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 sunflower 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. Fortright, 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*