Tales from the Hills above Lough Allen

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I said, "I suppose it's quiet now. There's no work in the quarry."

"Yes," he said, "it's very quiet now."

Not a man to give away much I thought.

"Do you be up our way now," I asked.

"I haven't been up your way since we did the Windmills."

"Oh yes," I said, "that must have been a busy time, bringing all that stone up there."

"That was a powerful time," he said. "There was a quare lock of stone went into those foundations."

And then I asked him what he thought of the fracking.

"Well," he said, after a moment, "people say that it could interfere with the ground water. Sure that would ruin the lakes, wouldn't it?"

"That's true," I agreed.

"And they say a lot of waste water would be lying around in pits; sure someone could fall into that and drown."

"They could," I agreed.

"And sure I heard someone say it will ruin the tourist industry," he said, looking around him at the barren fields, the brown rushes and the forestry in the distance.

"But," I added, "I suppose the fracking would liven up things in the quarry."

His eyes lit up. He seemed relieved that we were both on the same side and he no longer had to present answers like a schoolchild and hope they were correct.

"It would liven up the quarry surely," he agreed. "Sure it would be the makings of us," he said. "There would be dozens of lorries on the go, day and night. Day and night."

And we both fell silent and stared at our pints of Guinness.

"Do you have any dung?" I wondered.

"Any amount of it," he said. "Do you want some?"

I needed the dung for the roses, so he came up the following day, with a trailer of fresh black stuff and forked it into a pile in the garden, near the shed.

There's a particular aroma from dung, and a stringy texture to it, and a weightiness on the fork, and it has a strong smell. But yet I like dung.

Dung is rich with hope. Year after year I've seen it piled on Leitrim's thin fields as if it could change the scrawny hills into lush meadows. Dung for roses and dung for the carrots and spuds, and dung for the hungry fields and the stoney soil.

If you have dung you can't go wrong. There's even a proverb that associates dung with the idea of home. "Make your fortune far away, but marry on the dunghill."

Not that everyone in the world listens to that peasant advice nowadays. My friend Little Lotus is just returned from China, and she came to visit on Sunday all the way from Mullingar with her Irish boyfriend, and we ate a curry of mung beans and we all sat at the fire and looked out at the saplings bending in the rain and at the heap of dung that had been delivered the previous day.

Little Lotus brought me a flute from China as a gift, and I played a jig which to her amazement sounded utterly Chinese.

She's not great at English, and the conversation never strays into subtle waters when she's in the room, but she has a wide vocabulary of facial signals which she uses with her boyfriend.

When the rain cleared we all went walking up the hill. A huge lump of hay had been dumped on the side of the road beside a gate and she wanted to know what it was. I explained that it was fodder.

The fodder left out for cattle is yellowish brown at this time of year. I see it regularly hefted against the steel gate where black calves strain their necks and their eyeballs bulge as they get their morning dose.

I watched Little Lotus as as she watched Leitrim, and I could see her evaluating it.
"Do you live in the country?" I wondered.
"No," she said, I live in city."

I imagined her in a face mask on a bicycle in a milling crowd, or living in some small apartment where the hot water is rationed and where her grandparents gather wood on the streets for the stove.

As we returned, Little Lotus noticed the black pile beside the shed.
"Ah," she said, "more fodder?"
"No," I said, "that's dung."
"Dung?" She was perplexed. So she went over and sniffed it, and burst out laughing.
"Ahhh yes, dung!" she exclaimed with delight. "Dung! Yes! I know dung!"

Michael Harding is the author of numerous plays for the Abbey Theatre, 3 novels and 4 volumes of memoirs. His latest book is 'On Tuesdays I'm a Buddhist'. In his ongoing Irish Times Column he creates a chronicle of ordinary life in rural Ireland, focusing frequently on Leitrim.

Above is an excerpt from that chronicle, published with kind permission of the Irish Times.