

Houlihan's Wake

and other fragments of Mexico

Bryan Murphy

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Houlihan's Wake](#)

[Phoenix Mexico](#)

[Murals](#)

[Leaking Grail](#)

[Missionary](#)

[Mazunte Jazz Hurts](#)

[Dolores](#)

[Dog Day Sundown](#)

[Mushrooms](#)

[Visions](#)

[White Whale Island](#)

[A Whole Year Without Drowning](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the author](#)

[Other e-books by Bryan Murphy](#)

[Connect with Bryan Murphy on-line](#)

[Linehan Saves extract \(opening\)](#)

Introduction

In Houlihan's Wake, a young Irishman goes to Playa Chisme, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, determined to die, and determined to do so in a beautiful setting. But can Houlihan's death-wish do its worst in such a life-affirming place, where the lifeguards are adamant that nobody shall turn their massive party to celebrate a whole year without anyone drowning in Playa Chisme's lethal rip-tides into someone else's pitiful wake?

Houlihan's Wake is accompanied by further stories and poems set in "Playa Chisme" and elsewhere in the country to provide a rich array of Fragments of Mexico.

Houlihan's Wake

Houlihan wakes.

When the taxi goes over the second speed bump, it jolts him into full consciousness. "Playa Chisme," the driver announces as he pulls up. There is no sign of beach or sea, only a street of assorted shop-fronts swimming in the heat. Houlihan clambers out of the taxi into it. He revels in his disorientation for a moment, then he pulls his light backpack out of the taxi, pays the driver and thanks him. The driver gets out, ducks into the nearest roadside shop, emerges with cigarettes and a cold Sol, then sits in his car and gulps the beer as he watches Houlihan stagger along the short street.

Houlihan cannot see Ivaylo. Ivaylo was not at the airport, and he is not here to meet Houlihan, either. Although the sea is not visible, Houlihan can hear the surf dumping itself on the beach and then slithering back with full force. Houlihan looks out for their back-up meeting place, a restaurant known as "Poison". At the end of the street, he finds a green and white eating place called "Le Poisson". He thinks that must be it, walks in through a wrought iron doorway, arranges his pack and himself at a plastic table, and orders his second beer of the morning. On the table is a flyer, kept in place by an ashtray. The ink smudges as Houlihan picks it up. Its message in Spanish, illustrated with line drawings, is summarised in English: "Big Lifeguards Party! One Year Without Deaths! Posada Curandero Dusk Till Dawn". Houlihan suspects the organisers may be counting chickens that have yet to hatch.

A commotion outside distracts him from his third beer of the morning. Three young men, wearing rumpled T-shirts and dirty cotton trousers emerge, barefoot, from a path beside "Le Poisson" and run full tilt down the main street in the direction from which Houlihan has come. They are followed by four young men in heavy boots and uniforms. These men carry truncheons. The distance between the two groups widens. Behind them all trails Ivaylo, his face soaked in sweat, his breathing short and hard. As he passes "Le Poisson", he notices Houlihan, swerves into the restaurant, throws his bulk into the chair next to Houlihan, picks up his bottle of beer and swigs down what is left inside it. Ivaylo looks at his friend.

"You should eat something with that," he says.

"I was thinking about it," Houlihan answers, "if this is Poison."

“Don’t worry,” says Ivaylo, “they only feed it to their neighbours’ cats, not to their own customers. As far as I know.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Houlihan replies, “just the opposite. Tell me what is going on here.”

Ivaylo explains that the State of Acaxao has imposed a four-fold increase in licence fees on beach traders all along the coast. This has sparked a series of riots, which have now reached Playa Chisme. Heavy-duty police have been sent in to quell them.

“We had better keep out of the way,” he adds. “Those boys can get violent.”

That sounds good to Houlihan. He tells Ivaylo he wants to see for himself what is happening on the beach, and leaves his friend sitting at the table trying to squeeze a last drop out of the beer bottle. He has already paid.

Houlihan hurries along the path Ivaylo had appeared from. Guided by a cacophony of surf and raised voices, he takes the first turning, which leads him past a series of palm-thatched huts flanking inner courtyards, set back a little way from the ocean.

The fine sand of the beach is littered with overturned restaurant furniture. Shoes and sandals lie scattered among it. Knots of uniformed men are chasing, or laying into, civilians, some of whom wield sticks. One person sits clutching his head with a bloody hand; another lies twitching.

Houlihan sees a trio of police surround a bikini-clad woman and knock her to the ground with no fuss. This is his chance. He runs at the trio, attempting to insult them in his broken Spanish. He pushes his way into the circle, his voice raucous, and stands over the woman, arms out, waiting for the police clubs to rain down on him. It does not happen. The police move off to torment someone else. Houlihan wants to run after them, to offer them another chance to smash his head.

