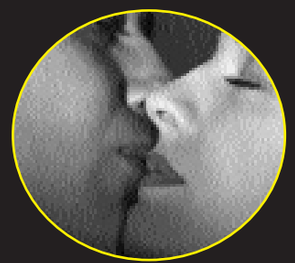

Cultivated Land

BY KENNEDY FRASER

It's been a long time since I lived near hares, or watched them boxing. I used to see it in the fields when I was in Yorkshire during the mating season. But I can't remember whether it is the males that cuff each other at courting time or whether males do the sparring with the females. It must be the males alone. At the time in my life I want to tell you about, I had an old farmhouse on the moors in the north of England, where my family is from. There was scarcely a week when I didn't catch a glimpse of a hare. I was alone at that house a lot, especially in the years after my husband, who was an American, had come to the conclusion that our life in it—hares in the field, owls on the roof, sheep in the heather, evenings of conversation with our neighbors Andrew and Elizabeth Reid—and indeed his life with me in general, had not, after all, been what he wanted.

Once I woke in the middle of the night to the bluish light of a full moon. I couldn't tell you what woke me, unless it was the church clock booming a couple of times, but I was usually oblivious to the sound. More likely I was worrying about how I could survive in this world without my errant, absent

spouse. I still slept in the big old Victorian brass bed where I used to sleep against his back with my arms protectively encircling him and fending off his anxious dreams. (I needed a little protection myself, as it turned out.) Andrew and Elizabeth, who had a house full of antiques and a surplus in their attic, had given us that bed, which was not unlike their own. Our bed had embossed, saucer-shaped ornaments, which I enjoyed polishing, at its head and foot. They gleamed at me now in the moonglow like dim, companionable lamps. I pushed back the covers, stepped down, and crossed to the window. It was early spring but it had snowed while I slept, dusting the lawn and the patchwork of stone-walled fields that rolled up the opposite side of the valley to meet the edge of the moor. Everything was as clear as day and yet mysteriously transformed. I stood at the window in my nightgown staring down at where two hares were circling and scuffling, then rearing on strong thighs to a height of three feet or more and throwing punches with their forefeet at each other's mythic ears.

My life at that time seems as far away from my life now as the world of "The Faerie Queen." Did I dream that moment with the hares, do you think? Or read it in a book? Perhaps it happened to Andrew and Elizabeth and not to me at all. The fields around their house supported more hares than the fields around mine. Their house was older and grander and on an even wilder, more romantic stretch of moor. They would have talked over the moonlight pugilism as they sat up in bed with their morning tea. That's when they talked about everything. After they had talked over the hares from every imaginable angle, perhaps Elizabeth would have gone to her study and begun a poem about them. Or Andrew would have lain on the old chaise longue in his own study and pondered hares in European history; thought of an apposite quotation from Wordsworth or a little something in Italian or ancient Greek; or tried to squeeze the hares (like extras in a movie) into the book he was writing about Harold Acton or about Mme. de Sevigne's scamp of a cousin, the Comte de Bussy-Rabutin. And then, on one of our shared evenings, when the sun was dropping behind the hills and rose-tinting the river down below the mullion

windows, the Reids would tell me the story of the hares. Or if it was my story after all—why, I would probably find a way to spin it out to them, and they would listen.

We were all four of us writers. But the other three were much older and more established than I was. They were always starting a new book soon after finishing the previous one. Andrew was in his fifties, Elizabeth and my husband were in their forties, and I was in my twenties when we all met. They had scores of published books among them as well as unsold manuscripts they had stuffed disconsolately in drawers. All the stories in their lives were grown-up stories and those, too, added up. Elizabeth had had two marriages and five children; my husband (although no one in England knew it) had had four wives; and Andrew, a courageous officer in the war, had escaped from two of his three prison camps. He was entirely at ease in several modern languages as well as Latin and Greek. But most of all, what the other three had more of in their columns of emotional accounting than I did, back then, was deaths: of parents, mentors, friends, siblings, lovers—sometimes by suicide.

