

Harriet and Flo

1.
The time arrives for all of us
sooner or later.
It has arrived now
for my friend Flo.

“Ninety-three is a long life,”
I’m assured by her doctor—although
I didn’t really need him to remind me.

The end is known from the beginning,
we all agree, and so, when consciousness
has receded to the point where
my presence in the room no longer seems
to have any meaning I say “goodbye,”
leave Flo with her sister, who has agreed
to keep watch over her final days.

2.
Less than twenty-four hours later a sign
catches my eye on Maryland Route 16:
“Harriet Tubman UGRR.” The arrow
points left, down Buckstown Road.
It will take a few minutes for “UGRR”
to register as “Underground Railroad,”
but Harriet’s name is enough, so I turn left
and, not far from Buckstown itself,
come upon the modest historical marker
alerting us to where Harriet was born—
perhaps, although it is surely the place
where she was raised a slave before
escaping to become the “Moses”
history remembers.

A bit about the history is written here,
but at the present moment the dates
are what strike me most forcefully:
“1820-1913.”

A quick mental calculation reveals that this,
too, adds up to ninety-three years.

Do you believe in coincidences?

3.

I can't remember if Flo and I
ever talked about Harriet.
We might have. She often spoke
of her work as part of the campaign
to desegregate Montgomery County,
Maryland, during the late 1950s
and early '60s. Today her name
is carved into a monument to
the she- and heroes of that struggle.
You can see it if, one day, you visit
the County Courthouse in Rockville.

Yes, I do believe in coincidences.

Yet right now I prefer to believe, instead,
that perhaps Florence Orbach knew the dates,
or at least the number of years, and decided,
simply, that she had no need to live longer
than Harriet Tubman.

I wonder if it might help
for you to believe it too?

Steve Bloom
July 2016

In memory of Florence ("Flossie") Orbach