“Hey!”

The woman’s cry stops Houlihan. He looks back at her.

“Get me away from here. Please!”

Houlihan moves to the woman and, with care, lifts her to her feet. He likes the look of her, despite her distressed state. He supports her as the two of them stumble together along the sand, away from the aftermath of the riot. She has him lead her around the curve of the bay to the eastern end of Playa Chisme, to the guest house where she is staying: Posada Tempesta. Houlihan

notices that it is next door but one to Palapas Paulina, where Ivaylo is supposed to have booked him a beach hut.

The woman has a bruised shoulder, but nothing worse that is visible.

“You know,” she says to Houlihan, “I think you saved my life. I’m really grateful to you.”

Houlihan likes her voice, though he cannot place the accent to anywhere more precise than North America.

“If I can do anything, anything at all, to thank you, I will. You just have to ask.”

She leans into him. Bad associations flood into Houlihan’s brain: promises, betrayals. He holds the woman at arm’s length. He looks into her eyes for several seconds.

“Just remember that I like white lilies,” Houlihan tells her, then turns on his heel and leaves.

Ivaylo *has* booked him into Palapas Paulina. The establishment is run down, but it has a bar that is open. Houlihan buys a couple of Boemias from it and takes the bottles into his hut. He pours the cold beer down his throat, then arranges himself in the hammock. He is soon asleep.

The dream recurs. Houlihan is living abroad. He wants to return to Ireland but he cannot, because he has done something terrible there. He does not know what it is, but he knows that if he goes home, he will have to pay for whatever it was with the loss of his freedom.

Ivaylo wakes Houlihan when he barges into his hut, bangs down the backpack which Houlihan had left at Le Poisson, and stomps out, slamming the door as best he can. After that, Houlihan sleeps only fitfully.

He thinks about home. Can he go home? No. Yes! He knows what he has done. His profession was creative accounting. He was caught overdoing it, but got hush money from the company instead of prosecution, as well as the sack. So he has already paid for what he did wrong. Now he is jobless and broke. Yet there is something more, something deeper and darker that torments him. Houlihan cannot bring it into his conscious mind, but he feels sure his guilt is absolute.

The heat at the middle of afternoon oppresses Houlihan when he comes out of his hut onto the beach. He trudges down to the water’s edge and into the shallows. The cold refreshes him. The waves break far before they reach him, but he feels the strength of their undertow as it sucks at his

legs. Houlihan looks past the white surf at the dark blue Pacific as it stretches to meet the light blue sky. He thinks that now is not the time to turn it all off.

Houlihan leaves the water and traipses back to Palapas Paulina. He spends the remainder of the afternoon there, drinking Boemia, passing the time of day with the few people who happen by, and watching the sun slip toward White Rock Island at the west end of the bay. At dusk, music reverberates eastward along the strand.

Houlihan showers and puts on clean clothes. He sets out to find Ivaylo, thinking that he will take his friend to the best Bulgarian-Mexican restaurant in the village, which he has heard is full of them. The first person he encounters looks Bulgarian, so Houlihan stops her and asks if she knows Ivaylo. She does, and she tells Houlihan where he is likely to find him. As Houlihan follows the dark road, his thoughts switch from Ivaylo, not such a false friend after all, to the woman who thought he had saved her, full of northern promise. He does not see the face until it is right in front of him. It is a pale face; it has freckles. It speaks to Houlihan with an Irish cadence: “Here now, aren’t you the one who ... ? How on earth did you get away? What are you doing here? Do you imagine you can just ... ?”

Houlihan feels panic rise inside him, soak into his brain and sweep back down throughout his body. He breaks into a run. He sees a line of dark human shapes at the end of the road. As he nears them, he understands that it is a phalanx of riot police. They are moving towards him, banging their clubs on their shields and chanting. Houlihan realises his guilt has been exposed and they are coming for him, to carry out the sentence. But now he does not wish to die at the hands of policemen. He veers off the road and sprints down paths between dark houses and back onto the beach. He kicks off his sandals and plunges his body into the sea. His clothes do not hold him back.

Houlihan flails at the water and succeeds in propelling himself beyond the breakers to where cross-currents and rip tides can welcome him with their induction into a short journey of no return.

Two people on the beach have seen him: a Mexican veterinarian and his Swiss wife, who are out walking their dogs in the cool evening. They surge into the water – they have done this before, when alone – but this time the dogs leap in after them, determined not to be excluded from the game, and the two people turn back, unwilling to make a sacrifice of their animals.

Houlihan is cold in the Pacific water. His body chokes and freezes, but his mind is lucid. As the sea drags him under for the last time, no biopic of his brief life flashes before his inner eye. He focuses his senses only on the touch of faithless Carmen, the taste of unforgiving Claire.

