

ELIZABETH THELEN

*Ask Martha*

Dear Martha,  
What exactly is mildew? What causes it?  
How can I prevent it from growing? And what  
can I do to eradicate it from my home?  
—*Martha Stewart Living* magazine

Dear Reader,  
Mildew is your punishment  
for not being the woman  
you should be. That bit of black  
plating your grout, stains starting  
in the shower curtain—all  
your inadequacies turned fungal  
and growing. Compare yourself  
  
to your mother, your sister-in-law,  
the rest of the world's  
competent ladies. Sweet Reader,  
how do you measure up? I know  
you disinfected the trashcan  
last week, but I can see  
  
the cat-hair dustballs  
tumbleweeding around  
your kitchen. Now take me.  
The master bath in my  
Connecticut home smells  
of hibiscus and lavender, with  
a friendly spike of citrus  
365 days a year. You could  
drink from that toilet. But

Reader, all this is not to worry you.  
Just pick a day, early autumn,  
when the view out your hall window  
is a simple matter of yellows  
and greens. Wear jeans,  
a comfortable plaid  
shirt and clean tennis shoes,  
and snug your hair up into  
a loose bun. I like to put on

a little music, something  
baroque, something lighthearted  
and energetic. And if the water's  
warm enough, the sponge  
soft enough, you might imagine  
you're scrubbing—not your almond  
fiberglass shower with its months  
of family grime—but a woman's

porcelain skin. It's me, oh, Reader,  
*my* skin is your ivory tub, claw-  
footed and classic. And my  
perfect brass ribbon-twists  
labeled Hot, Cold, and Drain  
will be gleaming soon enough,  
thanks to you.