

Rebecca Emlinger Roberts

an excerpt from

The Art of Looking Down

for Larry

ART is the soul I long to keep. Art helps my body to move, my heart to become more than a muscle, my mind to grapple with the meaning of things. This is not to say I think about art every hour of the day, just that it has bent my thinking as a whole into a whole, and sometimes into a hole. That's just the way it is. I cannot separate myself from art any more than I can separate myself from the disease I have had for forty years, rheumatoid, which has shaped my view of the world—not to mention the contours of my body.

To live with chronic disease is to learn to be artful in a most unceremonious way, simply to think through the moves that get a person going: tying shoes, climbing hills, walking on sand, getting out of bed, getting on the plane. My hands are crooked, and my feet are weirdly splayed, with toes pointed up, the balls of my feet thickened by calluses that have become almost as efficient as a second set of toes, with grip and finesse. If my hands ever were to be surgically straightened, I would be unnerved by them—the fingers now suddenly, weirdly foreign, as if they belonged to someone else.

Such are the perversities of the mind as it conforms to the pressures of disease. The second joint of each of my thumbs droops like a tired flag; my fingers cross and curl; there are unintended bumps and swellings. Still, I own them: they are *my* hands, *my* fingers. Something is in me, in *us*—in those of us whose bodies do not match our illusions—that is willing to take in the orphaned parts, that impels us to preserve the integrity of the whole. Thus does the self attempt to make of the will and the flesh a unified being.

This might be art.

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As I walk, my body swings like a metronome across the concrete, across the expanse from my car to the high school's front door, on my way to the pool where I have swum for years. My swim bag swings too, back and forth, its rhythm interrupted only when I stop. I am looking down. I have learned—after years of rheumatoid-induced joint erosions, after replacements of both hips and knees in surgeries stitching up but never quite replacing the precision of the originals, and after years of falling—the art of looking at the ground.

Looking down is an art. You follow the ground and learn not to respond to the environment beyond your downward gaze. You devote your head, the primary instrument of attention, to the ground. This means if you're on the move and somebody calls your name, you respond without looking up. You look down as you say *Hello*, look down as you say *How are you? What's up?* You look down as you say *Enjoy your day*. Whenever you are in motion, whenever one foot makes its way after the other, whenever you're on your feet and on the move, you look down.

Art: resistance, compliance, compliance, resistance. And so I look down. But I don't *want* to look down. I want to look up: at the sky, at birds in flight, at people's faces. I do not want to look down at their feet. I've been robbed; this is not natural; this is unfair. The ground is the ground: homely, uninspiring, empty of focus. What's to look at down there? The ground is where grubs live, where serpents crawl—the sinner's reward. The ground is bleak and brown and hard and yields only to our shovels, our machinery—never to our souls. It is penurious; it is caustic and brutal and faceless.

The ground. Where's the dream in it?