

Competitive edge

And *that* was the spring the sycamores attempted global dominion. In the autumn, their double-winged seedcases were viewed as cute dispersal devices, greeted alongside conkers as nature in harmony with humans, entertaining the kiddies with adorable examples of well-designed dissemination. By the end of March, those helicopters that had found a soft patch of ground were bedding in. By mid-April, they were waging war on the primroses, celandines, wild garlic, and all other indigenous claimants to the territory. Soon, every grassy surface was smothered in them – suburban lawns, motorway verges, meadows high above the tree line where all the ground had planned was a campaign of sip sip sip at the sodden soil gurgling beneath the pasture. Nurtured underground, the seeds exploded into saplings that could cluster-bomb the bluest spring sky with canopy clouds. Pretty soon, any spot of earth the size of a farthing was in a custody battle between the sycamore and the spring flowers, handled with all the mature diplomacy of Elon Musk arm-wrestling with Donald J Trump. In the water-logged fields, lambs picked up on the competitive edge, and set up primitive Olympics, mimicking Chinooks in bouts of vertical take-off. This used to be viewed as cute muscle-strengthening exercises, innocent gambolling, nature's way of entertaining the townies out for a walk. But now, the sinister nature of this drive for supremacy revealed itself; ewes are not the most notorious helicopter parents, but even they can produce lambs with ambition, who set their own targets. Pretty soon, they will metamorphose into wolves, and we know how that one ends.

Parlour games for millennials

The serpent in the Eton Collar has a get-out-of-jail card stapled to his forehead, but pays his fines with contempt, so he can continue round the board, dragging a red swathe of hotels behind him like a bloodied fox-tail. The utility companies have been priced out of the market; the community chest is empty. Capital punishment has been re-introduced for petty thefts (such as the bread needed to provide milk-sops for weans), but the hangmen reskilled after furlough, and all the cheap labour drowned in the channel, desperate to escape deportation to Rwanda. Meanwhile all the hardworking families are re-possessing the myth of the deserving poor, turning up for side-hustles and double shifts, dressed up in paper crowns and cheap versions of heated gilets from the middle aisle of Aldi. Now the electricity has gone off, we take it in turns to light candles from the flame of outrage, and once a week, the youngest survivor chooses a community card. The rest of us perfect the art of ceromancy, peeling off the winding sheets from guttering candles, pinching them into wax dolls which we pin to the wall to block out the drafts. Family pets, worms, and vermin begin to be viewed as useful contributions to the pot luck menu. Raids occur, nightly, for head-torches and tin openers.