

Bitter

BY JOSEPH BATHANTI

Knowing these days it takes a while
for my mother to get to the phone,
I let it ring and ring until she answers.

It's an accommodation
we've silently agreed upon.
Her voice, with the accent on *hell*

in *hello*, has not changed
in the fifty years I've known her.
It still delights me, in that first instant

before she knows who's calling,
when the world still holds promise.
But often enough the news is bad.

I am calling to find out
the arrangements for Nicky.
"How's Phyllis?" I ask.

"Skinny as a rail. I don't know
what she's going to do in that big house."
I don't know either,

so I inquire about the weather.
The temperature in Pittsburgh is nine degrees,
the biggest snowstorm in five years expected.

"It's so bitter," she sighs.
Because of the cold, my father does his walking
in the long halls of the big apartment

complex they moved to when they started
getting old and the neighborhood
and the house on Mellon Street, where I grew up,

got to be too much for them.
Last week, he caught his hand
in one of the building's heavy steel doors,

and broke a bone in it.
The hand turned black, but he waited
five days before going to the doctor

where all they did was put it in a brace.
Still, he can't get a glove on,

and it's minus-28 with the wind-chill.

To warm the hand, he draws it into his sleeve.
This morning, they went out to buy mittens,
but everyone was sold out.

My mother declares
that from one of my father's wool socks,
she'll make a mitten for his bad hand.

"What's the difference," she says, and I agree,
picturing them in a blizzard,
fighting their way,

with the rest of my ancient family,
behind the casket, up the frozen
hills of Mount Carmel,

my eighty-five year old father,
broken hand in a sock, trying
to keep my mother from falling.

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