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"Grandmother's Thousand Cats," "Boys on Winter Palominos"

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Grandmother’s Thousand Cats

Grandmother majored in French and Latin and raised cats. She numbered them, digits in the French tongue lovely, and they purred. After Grandfather’s horse tossed him off in a storm, she taught college, the oldest bachelor of arts on the faculty. Her students liked her cats, learned French by riding to the ranch for practice,

counting her cats *deux, trois*, and grooming mares. My mother met my father there, branding calves for his mother, the ranch Grandmother left them, cats and a thousand cows.

Mother teased she taught him the tongue so he’d feed kittens, more than a hundred when I was born. He let them prowl, squeezed milk to their mouths from teats of cows.

When my children were toddlers, he lined them up like the last cats in the barn, tongues out, giggling and squinting, my father squeezing warm streams to them all.
Boys on Winter Palominos

We sharpened icicles like assassins,
milking the tips like teats to make them melt,
sculpting ice daggers with our hands
until they ached. Grandfather's leaky barn
dripped like a grotto in blizzards,
cows' heat melting the snow to ice.
The dark loft dangled stalactites
five feet long and thicker than our necks
Most crashed to the floor when we whacked them,
but the best made lances, so heavy
we staggered. Daggers strapped to our coats,
Eddy and I galloped around the corral
on imaginary palominos, cousins
hugging the butts of lances longer than us,
Quixotes before we had heard the word.

Our fathers were off on battleships
or islands in World War Two, but we were boys
with movie ranches to rescue. Most icicles broke
when we stumbled, or jabbed them hard
at the barn to get at the bad men,
bank robbers barricaded, whiskey-drunk
on rotgut and firing wildly. When lances broke,
we dropped them and charged the barn,
grabbing slippery knives and whooping like savages,
leaping at shadows crouched behind the stalls.