A description of the dubious proclivities of Houlihan's closest family flows from the mouth of the lifeguard. He kicks Houlihan hard in the chest he has spent so much effort getting to work once again.

“You try to ruin our party! No way. Tonight we celebrate: one year, no drowning. You just stay away – stay away from the water, and stay away from our party!”

He kicks Houlihan on the side of the head and stomps off west.

Houlihan lies still. He hurts everywhere. He shivers. Minutes later, he sits up. He sees blurry lights at the far end of the bay. The sound of music coming from that direction is louder than the sound of the surf in his ears. He feels gratitude. He remembers the lifeguard's words.

Houlihan begins to feel less cold. He looks at the lights, which gradually clear, and again thinks of what the lifeguard said to him. He begins to laugh. Soon his laughter is beyond his control. This is one party he is not going to miss, not for the life of him.

[end]

Phoenix, Mexico

Ghostlike invaders razed Tenochtitlán
but not the southern cities:
Teotihuacán, Monte Alban, Chichén Itzá,
each fell under the weight
of its own firmament as the Gods,
the Kings, the warriors tumesced on blood
drawn from children, women, men,
leeches the blood-soaked, rain-starved land
beyond all hope of balance.

The Gods re-trenched, Kings downsized,
cities and temples accrued dust.
No longer were warriors' greatest massacres
celebrated in stone; village life and death
became again the single option.

That sacrificial stone,
interred in the pyramid's heart,
dried in a sudden thirst that stretched
through centuries of dark, damp air.
In the heat outside, new Kings,
new Gods, new horrors raged.

There were survivors; their day draws near.
The stones they heaved or cut
elicit reverence from strangers.
The endurance of such people:
Mixtec, Zapotec, Locandon, Maya,
globalises into common knowledge.

Their demands for dignity reverberate
in Turin, Tokyo, Cape Town,
gather momentum on the longest continent,
where kings and gods are learning, slowly,
to look, listen, think and share.

Murals

José Clemente Orozco sucks out my brain,
those remnant cells not addled
by ten hours' flight sou' west from winter,
splatters them over the orphanage ceiling,
fills their essence with colour and meaning.

My body lies flat on its back directly below,
dislocated by jet-lag and head-cold,
transfixed by the nightmare knowledge
on the multi-hued human-stained walls:

credulity, cruelty, refusal to learn;
readiness to follow, proclivity to stab;
hatred, arrogance, tragedy;
religion, exclusion, despair;
surrender to any higher power
that grants the right to kill.

Blood sweats from the heavy wooden cross
King Philip hugs to his groin,
anointing with red tears
a troop of guided tourists
who notice only each other.

I rise like an unburied Lazarus,
stagger into a quiet cloister courtyard,
marvel at an unperturbed sky,
reach for the light on your skin.

Leaking Grail

Early jacaranda colours the scented air,
wrought-iron benches massage our jet-lag
in a round village square centred
on a bunting-bedecked bandstand.

Lakewards, a man above a shop strikes
hammer blows to the façade below his feet;
its bright brick and stucco crumble. Roadwards,
work-gangs sweat to inch the grey innards
of a foetus hotel higher. Southwards,
the silver water that lures us ageing gringos
recedes to ease the thirst of Megalopolis,
while invasive hyacinth stakes out more metres
for its final resting place.

Missionary

I.

Elke sets out her limbs
over Playa Chisme's sand;
fitters and joiners intuit the call
to her expert assembly line.

Dark shoulders stoop to conquer;
firm hands do as they're told;
lifeguards inspect her for danger, close-up:
beached Venus, pale as an overturned turtle.

Chismera housewives spit full and loud
at husbands' empty shadows;
girlfriends hone nails to talons;
Elke flirts, blameless as afterbirth.

II.

Wheelchairs resound on red-earth paths,
overlaying laughter from within;
paradise's emissary, surf-soaked mist,
welcomes them with joy.

Age has yet to set much mark
on pushing volunteers from ends of earth,
nor on their charges, who imbibe the universe
in a different light, if they see at all.

From the cool crisp edge of another world,
Elke has come to bestow her skills,
flex for them her full firm figure
in servitude, as therapy.

III.

The wheel-chaired children are loud at play;
nearby Elke flips a page.
The Maya men will soon be back
to test her concentration.

The nightclub toilet stinks. Lupita
swings it open, meets Elke's gaze,
sees Lucy's dark locks locked tight
between light-tanned thighs.

A pacific blue moon dazzles
Playa Chisme's early risers, not Elke:
she's gone on to the next hidden port;
the job was not for her.

Mazunte Jazz Hurts

The guitar awakens to Hamish's tuning touch.
Hamish the outsider: youngster, beanpole, foreigner.
Mazunte's air is heavy with coastal flowers and Dolores.
He knows she is there.