In a way you might say the four of us started out in a single one of those two Victorian beds, since my new husband and I, the latest and undoubtedly the most deluded of all his brides, had rented the Reids' own house for our honeymoon. We slept in their beautiful bedroom with its sweeping view of fields and moors. (We fell for the views so completely that we searched for and soon bought a place of our own.) The Reids had come up with the plan of letting their home as a way to finance a trip to Italy, as I recall, and had advertised it in the genteel columns of a magazine called *The Lady*. Andrew loved Italy and had lived for some years in Naples before the war. There had been a woman he loved, there; Elizabeth referred to her as his "mistress," with an ironic smiling expression that I already knew enough to recognize as a look of jealousy, even though the affair had ended decades before and the woman had died.

The idea of raising funds by letting their home and escaping their cares on "the Continent" was characteristic of them. Like many similar schemes I would see them cook up over the years it backfired, actually costing

them money and causing them more agitation than they had had in the first place. As it turned out, they couldn't go to Italy and they had to stay at home. But their romanticism and their sense of honor prevented them from reneging on their agreement with us. They knew we were coming all the way from New York, where we were living, and planned to marry in Yorkshire and spend a month-long honeymoon in their house. So—leaving a nosegay of striped roses and a volume of 17th-century love poems by the bed—they ceded their exquisite and comfortable home to us and made do with the shabby and uncomfortable cottage they had rented for themselves nearby.

Andrew turned up some days after our arrival—after telephoning to be sure it was convenient—to pick up something Elizabeth needed from her study. He was a tall, blue-eyed, pink-faced man, dressed in what I would learn was his unvarying country-gentleman uniform: a tweed jacket so elegantly cut that it could only have come from a custom tailor, with his monocle in the breastpocket and a large paisley-patterned handkerchief tucked up one cuff; heavy corduroy pants; a pale, fine-checked shirt in the wool-mix fabric the English call Viyella; and a Tattersall cap, which, as he ducked under the threshold, he flipped off and laid upside down on a convenient table. The disk with the hatmaker's name and the pale silk lining stared up in a shocking sort of way, like some intimacy normally hidden. The muffled clunk with which Andrew lay down his cap was a sound I was to hear many hundreds of times. It strikes me now as that of a whole world ending: of England doffing its manly hat and putting it in some allotted place, from the age of King John to that of Shakespeare, from days of plumy cavaliers to those of sober Victorians in stovepipe toppers. Passionate and all-too-human as they were, there was always something in the Reids that made them seem like archetypes or artworks. Like the extraordinary objects with which they surrounded themselves—the Oriental carpets, the silver pitcher and the gilded gueridon, the pierglass in which Lord Byron was said to have admired his reflection, the chairs the Duke of Wellington had sat on—Andrew and Elizabeth had a provenance, they had patina.

THOSE FIRST EVENINGS RELEASED THE FLOODGATE OF STORIES THAT FLOWED BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN US FOR YEARS TO COME.

They were very much a gentleman and a lady. In his case, the slightly exaggerated English-gentlemanliness of his manner may have stemmed from having been born and educated into a family of wealth and social prominence not in England at all, but in Australia. Any trace of the antipodes was almost gone from his plummy upper-class English accent. His leap backwards into the Britain his grandfather had abandoned had had a heightening effect on him and his style, as if his whole person were in quotation marks. With his monocle; his silver-backed hairbrushes; his habit of reciting from memory verses from Tennyson or Longfellow; and the stoicism and code of manners that precluded him from complaining or speaking directly (except on rare and therefore startling occasions) about his feelings, he was the perfect English gentleman. A gentleman, actually, of a generation or two earlier than his own. I have a photograph of him in his cap lying on my old blue rug among the remains of a picnic. His posture—leaning on one elbow, with his feet crossed at the ankles—reminds me of all those languid young men on country-house lawns before the blood baths of Flanders.

It was September, normally a time of settled weather on the moors, and grouse-shooting season. In the afternoons, as I lay with my new husband in the purple heather, the faint popping of guns and shouts of beaters were carried on the breeze along with the cry of the curlew. One morning I had woken to a brilliant blue sky and a covering of hoarfrost. I stepped outside the front door, looked up at the hills, and started singing. The house stood a half mile from any neighbors. I was quite alone in that radiant isolated country. My husband was sitting in the darkness of the old interior. Even in those early days he would brood for hours in unreachable solitude, sandbagged by his demons. But my voice felt clear as the air and the hill streams to me, and strangely powerful. The longer and louder I sang, the more joyously I felt my youth and strength, and all the lives of my ancestors standing in their youth and strength in fields with views like this one. Mrs. Lennie, Elizabeth's charwoman (who came with the rental), was turning in at the gate from the moor road just then; she told me in later years that she had never in her life heard anyone sing like that, or seen anyone who looked as happy.

