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When wonder comes for Christmas

In early light, a garden's gifts cannot be missed

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When at last the morning comes, I am not unlike the little child at Christmas. Having tossed and turned in anticipation, through all the darkest hours, at first light I throw back the blankets, slide into clogs, slither into a heavy sweater and tiptoe down the stairs.

For days, I've been stockpiling for my friends. I've corncakes stuffed with cranberries and pine cones wrapped in peanut butter. I've suet balls to dangle from the boughs, and little bags of birdseed, just small enough to stuff in all my pockets. I've a jug of fresh water for all to drink and splash before it turns to winter's ice.

It's time for a Christmas treasure all my own, one I unwrap every year.

My walk of wonder takes me no farther than the patch of earth I call my own, a rather unassuming tangle of hope and dreams and heartache (for what garden doesn't crack a heart, at least once a season?), in my leafy little village.

I carve out this hour of Christmas morn, before the footsteps slap across the floorboards up the stairs, before I crank the stove, and kindle all the Christmas lights.

It's my hour of solitude and near



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silence, as I tug open the back door and step into the black-blue darkness of the minutes just beyond the dawn.

It's my chance to take in the winter gifts of my rambling, oft-rambunctious garden plots, and all who dwell among them — the birds, the squirrels and fat-cheeked chipmunks, the old mama possum, and, yes, the stinky skunk who sometimes ambles by and sends us dashing in all directions.

And, best of all, it's my early Christmas moment to reciprocate the many gifts that all the seasons bring me.

I am nearly humming as I make my yuletide rounds: I fill the feeders, scatter seed and stuff an old stone trough with what I call the "critter Christmas cakes."

At this scant hour, the black-velvet

dome above is stitched still with silver threads of sparkling light. And limbs of trees, bare naked in December, don't block my upward glance at all that heavens offer.

This is where my prayer begins, as I whisper thanks for all the chirps and song, for flapping wings and little paws that scamper — all of nature's pulse beats that bring endless joy, and teach eternal lessons.

As light brightens in the southeast corner of the sky, the architecture of the wintry bower emerges. The black of branches — some gnarled, others not unlike the bristles of an upturned broom — etch sharp against the ever-bluer sky.

Exposed, the silhouette reveals the secrets of the trees — the oak, the maple and the honey locust that rustles up against my bedroom window.

As I come 'round a bend, gaze up and all around, I cannot miss the nests not seen till late in autumn, when the trees disrobed and shook off their blazing colors.

In murky morning light, the nests appear as inkblots of black among the lacy boughs. Only in winter do we realize how many dot the arbor. There is the contour of the squirrels' shoddy leaf-upholstered hovel high up in the maple, and, down low in a serviceberry, the robins' tuck-point masterpiece of twigs.