#1

Hamish disburses his allotted notes,
thrills to the skill of the tenor sax beside him,
follows his bandleader's instructions to stick to the score.

#2

Hamish glimpses Dolores. Has she changed?
Hair bleached to a lighter charcoal,
self-composed, at ease in town clothes,
she slips beyond his vision.

#3.

Hamish's notes slide into urgency,
playing for Dolores,
calling her to his orbit.

#4

Hamish has become technique,
Dolores forgotten.
Now the drummer plays off him,
indulging in riffs unheard.
Band members swap expectant looks,
Hamish oblivious.

#5,6,7.

The players urge each other on
with twists of improvisation.
Tenor sax dives deeper into the music and leads it
to places new. Hamish follows him,
and then is following no-one,
rearranging the tropes of the genre to outline new possibilities and then
explore them: no longer technique
but raw feeling.

Their music stops rather than ends. Applause takes its place.
The musicians stare
at each other,
exhausted,
elated,
astonished.

Hamish threads his way to Dolores. She is not alone.
He takes her aside, implores her.
She snaps.
Sorry. Just not my type.
The world stops turning.

His blood has frozen in his veins.
His liver has turned to lead.
His head hurts.

The bandleader approaches Hamish
like a business-touting Charon.
Hell to pay for disobedience.

We have to talk.
Hell's gondolier beams.
Let's get us some beer,
fix you some solo time
for our Oaxaca gig.
Hamish is back, in a world that turns
towards light.

Dolores

He knows she is there.

The air is heavy with the aroma of coastal flowers and the Pacific humidity he associates with Dolores. The guitar awakes to Hamish's touch as he tunes it. The audience looks bigger than those he is used to.

Hamish felt very lucky when the leader told the band they would be playing the Jazz Festival at Zuntema, just along the coast from Playa Chisme, where he had met Dolores. He was sure she would come, for the rare treat of live jazz, if not for him. She had captivated Hamish by her easy sociability, by her height, which matched his, by her being at home in her own skin even amongst the lost souls of Playa Chisme.

Hamish, though, failed to prise Dolores away from the surfer. Four long months have passed since then: plenty of time for Dolores to have grown out of him, or tired of him.

The act before the Oaxaca Jazz Ensemble is playing. Its music barely creeps into Hamish's awareness. He thinks of the music the Ensemble is to play, and suffuses it into his mind with the essence and the allure of Dolores.

Now it is they who are playing. Hamish produces his allotted notes. He would love to follow the tenor sax beside him into the heights and beyond them, but his instructions are to stick to the score and not try to show off his technical skills. Those skills had brought him invitations first to jam with the Ensemble and then to join them, an honour for a musician barely out of his teens that recognised his Oaxaqueno status despite frozen-north birth and features. Hamish is happy to do what they tell him.

At the end of their second number, he catches sight of Dolores. Has she changed? Her hair has bleached to a lighter brown. She is as self-composed as ever, at ease in town clothes. She slips out of his vision amongst the families replenishing plates and glasses.

Into their third number; his playing takes on an urgency. He is playing for Dolores, of course, calling to her, urging her into his orbit. By the fourth number, he is not showcasing his technique, he is his technique. Dolores is forgotten. The drummer starts to play off him, echoing Hamish's chords in new riffs. Expectant looks are exchanged amongst the band, though Hamish is oblivious to them. They urge each other on with flickers of improvisation. The tenor sax dives deeper into the music and leads it in a new direction.

Hamish follows him and then is following no-one, rearranging the tropes of the genre to outline new possibilities and then explore them. This is no longer technique but raw feeling.

The music stops rather than ends. Applause takes its place. The band stare at each other, exhausted, elated, astonished.

Hamish is back in his own head. He remembers Dolores. Now is the time to find her. He sets his instrument down at the edge of the stage and takes the steps that lead off it. High-fives and back-slaps mark his passage through the crowd. He has never experienced a reception like it. But where is Dolores?

The next band is tuning up when he spots her. She is not alone. Hamish recognises four of the group from the Playa Chisme summer. The surfer is not amongst them. Tomas waves him over. Greetings are effusive, congratulations sincere. But it is an age before he can get Dolores to one side, out of earshot of the others. He asks her to come to Playa Chisme with him, alone, now. She can't. He insists. She won't. He cannot believe her reluctance. He entreats her.

“Look, Hamish, you're a nice guy but you're just not my type.”

Hamish's world stops turning. His blood has frozen in his veins. His liver has turned to lead. His head hurts.

The figure of Julio comes into Hamish's peripheral vision. Now he is going to get hell for his disobedience. Julio nods at Dolores.