Andrew came back to visit us several times during our stay in his house and acted more like a charming host than a landlord. Sometimes he was accompanied by Elizabeth, a slender, elegant figure with a bright crest of pale hair twisted up in a 1960s hairdo. We invited them to dinner. In their sophisticated but to me unfamiliar kitchen I nervously prepared a brace of grouse for them with all the traditional trimmings. Before and after dinner we sat around their hearth—as we would sit for countless hours in future years—refilling our glasses and talking and talking. However hot the day had been, it was always cool enough for a fire in the evening. When the log basket was empty that night it was Andrew (discreet and apologetic, more like the butler than a guest) who refilled it. Even his firewood looked historic—great fat cross-sections of trees from the Earl of Barningham's sawmill, with many concentric growth rings. And after he had tossed the log on the fire, Andrew pulled his handkerchief from his sleeve like a magician and used it as a rag to clean his hands of bark dust.

Those first evenings released the floodgate of stories that flowed back and forth between us for years to come. Sometimes, as stories will, they had great psychic force behind them. We relived the walks that Andrew used to take around Cambridge in the company of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Elizabeth's extraordinary youthful beauty and its effect on men were often spoken of. Some of their closest male friends had been madly in love with her. One of her admirers had been a novelist and member of the Bloomsbury group who had married a woman half his age whose father had once been the man's lover. It was through that novelist and a cottage he owned in the Dale that the Reids

had discovered that part of the country in the first place. I felt practically related to him. I expect if I read his novels now, I'd find some perfumed trace of Elizabeth. Virginia Woolf stayed in that cottage once; she wrote in her diary of being on top of the very moor that I had serenaded.

Love—intergenerational, extramarital, unorthodox, aristocratic, bohemian, erotic, romantic, tragic; in novels or history books or among the circle of their own acquaintance—was a recurrent topic, it seems to me in retrospect. But I can't remember, oddly enough, reading Andrew's book about the incestuous affair between Lord Byron and his half-sister, Augusta. Perhaps I did read the tale of that catastrophic, febrile passion between two handsome, love-starved people living in another England. Or perhaps I didn't read it, out of shyness about discussing the subject with its author. Perhaps I read it without understanding and simply put it away on a high shelf, where until now I have put away so many things connected to my moorland days with Andrew and Elizabeth. I remember hearing that traditional keepers of the Byronic flame were infuriated by the book and tried to prevent his having further access to the poet's papers. They often came up in our conversations by the fire, those other scholars—an army of closed-minded gargoyles muttering from the semi-darkness behind the Chesterfield sofa.

Andrew was a natural teacher and I had graduated from university not many years before; we shared an interest in French literature. From our earliest dinners, Elizabeth took pains to seat me by her husband's side and next to his "good ear" so that he could especially enjoy our conversation. (He almost never mentioned the war, except to say that its guns had robbed him of half his hearing.) In the earlier days of their marriage, when they had entertained a lot, she must often have arranged to please him this way—serving up to him some attractive and attentive young woman as his dinner partner. Hostesses always performed little bits of this kind of business; skillful ones still do, I suppose. But with the Reids, it was keyed up; it seemed like some longstanding game between the couple, full of reverberation. She earned his benevolence by pleasing him, flattering me by extension: a three-way pact in which I was thrilled to be complicit.

After some years of my own marriage, as I told you, my husband left me. We were in New York at the time; I discovered he was seeing another woman. I adored that man right up to the moment he went out of the door with his suitcase —and probably for some time after, even though I was to discover little by little that his deceptions were long-standing, if not pathological. Yet again he was making his Houdini-like escape from a marriage that would have made a less self-destructive man feel perfectly contented. Across the ocean and behind the thick stone walls of their eyrie on the moors, the Reids went into high gear: talking over the unfolding drama night and day and dispatching at top speed a stream of well-meaning letters. They had been fond of him, and they simply couldn't understand his action. They had described him once with sublimely Jamesian patronization as "the best kind of American." Elizabeth described him protectively as a "neurotic" and suggested that I forgive him.

