

Columbus Day

A S A D D A Y . On my mother's side my family goes back to a village near Fano in Italy. But because my mother married out of the ethnic fold I cannot sport a Sannicandro or a Mancinelli. In addition to which my father once chased my mother's sister out on a fire escape with a butcher knife: I have bad blood in me. My aunt feeds me gorgeously, but she still stutters when she talks about it. I may look like my Uncle J. (I think it best to abbreviate), but there is no doubt that as I get older the strangeness is showing. My aunt, let us say Aunt I., is fat, pink, and excitable. And a small town girl. Stuttering on a Third Avenue fire escape must surely have been a high point in her nightmares. My Uncle J. was a favorite of mine. He spent most of his time in the cellar. He also taught me how to chop wood. His great feat in my childhood was the fearless poking of his arm into spider holes. Later, in Latin I, I read about the Roman Lucius Scaevola. When captured by the enemy and threatened with torture he stuck his right hand in the fire and said, "Call me Lefty." My Uncle J. had a fraternal twin who spent *his* time in the attic reading Freud, the Bible, and etymology. He ultimately became a hobo and lost a leg hitching a freight. However, they both left me with an interesting symbology of life. Meanwhile my Aunt I. is stuttering on the fire escape. There is a song in the Catskills of yore to the effect that all over Italy they sing so prettily (or in Napoli so happily) which makes me feel the curse of my doomed blood. My mother once drank cabbage juice for two weeks and tried to cure her sinus by having thumbs stuck up her nose. And my Uncle H. once didn't like the way my Aunt T. sang while washing dishes and didn't speak to her for two years. My Uncle T., whose wife wouldn't see or speak to him when she was dying of cancer, used to ride down hills standing on his motorcycle. Aunt N. wishes her husband's grave filled with horse manure, and Aunt I. unplugs all her appliances when she goes to work. I think it was summer when she was sweating on the fire escape. The colossal outrage of it. All my mother's family are superb cooks, and I see her staring and stuttering in at me in my dreams. She is saying something like "You b-b-b-be a g-g-g-good boy." And I do think I've tried. On this, Columbus Day, I try to overcome the bad blood in me by thinking of Columbus, Garibaldi, Machiavelli. I try to sing so happily, as they must have, of spider holes, cancer, stumps, and graves. But the cellar is dank, and monsters lurk behind the furnace. In the attic my Uncle M. dropped cigarette butts into his pot of urine and water until all hours of the night, and my Uncle H. went to sea. In the winter I rolled a hot brick in newspaper to put at the bottom of my bed. My Uncle J. once got a bald head but no one knew it for three weeks because he never took his hat off. A war came, and things fell apart. Everybody got older.

My grandmother, who had twelve children, died at eighty-nine, blood spilling from her mouth all over her chest. And I sing.