

COW POX

"Uncle John's devoted cows would risk their lives for him. But they are powerless, an incredulous chorus. His fever over 104, he dozes heavily in bed, like oil on water. Sometimes, taking my hand, he points with the other toward something invisible. His face is smooth and firm as polished rock and I think if he be taken now, surely he'll be content. He tells us what he sees -- cows of all colors, red and teal blue, ochre bulls grazing. His hallucinations seem unique to us as a report from the moon. In his frenzy Uncle John raves that his cows are his only 'amigos' in a region desolate as the North Pole. Large dusty tears stream down his cheeks. I appreciate his devotion, but my mother, sensitive to familial ties, feels slighted by the objects of his affection. Hadn't she sat on his lap as a child and worshipped Uncle John with the ingenuousness of a Mayan offering a virgin sacrifice? The illness creates a rift between them wide as the Rio Grande in Spring."

"The cow's ministrations in his behalf are reinforced by his iron constitution and he pulls through the attack, as he later does the blizzard of '79, the Indian War of '86 and the drought of '90 to '95. It is a stampede, caused by his attempt to distribute gifts among the cows on the anniversary of his recovery, that kills him in 1896, a saintly man of 92."

-- Maxine Chernoff

Chicago IL

GRANNY

She always had a gift for everybody. "OH, yes," she said, when you dropped by, "I thought you might like this."

And she grubbed in a dirty old gunny sack and brought out your present -- Your Present in her eyes -- and you always politely responded, oh, wow, thank you, and took it home and found you loved it too, though you never showed it to your smart friends.

Not because you were ashamed of it, as you first thought, but because you found it was, indeed, Your Present. She had a gift for that.