

OF THE NOBLE AND THE VILE

Corey Van Landingham

Aerugo nobilis, Virus aerugo

A canker on the sunken cheek.
 One wants to take a thumbnail
 to it, slough the bluing wound,
 flick tongue through hollowed hole.

Dredged up from the burial site,
 the shipwreck. The valley
 where the fleeing army finally
 buckled, swords swallowed

by the river. Spilled coins
 pressing their faces to the silt.

 Free of us, bronze sighs.
 Millennia of low echoes alone

in the seagrass. Schools of bream
 like tumbled light, mouthing
 a hard ear. One needs
 a clean room, with good light

to scrub the surface.
 But you see, it's a thing of salt—
 a reaction kindled below the face.
 No matter how many times

cloth-polished (careful,
 around the parted, swollen lips),
 it's in the bronze's blood.
 The spots like molded bread,

stippled blooms of turquoise
from the mine.

It was once thought an artifact
could, from across the room,

spread to another coin
or bust this *bronze disease*

as we call it now,
and know its contagion requires

touch. Understand, though,
this was a time when an entire village

feared a wisp of blue smoke
seeping from the cracks of an old

wooden house on a lakeshore
in Switzerland—that *that*

was the plague.
Or cool Saturn swinging hegemonic

in the night. A vengeful God.
But this disease, remember,

starts with salt. A bearded head
off the coast of Brindisi.

Bronze ingots interred
near Kaş. It's our need

to see them, to touch—what ignites
the corrosion. The smack

of oxygen once the sculpture
breaches. Salt, water, air

and in a week three banded bracelets
collapsed to dust.

Some reverse-Midas, the touch
of an eye. Pliny

knew one patina (liberty's
green hue) noble, one

vile—verdigris
searing the emperor's brow.

In Rome, such care was taken
with a statue's eyes

that they're mostly lost
to us. Painted bone, shell.

Lapis lazuli smoothed to orbs.
Now, empty sockets—

Which shal change oure vyle body—
Now dark doorways, blank

moons. It's those wells
that make the throat clutch,

what's been dropped there.
A falcon returning

to his wrist. Salt cliffs at dusk.
The callus on his daughter's heel.

It takes touch
to catch it, yes,

and we humans are spared. From that
at least. It's something else

that keeps you up some nights
picturing, off Mykonos,

deep below Alexandria's blue basin,
thousands of blinkless eyes.