“Hamish,” he says, “we have to talk”.

But the band leader is beaming.

“Let's get some beer and fix you some solo time for the gig in Puerto Desaparecido.”

Hamish is back in a turning world. He is starting to feel good.

[end]

Dog Day Sundown

Far from winter and work, the sun still sets
on a perfect, dog-free bay in southern Mexico.

Filaments of eye-candy cloud
squeeze the horizon into layers,

then part the curtain on the evening's stars:
Mars and Venus, crescent waxing moon.

A watcher on the beach sifts sand,
peers at what thoughtless fingers raise:

a leather collar, cut sharp, stained dark,
a name engraved - "Tigre, Posada Las Americas".

Inside the town, once clouds reclaim the night,
the mayor sleeps deep and sound.

She's paved the road outside her house, raised taxes,
"cleansed" the beach. A second term may come.

Mushrooms

The Bulgarian Army is on the brink of making its first killing in Mexico, and I am the designated victim.

Goran has me pinned against the outside wall of the hut. I feel his military knife pressing on my neck. Both of us are shaking. His pungent odour is exacerbated by the heat of the morning and by his anger. He is not one of our country's new, deodorant-using generation.

“You mafia-ridden lot,” he yells, “think you can buy anyone: referees, players, journalists ... It’s all money with you, Ivaylo Ivanov and your dirty Levski team! Filthy money! No honour, no tradition!”

Even in my precarious position, there is no way I am going to let that pass.

“What?! Your team belongs to the army that never won a war! What kind of tradition is that? Where’s the honour in breaking your opponents’ legs, eh?”

Goran’s knife presses harder against my neck, so I shut up. Goran has not sharpened the knife recently.

The silence is filled by Beethoven played at full volume on the sound system.

A door slams.

“What on earth are you doing, killing each other before breakfast? How can I afford to pay a cook to make the best *chilaquiles* on Playa Chisme if you’re dead before you can buy them?”

The calm voice comes out of a short, slim woman who has emerged from the kitchen hut on to the sand. The aroma of sun lotion and grilling peppers comes with her. Milena shakes her blonde curls and fixes her green eyes on us.

“Sit down and eat something before I lose my temper. And stop arguing about bleeding football!”

She pushes past us to the tiny computer that controls the sound system, and tries without success to turn the music up.

Goran’s eyes bulge like a puffer fish out of water. Nevertheless, he finally moves the knife away from my neck, turns away from me. Then he

turns back, grabs the hem of my Levski Sofia replica shirt and slashes a tear into it.

I stare at him with even more hatred than usual. He smirks as he saunters to a table under an awning over the sand, and sits down with two other breakfast regulars, Stanko and Yulia. He looks at the skinny man of indeterminate age.

“Don’t you start,” he warns.

Yulia laughs. She gestures enquiringly toward Milena.

“Botev Plovdiv,” says Goran, “Second Division”.

The two of them laugh again. After a few seconds, Stanko joins in.

Milena comes back from serving customers on the beach to find me standing transfixed outside the kitchen door, glaring at Goran’s thick back.

“Will you have some coffee, then?”

I don't answer.

“Take the weight off your feet, and I’ll fix you some breakfast.”

She leads me to the main table, where the other Bulgarians are sitting. I fall into a chair, reach for Stanko’s packet of cigarettes, take one, settle it in my mouth and look around for matches.

Goran proffers his lighter. I snatch it and light my cigarette.

We sit and watch the day grow hotter.

Brahms is drowning the noise of the surf beating on the beach when Milena brings a plate of tacos to our table.

“What’s inside these?” Goran asks.

“Minced beef in half of them,” Milena answers, “potato in the others.”

“Any mushrooms?” Yulia asks, opening the one on the top of the pile.

“No,” says Milena, “not the season.”

“It’s the season at home,” Goran says.

Stanko swats Yulia’s probing fingers away from the pile of tacos, then from his thigh, sets out the four plates Milena has brought, and divides the food among them.

“I know the best place for mushrooms,” says Yulia, licking a finger and gazing at Stanko. “A certain wood in a field on the slopes of Mt. Vitosha.”

I set her straight.

“Vitosha’s rubbish for mushrooms.”

Then I turn my attention to Stanko. “Why have you given Yulia the extra taco? I’m the one with the right to be hungry.”

Back to setting Yulia straight: “Everyone knows you’ve got to get well away from the city to find decent mushrooms.”

Stanko ignores my comment about the tacos.

“When my brother was mayor of Plovdiv,” he says, looking disinterestedly at Yulia’s weighty breasts, “the best mushrooms were in the hills near there. These days the ones on Vitosha are better.”

We have all heard about Stanko’s brother before.

“Since when do you know anything about mushrooms?” Goran bellows at him. “Before you came to Mexico, you’d never been outside a city!”

