

First Smell of Spring

The smell of change comes even before the trees open bud, before the eye can verify what is happening. The precise date is unpredictable, but one warm afternoon the change is in the air, winter turning to spring, and it is more than sunlight, more than warmth. It is a kind of presence smelled and felt most keenly in the open country but also in a suburban street and even in a city park.

It is a compound of many subtle scents. It is the earthy smell of soil stirred by little, seemingly inconsequential movements—the thrust of grass stems from wakening roots, the spring house cleaning in a colony of ants, the thrust of earthworms and their fine-grained casts. It is the fertile smell of leaf mold and rotting twigs in a woodland, a rich, damp, vegetative odor. It is the clean, silty smell of flowing water at a brookside, the misty smell of wet stones, the damp, almost green smell of moss.

The only place it has even a tinge of rankness is in the bogs, where decay is swift and water stagnant. Even there it is the smell of life, not death, life teeming in the soggy rootbed, preparing to emerge green and urgent. And on those wet margins the bog smells are already livening with the resinous odors of poplar and willow buds straining at their seams. Soon the faint polleny smell of willow catkins will be there.

It is the odor of quickening life, the first fragrance of spring, thinner than mist, warm as sunlight. Change is in the air.

The New York Times

Published: April 5, 1964

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