

Against Translation (by ALAN R. SHAPIRO)

The songs swept down from the northern steppes
with cinerary horse
and sword and vestment
in the wake of battle
suicidal for a bronze
translation of flesh burnt
to a vertical vapor trail
of fame which, so they claimed,
would be undying
by which they meant
the dying would be just
prolonged
a little longer
as on a ladder
made of air each
legendary smoke of name could only climb
by thinning
till it wasn't there.

And now as the steel tips of our devices
dig, sort through
and analyze
what's left behind:
scant traces
of berserk debris, dumb soot of ritual effaced
by dumber ash,
beneath ghost towns
the ghosts have all abandoned,
all we unearth
intact now
are the untranslated
bones of babies,
inhumed at home in older dwellings

on deeper strata
under mud floors
in pits?—?placed
carefully on sides, knees drawn to chests,

skulls cupped in pebble bones of hand,
the dead nursling,
the stillborn,
the miscarried?—?unnamed,
unadorned,
as if the only grave goods
buried with them were
their perishing?—?
as if that
were what the mothers
wanted to keep close,
keep hidden, safe
from the heroic
stench of burning
upward while their breasts
still swelling dripping
freshened the black dirt
sucking at their feet.