Goran turns his hard eyes on Yulia, then grins.

“Give Ivaylo the extra taco, Yulia. It’ll save you putting on any more weight. And listen to what he has to say about mushrooms. The fool doesn’t know much about anything worthwhile, but he knows a lot about mushrooms.”

That is my cue. I tell them in detail how to recognise the poisonous ones, and what the poison each one contains will do to the human body. They should know by now; I’ve told them often enough.

The aroma of coffee is strong. Yulia gets up and waddles into the hut to see what has happened to it.

I tell them about the recipes my mother and my mother’s mother have made over the years with the mushrooms I have picked for them.

Stanko gets up and goes into the hut to see what has happened to the coffee and to Yulia.

I have barely started explaining the role of mushrooms in Bulgarian history when there is a commotion.

Stanko backs out of the kitchen with a bottle of mescal in one hand. He uses the other hand to protect his face from the slaps Yulia is aiming at him.

“What’s going on?” I ask, as though I cannot see. Why do they have to interrupt me now?

Yulia turns to me, pointing at Stanko. “This bastard,” she says, “was pouring mescal into your coffee.”

“Very kind of him.” It doesn't happen often.

Yulia turns to the others.

“For heaven’s sake, we’re having breakfast. Everyone knows Ivaylo can’t take liquor at breakfast.”

“Who says I can’t?”

“I just wanted to divert his attention from mushrooms. You know, shut him up a bit. Give us all a rest.”

“Give him liver failure, more like it.”

“Why do you drink that stuff anyway?” Goran cuts in. “Tastes like lighter fuel. What’s wrong with rakia?”

“Yeah, right,” spits Yulia. “Where in Mexico is he going to get Bulgarian liquor? Never mind in a village in the State of Acaxao? It’s not exactly the centre of the world, is it?”

“Never heard of air carriers?” asks Stanko. “My brother keeps me supplied, and Ivaylo can buy a few bottles off me any time he wants.”

“Like I do,” says Goran. His large hands move instinctively to lay over his money belt.

“As a matter of fact, you have a slight debt towards me in that respect. You owe me for thirty-seven bottles of the finest Bulgarian rakia.” Stanko's lips offer a smug smile over his bared teeth. He knows he doesn't have the physique to take on Goran. None of us does.

“It just so happens,” I enunciate, since I know they can be slow, “I prefer mescal.”

Goran backs me up. “Better taste, better immediate effect, less awful after-effect. Plus you don’t have to pay through the nose for it to someone who thinks he’s doing you a favour.”

“And since we’re in Mexico,” Yulia points out, “we might as well drink what the Mexicans drink.”

“And since we’re in the European Union, I suppose we have to eat over-cooked vegetables and plastic bread?” Goran has worked in Britain.

“We’re in Mexico now, not the European Union,” I point out.

This does not wash with Stanko. “Bulgaria is in the European Union. That’s why we’re all here, isn’t it? To get away from all that.”

“All what?” asks Yulia, stroking her left nipple.

“All that commercialism,” Stanko retorts, looking her in the eyes. “The rat race. The pursuit of money at all costs.”

“I’m just here to have a good time,” I tell them, as though anyone could have any other reason. Apart from spiritual development, of course.

“Stanko is right. Bulgaria isn’t what it was.” Yulia sounds homesick, timesick.

Goran taunts her. “Yeah. It’s no longer poor, backward and isolated. Damned good thing.”

I can’t let him get away with that. “Isolated was good. We didn’t have all those foreigners.”

“Oh, no? Only the Greeks, the Romans, the Turks, the Germans, the Russians, and whoever else chose to subjugate us from time to time.”

I can feel my spirits recovering. “Those people taught us things. This lot ...”

“Which lot?” Goran senses another stimulating row brewing under the Pacific sun.

“Asians, Africans ... they take our jobs and they don’t want to work.”

“Was that why you left Bulgaria?”

“No. I gave up my job so I could come here and pursue my spiritual path. And they try and steal our women.”

“Who was that lady I saw you with last night? Margarita? Carmencita?”

“What time, precisely?” It could have been either.

“Never mind.”

“Anyway, they’re dirty. And they have different beliefs. You people have been away so long you probably don’t know that some Vietnamese wanted to build a temple. Can you imagine that? A Hindu temple in the middle of Sofia?”

“Buddhist, maybe. Anyway, now that we’re in the European Union, we have to respect freedom of religion.” Goran can be really infuriating.

Stanko chips in. “What about freedom *from* religion?”

Yulia is with him on that. “Yeah. Who needs gods?” Apart from her.

I’m not going to let them divert me. “No, I mean freedom from *their* religion. There’s nothing wrong with *ours*!”

