WAVE

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WANDLEBURY RING

October, and a mist drifts from the Fens.
I'm eight years old and standing on the downs of Gog Magog Hill with my family.

It's Sunday, and my brother and I rose early to pack our lunch and load the stuttering car.
Now we race jagged kites into the air,
wrestling a wind that tugs our fingers numb.
Our father shows us how to make them climb and twirl like German bombers in the war.

He falls over, plays dead—then swallows air to chase us screaming round and round the hill.
We make him keep on bombing us until we flop down and gaze northward toward the Wash.
I imagine stilt-legged fen-folk crossing marsh two hundred years before, when farms were drowned.

Now skylarks, peewits skirl over lowland.
Gog and Magog, sleeping giants, stretch away.
Below us are the woods of Wandlebury.

We wander into a thick glade of beech
then tread our muddy circle round the ditch that ancient Britons dug to build their fort.
Father tells how Romans tore it apart,  
burning bricks from soft East Anglian clay  
to mount their rounded arches toward the sky  
and pave the Via Devana to Haverhill.  
Down the scarp and into the ditch we tumble,  
tramping like soldiers through the fallen leaves  
that crunch beneath our feet. The barrow-graves  
where Romans piled their dead lie further north,  
but here we roll ourselves in rich black earth  
then clamber up the bank, smelling of leaf-mould, wood smoke, dirt, and ash. It's a relief  
to shiver and find ourselves on sunlit lawn,  
leaving behind the glade and red hawthorn  
for the cobbled drive. We cross the slippery bridge  
and peer together over its mossy edge  
at hungry ducks, the sunken cricket pitch's  
forget-me-not. Behind me lies the ditch  
where today it is my father's shade I see  
kicking dead leaves aside to unbury me.