I suppose, looking back, that she assumed that my husband lived by the old gentlemanly code in the way her husband did and that I would understand that a woman's fate depended on overcoming her jealousy and going along with that code. The honor and integrity of a gentleman may have ruled out boasting, cheating, or betraying a brother officer but it never promised not to lie when it came to the secret doings of men and women. In this way marriage and with it society were kept going. Obviously my husband was as dishonest about his love life as any worldly Edwardian; it was the honor and integrity that were the problem. To be sure, he claimed to have them. After the disgrace of each divorce he rebranded himself as a man of honor; his life could only move forward if he could make others believe in him not just as a decent fellow but a more decent fellow than practically any other. As an entranced young wife I believed his propaganda. I have since learned, of course, that people with real integrity—or humility, come to that—would never have the slightest thought of letting you know it.

It was nice, when I went back alone and unhappy to stay in my house on the moors, that the Reids were at home up the road to pour out my heart

to. But it was the land and the creatures I shared it with that really helped me. All of Andrew and Elizabeth's extensive thinking and talking about my situation was not more useful to me than the chuckle of the grouse, the piping of the wren, the chatter and twitter of the owls above my bedroom window. Although Andrew said "Coraggio!" and "Come on, old gel!" and Elizabeth read passages of Montaigne out loud to encourage me, nothing was as helpful as my old guidebook with its handdrawn maps of walks to take around the dale. I set off with a flask of tea and a walking stick—just in case I came across a bull and needed to distract it. On fine days I hiked for ten or fifteen miles through woods and fields ("keep the intake wall on your left-hand side until all cultivated land is left behind") and up old Roman roads and drovers' tracks that invariably led to some panoramic hilltop. Everywhere sheep of the local breed, with curly horns on either side of their grizzled black faces, would grumpily wheel away as I approached or lift their heads from the turf and stand there amiably staring and chewing.

I always walked alone. Andrew was into his sixties by now, with a constitution undermined by cigarettes and whiskey. In his youth he had hiked all over the continent with a knapsack, learning the cultures of Italy, France, and Germany from the level of their hedgerows and hayricks. But at this point he was not much of a walker. Elizabeth walked alone, as I did, but in a different direction. I pictured her with her bright crest of hair, on some leafy path of dappled sun and shade, waiting for a poem to strike and peering about for a sight of the giant white bellflower. I longed to walk alongside talking and sharing our experience in the way I have since learned possible between two women. As a writer she had a professional interest in giving voice to people's feelings. Yet something almost always stopped us being completely open with each other. It was more comfortable (though certainly not simpler) to keep things at bay by acting our allotted roles as two moons around the sun of Andrew. She read a book called "Silences," full of feminist insights about women and writing and passed it on to me—but almost wordlessly, as if discussing it would be far too risky. Like Andrew, she had in her manner

something of another, earlier England. What she knew was what a highly intelligent woman could learn at home. That was the world in which, mothlike, she stretched and bashed her wings as a literary artist. She had been educated by governesses in her father's house and he had ruled out the idea of her attending university. Instead, she had been one of the last generations of debutantes to be presented at court and was married immediately after. There had been a house with servants and the children. But she felt herself a poet; there was a first volume of her poems when she was barely out of her teens. Then the enormous starting-over with Andrew, who had seen so many things in life; when it came to writing prose at least she must have been his pupil. His thoughts unfurled in book after book with obedient and manly ceremoniousness. She worried when her style went haywire, when her own fiercely original intuitions resisted her attempts at order. I always felt sad when she bemoaned her "untrained mind" and Andrew did not contradict her. The course of her life had been determined by her beauty and by what Andrew called her vulnerability. It was this combination, he once said, that made many men fall in love with her. She had all her life been subject to nervous illnesses; there were hints that Andrew had more than once brought her back to life after an attempt at suicide.