“We’re lucky the Mexicans don’t care too much what we believe.” So can Stanko.

“If Montezuma and that lot hadn’t let those Spaniards just walk in, they’d still be running the show!”

Goran thinks he's being funny.

“Look, joking apart – ”

“Who’s joking?”

Stanko starts to lecture. “Once the dictatorship collapsed, our fellow citizens went abroad in droves, in search of a better life. They worked like crazy and in return got treated like dirt.”

“Exactly. So we’ve got to show the foreign scum in our own country that we are the masters now.” That was telling them.

“No. We’ve got to treat them the way we wish we’d been treated.” Goran is going to hurt himself if he falls off that high horse.

“Rubbish! Some of them can’t even speak Bulgarian. What can they ask for?”

“You heartless swine!”

“Blind fool!”

“Fascist!”

“Traitor!”

It's obvious to everyone that I am right, but Goran’s hands are around my throat, pressing. I have a nasty sense of déjà-vu. His face is crimson, his eyes seem about to launch themselves out of his head. He moves one hand

from my aching throat to his own chest. His pupils roll backwards to leave only the whites of his eyes visible. Then the lids close over them. No sound comes from him as he falls to the sand.

Milena's scream rises above Beethoven. For the first time in several days, she turns the music off.

Stanko bends over Goran and tugs at his CSKA shirt. Yulia's voice stops him.

"Leave him alone!"

Stanko hesitates. Yulia moves over to him and pushes him gently away from Goran.

"His shirt is loose enough. Just stay out of the way while I take his pulse," she says.

She kneels beside Goran and takes hold of his thick wrist. We all close in, but draw back when Yulia glares at us.

"His heart is still beating, but the pulse is faint. Help me move him into the shade."

Milena whips a cloth from a table and spreads it in the shadow of a beach-hut wall. Together, Yulia, Stanko and I lift Goran and carry him to it.

"Lay him down gently."

"Recovery position?" I ask.

"Right."

We lay Goran on his side on the makeshift groundsheet. He is unconscious, but sweating.

"Anyone got any aspirin?" No answer.

"I'll go and get some from the pharmacy," I tell them.

"Quicker if I go," snaps Stanko, and heads off at a run.

Yulia looks distraught.

"I'm going to do mouth-to-mouth."

She again kneels beside Goran, presses his cheeks to open his mouth, lays her mouth over his, and forces her breath into his lungs. After a few minutes, she stops, looks up.

"He's coming back to us."

So is Stanko, panting from his exertions, and clutching medicine in both hands.

“I got some nitroglycerine as well. That’s what he needs, isn’t it?”

“Does he have it on prescription?” Yulia asks.

“He never has anything on prescription,” I point out.

“But does he take it?”

“He doesn’t take anything for his health except rakia,” I remind them.

“In that case, it could do him more harm than good. Just the aspirin will be fine, when he comes round. Where’s the nearest phone? We need to call an ambulance.”

I pull my mobile from my shorts pocket. “I can’t usually get a line here, but if you tell me the number, I’ll give it a try.”

Milena tells me the emergency medical services number. They fall silent as I try to get through.

A loud groan breaks the silence. We all look at Goran, who rolls onto his back.

He tries to speak, but no words come out.

“Stand back from him,” Yulia orders. She tells Goran to relax, not to move.

“No line,” I murmur.

“It’s quicker if we take him ourselves. Stanko, did you see a taxi in the village?”

“No, but they come and go all the time. Maybe now ...”

“Goran’s Dodge is right here,” I tell them. “If someone can drive it.” I don’t remember how to handle a car.

“I can.” Milena smiles. “Don’t often get the chance to drive here.”

Stanko looks crestfallen. “Goran was saying the ignition’s on the blink.”

“No problem. I can hot-wire it. I knew I’d put that skill to honest use one day.”

Yulia looks at Milena with wide eyes, then turns her attention to Goran.

“Goran, nod if you can hear me.”

Goran nods.

“Are you in pain?”

He nods again.

“Where? Just nod if it hurts where I point to.”

She points to her own chest, shoulders, neck, jaw, teeth, arms, abdomen. Each time, except for the teeth, Goran nods.

“We’re going to drive you to the hospital in Pochatlu. It won’t be fun, but we’ll be there in half an hour. If you chew an aspirin, it’ll help with the pain. Can you manage that?”

Goran nods once more.

Yulia puts her hand behind his neck and lifts his head up.

Stanko slips an aspirin into his mouth. Goran chews.

Milena locks up the kitchen shack and goes off to start Goran’s car. Six minutes later, she drives it up between the rows of beach huts.

Stanko and I again lift Goran, who moans softly. We lay him along the back seat. Then the two of us squeeze into the front seat, next to Milena.

