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The Skull

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The Skull

I'd dug it from the pit, thinking it a fossil.
I'd cleaned it up & held it upside-down
in one hand where it felt like my own head.
There was no jaw. We looked everywhere.
I set him up on a lump of chalk, gave him
a tongue & made him talk, telling me
about his life, but Derek shut me up.
Maybe it's worth something, he said.
So we brought it in & showed it to
our History teacher, Mr. Barlow, who had
just been talking to us about the Devil's Dike
& Wandlebury, Beaker Folk, the local
Bronze Age & other stuff that set me dreaming.
He said to take the skull to the Museum
of Arch & Eth, & that was where we learned
it was an Anglo-Saxon boy about our age,
but older by about a thousand years.
He must have lived up there on top of what
were now abandoned chalk pits, doing what
boys do, playing with his brothers & his friends,
maybe even finding the very fossils that brought me
so often to this place after school, scrambling
through the rubble at the foot of cliffs,
filling pockets with ammonites & snails, chitons
& cephalopods. Perhaps he found them too,
but didn't know what they were, calling them
"dragon's teeth," or "stone flowers," & took them
back to his hut to share, but then forgot about,
so maybe some of those he picked were hidden
in my own collection of under shirts & underwear
until my father found them & dumped them out.
"If you spend more time on useful things, like mathematics,"
he said, "you'd be better off. You can't do anything.
You'll end up as a dustman. You'll end up on the streets."
I tried to say that history's useful too. "Shut up,"

he said. "Like talking to a brick wall. Numbskull."
And he hit me on the head. I thought about
that boy a lot, up there, all alone, abandoned,
not buried in one of those cemeteries we'd read about
with gravegoods & relatives & sometimes a horse
or dog or two. What was on his mind? Did no one
miss him when he didn't come home that evening?
If they did, did they go out to look for him
on that windswept heath, calling his name?
He could have been an ancestor of mine, sort of.
How did he die? Maybe he killed himself, or someone
killed him. Maybe he got lost, got water in his lungs
from falling in a fen so he couldn't breathe or speak,
like my friend Alf whose lungs collapsed & whose head
was long, like his. What did he see out those sockets
as he looked over to where our streets would be,
our school, & where his skull would end up on a shelf
in the basement of the university's Museum of Archeology and
Ethnology,
growing even more silent with the years, in a box with other skulls,
above which, years later, on my first day as a freshman
I would sit with three others in a large room around a huge
oak table as white-haired Dr. Whitelock came in & greeted us,
then turned to me & said: "Please open your copy of *Beowulf*
to page one, and start translating." *Hwaet!* I could. I did, until she
said,
"Thank you. Very good. Stop now. Next." But no one really could.
After class, Jenny Daiches invited me to her rooms. I couldn't go.
I'd discovered that what you came to learn here, you were already
supposed to know.