I was more likely to chat about recipes or gardening with Andrew than with Elizabeth. She and I fumbled for a common feminine language but never consistently found it. If there were words for what we knew about our lives, they seemed to make us nervous. Her attempts at imparting wisdom were fitful and came with a ferocity that scared me. "Forty is the watershed, for a woman," she told me, with a rueful crooked grin. "One swans along while looking young, my dear, but after that it's all downhill." On one ill-fated day of winter sunshine Elizabeth and I had lunch alone together. We fortified ourselves against our guilt at excluding Andrew and against the possibility of intimacy by drinking several bottles of Pouilly-Fuisse. For a long time afterward I tried to forget that that lunch had ever happened: the sound of great white rugs of snow oozing down the roof above us and landing with a sloppy

thud outside the window; our angry tears and the hairpins from our chignons flying about in the shafts of sunshine; and her screech of pain: “For years you’ve been seducing my husband!”

We were three lonely people, isolated in our houses on the moors as if on two rocky islands. Each year the Reids had less contact with their past—her children, the old friends in London—and became more dependent on each other. “Each blames the other for his sufferings,” she once wrote in an essay about Vronsky and Anna Karenina in exile. Around us, each year the farmers’ lambs would be born, jump about a fresh green world with their umbilical cords still dangling under them, then grow and get on the track either to motherhood or to the slaughterhouse. The hares would purposefully put on weight in preparation for winter.

In one of those years when I was waiting for my divorce to be finalized and for my increasingly baffling life to become normal, Andrew told me he was in love with me. Like me, Elizabeth had put our angry luncheon out of mind. Indeed she had taken to “posting” him up to my house like a parcel while she got on with her writing or went out walking. It was a joke between us, the posting up for tea or drinks and for what she gaily called our flirting. I expect it was he who really stage-managed this posting and flirting, who “wangled” it. Now he wiped his fingers after eating a piece of Victoria sponge cake in my garden and told me that at first when my marriage broke up, he had been dismayed for selfish reasons: that if I were an unmarried woman living alone he thought he would no longer be able to visit me. This seemed a little archaic to me—related in some dusty way to the ways of the Edwardian country house where the hostess tactfully arranged for lovers who were married to other people to be housed in adjacent bedrooms.

I suppose he kissed me that day, when he was alone with me beside my clematis: pressing his face to mine in an awkward way and hugging me so hard I thought my ribs were broken. Behind this first embrace and subsequent ones (which occured most often, it seems to me, at their house), I felt there was something schoolboyish and inconsolable. Once when we had all been

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drinking the whiskey called “The Famous Grouse,” she said something cruel to him, and he blanched and rushed into the kitchen, where I came across him drinking from the upended bottle. I felt appreciated and even loved by him but I never felt kissed, exactly. It was as if kissing me were like that hasty top-up of whiskey: a means of shutting off a world of uncontrollable emotion, rather than a venture into it.

When I first knew the Reids, I would sit on their window seat looking out at the fields and half-listen to the pair conversing: two voices calling and responding with a harmony as exquisite and rare as their records of castrati singing Neapolitan love-songs. But as the years went on the cruel remarks became more frequent between them and sometimes husband and wife would each be so desperate for my attention that they would cut each other off in mid-sentence or raise their voices and talk right over each other like competing radios. All his life Andrew had the gift of taking delight in small pleasures: his pelargoniums in bloom; the sight of an historic house through the railings of its misty park; a starched white napkin or a nice plum crumble to round off a dinner. He was a great one for the vaudevillian wink, the well-timed wisecrack. It was a bad sign when Elizabeth, who had benefited from this knack of his for enjoyment—whose life may even have been saved by it—came to resent it. It was as if there was only enough happiness, enough of life itself, for one of them. They were in a mortal struggle.

The local doctor, a brilliant Scot of erratic habits who was subsequently struck off the medical register on account of his drug addiction, hopefully prescribed a variety of pills to Elizabeth, the middle-aged woman poet. One of her mystifying and proliferating symptoms made it difficult and painful for her to see, especially in the evening. While Andrew told stories from his day’s reading—the libertine adventures of Avignon popes or of some Borghese—she would sit beside the Victorian lamp despondently shielding her eyes with long, bony, ink-stained fingers. And they were worried about money.

