Riding Horseback with Sylvia Plath
Lyn Lifshin

She was more hands on. I had taken a few lessons as a child, but she wanted to plunge in. I told her I didn't want any injuries. Ballet was my obsession and even a mild Achilles tendon ache or sore knee makes me seethe. She was a good dancer, you should have seen her in that tight red dress, blonde hair. Neither of us were as blonde as we pretended. What isn't an illusion with poets? Stages of trying to pare everything down, poems, our legs, our whole bodies. Not that she was ever as plump as I was. I painted horses, as she did, fell in love with their beauty, wildness. We both fell for those enormous mahogany eyes, as we did for many similar lovers: big untamable, a little scary. We could lose ourselves in their manes, leave whatever was most terrifying or hideous out of sight. When I wrote about Ruffian, the gorgeous tragic race horse, Sylvia understood how the world went away, as when she brushed Ariel, loosed the cake mud from her flanks and tail. There was no one to bother her, no nasty notes from men, no over-worried mother's calls or letters, intrusions we both knew too well and couldn't quite deal with. No one was telling us what to do when we were lost in horses. No advice, threats,
warnings. We both had had it
being told what to do

Early morning, before it's light,
to be one with a horse, especially
if it's your birthday: ecstasy.
Sometimes, it's as though
it's too much to be charming,
and still, give up wildness.
When Sylvia rode Ariel
as dark sky began to lose
its ink, she broke for that
moment, out of everything
holding her, as I did with Ruffian,
cantering, galloping, airborne,

no longer daughter, mother, wife