

Abigail Smith answers a letter from John Adams in which he sends her a list of her imperfections, defects and faults.

There are frogs mating in the pond tonight.
I hear their love songs and I think of you.
All day I have been trying to write
an answer to your letter. Just a few
words to thank you for your kind list; your true
and detailed catalogue of all my
defects and faults. You wait for my reply.

This morning I woke early to sit by
my window. There were crows flying low
over the spring meadows. Dearest friend, I
had such a joyful heart and such a flow
of spirits. I thought both would break and flow
into my pen. But such was not to be.
I could not concentrate or think of me.

Instead I tarried in my chamber all
day. I made up my brass bed with the sun-
flower quilt. I put on my cashmere shawl
with palm-leaf border and hoped someone
would call. No one did, so I folded some
clover and lavender with their sweet scent
into my bureau drawers. Now this day is spent.

The twilight deepens from the nearby
pond, the wild cry of a loon disturbs the night.
Forthright, I take my pen in hand and greet
you. *“My friend, I read your letter with quite
a bit of pleasure. In fact, as one might
read of his perfections, I read of my
imperfections. Please excuse me if I*

*still persist in some of them. I agree—
neglect of singing is a fault but I
have a voice as harsh as the screech of a peacock.
You should not complain again of my
not singing. Next thing, you tell me that I
hang my head like a bulrush—that I do
not sit erect—that this makes me seem too
short for my beauty. This fault will be rectified.
My ambition is in every way
to appear agreeable in your eyes.*

*Still another fault you find which you say
is inexcusable. You express dismay
that I read and think too much. You tell me
to repent—that these things ought not to be.*

*You say I ruin my figure when I
sit with my legs crossed. I will amend
this fault. Since you wish it, I will comply.
For my part, I do not apprehend
any bad effects, but this practice will end.
As for the legs of ladies—” I find I
cannot concentrate. I don’t know why.*

I watch the fireflies drifting in the night.
In the meadow, a wingless female glows,
till a male, falling toward her pale light
finds her in the dark. The fire burns low
and the lamplight flickers. Parrot-toed,
you call me. I do not possess, you say,
a stately strut because of my way

of walking with my toes bent inward. I
know this fault of mine has only one cure
and that is dancing school. But before my
room grows cold, I must continue with your
list of my faults. Then I remember your
other letters. In this still room I hear
your words, “Miss Adorable” and “My Dear.”

All this day I have been trying to write
my reply to your kind letter. My head
has been filled with my faults and defects, like
how I cross my legs, how I hang my head.
Now “Miss Adorable” is going to bed.
Under my sunflower quilt, all night long
I’ll hear the mating frogs sing in the pond.

Margaret C. Kay