They had been rich (“we used to be rather well-off,” Andrew said, with characteristic understatement) and now they were not rich. Their books sold rather little and the way things were going their wealthy old relations looked set to outlive them. Their fine house with its fine furnishings should have been at the center of a large estate whose fields and woods would support the refinement of its master and mistress. But apart from the graveled drive and a tiny patch or earth for Andrew’s rosa rugosa, the land right up to the walls of their house belonged to the neighboring farmer. And the style and subjects of the Reids’ writing sometimes struck their publishers as out of date—as isolated from modern literary fashion as their house was in the landscape.

I worried about money, too, but in a way that seemed in comparison rather pedestrian. Their stratagems for surmounting financial difficulties had glamour and a magnificently dotty 18th-century air about them—like some brandy-fueled flight by barouche from faro-debts and bailiffs. My friends drank clarets of lesser vintage and discontinued the laundry service for the napkins. They let their house again and moved into mine at a period when I was in America. They borrowed more money for a trip abroad and waited ever more impatiently for their inheritances. For some reason—it had to do with economies and with Elizabeth being “overwrought”—Andrew was doing more and more of the cooking. Now when he crushed me to his chest I could smell, in the tweed of his increasingly out-at-elbow jacket, not only wood and cigarette smoke but also a lingering fragrance of veal Marengo. And kiss me he did—behind their kitchen door or even in the drawing room while she sat apparently self-absorbed and shielding her eyes with her fingers. I would struggle to break free. Sometimes this love of his seemed deadly serious—one day at my house he got so flustered that he fled in a rush and left his cap behind him. But sometimes it was as if I were a romantic story in one of his books or (worse yet, I felt) a book that they were reading out loud to each other. He would show me to my car at the end of an evening while she stood

in the doorway with the light from the room lighting her hair in a halo. She would stand there as we crunched over the gravel in the cool air and go on watching while he gave me one of his passionate-schoolboy kisses. I went back alone to my house with its ticking clock and the owl keeping up its chatter in the darkness. I would puzzle over the plot of our little triangle; but I kept losing my place and having to riffle back to see if I had missed something on earlier pages.

The neighbor up the road from me kept an elderly goat called Doris—a long-bearded, battle-scarred crone whose nanny-goat watershed was long since behind her. She had nurtured several generations of kids in spite of having somehow lost one of the two udders she was born with. She was a free spirit, an incorrigible escaper of tethers and leaper of fences; I swear she could find her way to the most tender of my garden plants on a pitch-black night with her legs tied. One day, whether sanctioned or not, posted or unposted by Elizabeth, Andrew turned up at my door in a tremendous dither. He took off his hat and mopped his head; he was flushed and sweating. For the first time I saw that he was an elderly man and not by any means a strong one. The addicted Scot had informed him that he had a heart condition.

"A goat!" he said breathlessly. "There's a goat stuck in a tree at the bottom of your lane. We must telephone the fire brigade for help, or we must shoot it."

Doris looked surprisingly large, lying twistedly on her side with one foot caught fast in the V-shape between the branch and trunk of an ash tree. Who knows how long she had struggled. Exhaustion and perhaps the ignominy of lying there with her one tit revealed were enough to make her think of giving up and dying. Her domed black eye was already filming over and flies were buzzing round it. Farmers were nowhere to be found that afternoon and the firemen (the same farmers, actually) were unavailable to rescue Doris on what the woman at the switchboard called a "humanitarian mission." Andrew and I leaned over the goat; the eye rolled up at us despairingly. I tried to push the branch. I pulled at the foot, which I felt sure must be broken. I grasped it tighter. I can feel it now—the bone and tendon covered with coarse brown hair, the cleft-horn hoof with grime and dung ingrained in cracks in the yellow. I had a sense of helplessness and horror. Andrew wasn't strong enough to help me. But then we got a big rock off the wall, and wedged it into the ash tree, and hit it with another rock, and the trap sprung wide enough to free the creature. It lay there stunned for a while, then rocked itself to its feet and wandered limping down the lane, shamefacedly bleating.

We had something—a real story—with which to entertain Elizabeth later. There were no lies we needed to invent. There was only this authentic and Tolstoyan moment, the material for a poem, perhaps. It pleased her immensely. She wanted every detail. And when we had told the absorbing story once she insisted on a second reenactment. She never put her hand across her eyes at all, that evening. She inhaled the tale with a vigor that surprised me.

If you look in her books today I expect you'll find it somewhere.