tired of being alone like Daddy in the field
playing songs in his head no one hears
because the girl in charge of the jump rope looks like Shirley Temple,
who makes my Daddy smile
because Daddy works all day, and he doesn't wear a suit like Jill's father
or Jack's mother

 But Daddy has five suits
 and colorful ties wrapped in paper from the cleaners
 in the back of his closet with the moth balls

because the bell is ringing
in my head
even still
when there is no more recess
no jump rope,
only the rhythm of a distant rhyme
committed to memory
when I was nine.