

# welcome

## save it for a rainy day

IT IS A RAINY SUMMER SUNDAY, another day in a week of relentless, torrential downpours. At first the rain is a welcome respite from the sun that scorches and withers plants and skin; soon, though, the rain becomes cause for alarm. The gutters are clogged and rain is washing down the windows, seeping in over the sills. Mysterious jets are springing out of the retaining wall at the back of the garden; rain is sluicing its way across the driveway onto what was once my terrace, and is transforming it into a swimming pool. The sump pump in the basement has come clanking to life, but it is an ancient machine and moves arthritically, creaking and grinding, complaining, dangerously overloaded.

I cannot weed; I cannot plant; I cannot prune; I cannot mow. I am housebound but feel like beating my wings against the bars of my cage; I look outside and there is so much to do. The weeds luxuriate; they seem almost to snicker. I can go to work on the gutters. I put on a raincoat and sneakers and march purposefully out to the garage to get the extension ladder, and that is when I learn that I am the proud owner of yet another useless gadget in my arsenal against the inexorable decay of the house. The ladder is so heavy that I cannot budge it. How did I ever hang it on those pegs? I remember that my father and brother were with me when I brought it home from the hardware store. Alone, I don't have the strength to handle it. And what was I thinking, exactly, when I bought a ladder that could reach higher than two stories? I was thinking that I could shore myself up against trouble. Here is trouble, and I am helpless against the waters lapping at the foundations of my house.

I am once again at the mercy of the plumber, or the roofer, or any genius who can calculate and divert the runoff pouring into my basement from the neighbor's uphill grounds. I will take help from anyone who will take my call. The gutters can wait. Indoors again, I get to work sorting through piles of catalogs. I can never get rid of them; they are the mailbox perennials, and I am addicted to them. The catalogs are full of the season's amazing gadgets: motorized floats that will spin you and your cocktail across the surface of your pool, for those too languid to paddle; outdoor heaters—40,000 Btu!—that will warm the air around your chaise, for those too weary to get a sweater. It is impossible not to start reading them, not to wonder at who would spend money on such things — and wonder, too, where I will store everything I am ordering. How do you get a life where flirting with the edge of infinity in your pool is your biggest problem? And why? Why do we need help with problems we do

not even know we have, when we cannot get help for the problems lurking under the eaves?

One catalog catches my eye, probably because there is a picture on the cover of a man with a wrench, bending over a puddle of water, and a woman behind him, her face a mask of shock and despair. I can relate to this. All my appliances leak. Even the toaster. The catalog, Duluth Trading, turns out to specialize in tools and gadgets for the serious tradesman. It is filled with lethal-looking things like a machete (with leather scabbard), a flame tool, patella knee pads, contractor's consoles, lineman's utility buckets, antivibration gloves, a calculator that "instantly finds lengths for common rafters and solves concrete square-ups and slopes," and enough holsters and buckets and holders and pouches to organize an elementary school. What a mysterious world of gadgets; they are seductive. You get tricked into thinking that your problems could be fixed if only you had the right tool. But the tools are meaningless in the wrong hands. Incredibly enough, the cover of the catalog turns out to be advertising the solution to an age-old problem known in the trade as plumber's crack: a T-shirt with an extra-long tail to cover the backside of the guy kneeling on the floor, his head in the cabinets under your sink, his jeans—well, you get the picture. More problems we didn't know we had. I would not mind if the plumber arrived wearing a bikini. Around here it would take a crack in the fabric of reality for the plumber to show up at all.

The rain lets up a bit. The sparrows nesting in the ivy that covers the neighbor's garage part their curtain wall and swoop and dive through the drizzle. I watch from my window as they land in my gutters, pluck out pine needles and catkins from the oak and bits of straw and even the shredded plastic wrappers of cigarette packs left behind by the roofer, and return with the debris tucked into their beaks to shore up their nests. Soon my gutters are running again. What a clever gadget a sparrow turns out to be.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR