Dear Champa Dolma

Suzy Bertsche
DEAR
CHAMPA DOLMA.

By Suzy Bertsche

I met you in Kibber,
a cinnamon colored village
beneath white distended clouds
on a stucco rough hillside.
A transatlantic flight to Delhi,
overnight train north,
bus to Kaza,
jeep ride to your blue door.
You were three, I was eighteen.

A year after spending seven nights
in a bed facing your cousin,
I got her letter.
It didn’t start with “Joule”
or “Namaste,”
but “Hello.”
She didn’t mention you,
or your swollen-eyed friends
who played tag around
the monks’ gompa.
The letter smelled of
dirt soaked yaks
your father brought down
from the hills at dusk,
stunted purple flowers
I have long forgotten
the Spiti name for,
chai garam that gave me shigella,
shadowed dust swept away
by your aunt each morning before
I woke up to make roti
and eggs with onions.

I wrote an ode to you.
I read it aloud only once.
Now that I am not acclimated to sleep at 14,000 feet, I am nervous it was the lack of oxygen that made it sing. Every day I wrote a poem about your family. They are all locked up in a thin notebook.

Not one picture of you smiling, too smart for my camera, always looking past the lens, through the pupil, to the bone socket. Your forehead had more wrinkles than your grandma, who washed your hair in a slice of stream, and tried to feed me tsampa mixed with chaang.

I tell others of your purple sweater, plastic pearls, top knot. I don’t tell them your cheeks were rough, frayed by the sun or that you never once looked into my eyes, even when your cousin had me hold you for that picture.

All the best,
Kalsang/Suzy