I was nine years old when I first put on glasses, having stumbled for all my life through a world with too much clarity, where everything looked like exactly what it was. I was used to the sterile geometry of walls and windows, the empirical veining on new spring leaves. I was used to a clockmaker’s world.

One day my father left his glasses on the kitchen table, and I slipped them on and watched the world slide into a maze of color and shadow. There were no edges to the table, no ceiling, no floor: all I saw was sunlight spilt like water across the white stretch of linoleum, the green brightness of leaves through the wavering window-pane, as though I had wandered out of the sensible world and into one made of metaphor instead of matter. It was like opening my eyes for the first time.

I hid the glasses in my room and slipped them on, sometimes, when I thought no one was looking, watching in the mirror as my face dissolved and became the moon. Then I thought I understood the perfect fluidity of the world.

It was at the same time that I began to collect words as I collected those shifting moments: words to describe things, at first, like the curved panes of the glasses or the slant of sunlight through a window. Crystalline. Luminous. Then words for words’ sake, for the music of their vowels, for their preposterous length. For the world they described. Madrigal. Skygodlin. Brobdingnagian. Absinthe. Verdant. Words like jewels, so that occasionally I found myself stringing them together into sentences, then paragraphs. I took the glasses from their hiding place under my bed and began to wear them outside, learning to live in a world where doors wavered in and out of my sight, where light and shadow had as much weight as sticks and stones. At eleven, I kept a notebook about waking up in different worlds. I spent a lot of time staring into space, or watching the sky. Later, I would read Mallarmé, and have an inkling of what it meant to be haunted by blue.

There are those of us who live in a fabulist’s world, a world made up of words as the scientific world is made up of atoms, each atom invisible, inexplicable, beautiful. I want to describe the world knowing description is futile, in a world where words breathe themselves to life and refuse to be captured. Sometimes putting words on paper is like groping blindly in the dark for a light switch, a candle, anything. Sometimes I see things clearly.
A Conversation with Celia Bell
by Melissa Hartman

What is your earliest writing memory?
When I was about four, my mom gave me a cup of black tea, and for the next couple hours I was just incredibly wired on caffeine, and I started dictating stories and poems to her. Obviously, I was too young to read or write properly, but she copied everything down, and the story’s become kind of canonical in my family. Probably that’s why I drink a lot of coffee now.

What was your first published piece?
My first published piece was an essay for the “Lives” section of the New York Times Magazine—the column that runs on the magazine’s back page every week. It was a piece about my grandmother, and I’d originally written it for a school assignment. To be honest, I didn’t think I had much chance of getting it published. My father was the one who suggested that I send it in, and I kind of laughed at him. But I sent it in anyway—and they took it.

What do you think is the hardest part of writing?
It definitely varies piece by piece. Sometimes a story almost writes itself, but just as often (probably more often), the writing is a very slow process. Often, though, the hardest part is just sitting down and actually writing. I’m something of a perfectionist, so I never much liked the idea that you just have to write down whatever junk comes into your mind, and then go back and revise it into a passable story. Probably it’s much easier if you’re someone who can work that way.

Has your writing—or something that happened in one of your stories—ever surprised you?
I think there’s generally an element of surprise to the best stories, even for the author. I feel that when I’m writing a story well, its elements come together almost of their own accord—if I have to rack my brains for the next thing that happens, it’s often a sign that something’s wrong with the way the story has been set up.

What writers (or works) have taught you the most about writing? Whose writing do you particularly admire?
I feel like I learn something from almost everything I read (even if a book is awful, it can teach you what not to do). The list of authors I admire is about as long as my arm—Marquez, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Dylan Thomas. There are a lot of others. I’ve always been very attracted to the musicality of language, so I like authors—and poets—who have an element of lyricism in their work.

What is the best writing advice you’ve ever received? Is there anything you would add to that?
I think the best writing advice I’ve gotten probably came from my father, who’s a novelist himself. It’s quite simple, really—and I can’t remember the exact words he used—but the basic thrust was that, to really write well, you have to surrender your ego and let the work speak for itself. I had an English teacher who would say that all the best writing is about reducing the space between us, as human beings. I think they both amount to the same thing.