Yulia gets into the back and cradles Goran’s head in her lap. Goran groans.

Milena reverses down the sandy path and on to the tarmac road.

It is not yet noon when we unload Goran onto a stretcher outside the emergency department of Pochatlu hospital. The paramedics wheel him inside, and our group hurries after them.

Milena, who is fluent in Spanish, explains to the duty nurse what has happened. The nurse glances at Goran, issues an emergency classification, gives Milena a sheaf of forms to fill in on Goran’s behalf, and goes off to arrange an immediate examination.

Milena is still wading through the forms when the nurse returns with another team of paramedics. She tells Milena that a cardiologist will see Goran right away, but it’ll be a couple of hours before there will be any news.

“That’s okay,” says Milena, “it’ll give me time to park.” She gives us an ironic smile.

The paramedics converge on Goran. A look of panic passes across his face when they start to wheel him away. Then his features settle, and he fixes a gimlet stare on Yulia.

“Vitosha’s rubbish! Absolute rubbish! Everyone knows the best mushrooms grow way down south.”

Visions

Colonial church towers shimmer and flash
in the mirrorshade façade of the university,
burn disapproval into our Europe-white necks
as we jaywalk the freeway to the old
academy ablaze with the light of Orozco,

whose broad brush clarifies past with future,
admonishes the wordwise, whose mighty pens
inspired, then served, sword after sword.
Below his frescoes, a cherub-cheeked,
shifty-eyed gilded youth steps up
to pocket a “Medalla al Valor Masonico”.

Bright blood seeps from the pulp
of a book clutched by a fanatic
caught in righteous rictus above him.
It thickens, drops, and brands the neck
of the deserving young bulwark
against the urge to freedom.

Next door, Expiatoria’s gothic spires
gleam with modern glass stained
in reassuring colours to ward off
Orozco’s bleak truths, to harvest
more souls from acquiescent bodies
for a hungry god.

White Whale Island

The needle pricks her finger, teasing out a drop of blood that amplifies the vibrations reaching Grace from White Whale Island. She lays aside the delicate lampshade she is crafting for the beachfront bar, gets to her feet and strides down to the water's edge. The vibrations from the island resonate even more strongly in her head, and she stands transfixed, staring at it across the ocean breakers. She has heard it is sacred to the Mayas, a point where cosmic energy intersects with the Earth's elements before dispersing in all directions. And she has seen wedding parties heading out to it in launches to overlay the Catholic ceremony with its benediction, like icing on the wedding cake. Grace has, of course, felt the mystical undertow at Ayer's Rock and, to a lesser extent, at holy sites far from home, but never before has she felt so personal a call as that coming to her from White Whale Island. She has entered the water without thinking. Now she glances round to check the lifeguards' yellow flag is still flying and, sure that she won't be followed, dives under the first Pacific breaker. The strong, easy strokes that have served her so well in many of the world's seas become a form of meditation; the vibrations are her compass. Before half an hour has slipped away, Grace is negotiating an inlet to make landfall on White Whale Island.

In the late afternoon heat, Grace stands on the guano-encrusted rock, legs akimbo, arms spread, feeling the vibrations encircling her, like the Earth Goddess's answer to Leonardo da Vinci. Happy, she opens her outer eyes, and is blinded by the sun's rays refracted off the white rock stretching into more white rock ahead of her. Grace stumbles around her domain, and finds no sweetness, no fresh water, no plants thrusting through the rock's bird-shit crust, no insects. The birds themselves have deserted in search of food. The sound inside her head is overpowering. The strength leaves her legs. Grace struggles to achieve the lotus position, but consciousness disappears.

The vibrations wake her. It is dark; the tide has turned. Her deep-tanned skin is burning; her head aches. She looks toward the shore: the few lights seem distant. Grace locates her entry point and releases herself from White Whale Island. The water's coldness is a shock, but it wakes her completely. Grace soon hits her stride, but progress is slow: currents cross, and tides rip her in directions she does not want to go. Grace is tired, very tired. Yemenjá calls to her from below, and Grace feels how easy it would be to abandon herself in sacrifice to the goddess of the sea, but her thoughts spin off to her own mother, and to stem the tears--she is not sure whose--Grace ploughs all her attention into her stroke. The shore is nearer, but a

second wave of tiredness strikes even harder than the first. The face of a child halts Grace as she slips down into the wave. It is her own face, but tinged with someone else. Past, present or future? Grace cannot tell, but her re-awoken curiosity gives her the energy to surge to the surface, establish buoyancy and cling to it, letting the waves take her where they will. Grace hears a breaker crashing on the shoreline. Surf envelopes her and toys with her as though she were a plastic doll. Coral sears her right leg and lets her know she is still alive. The sea deposits her on the sand and leaves her. In pain, she rises to her feet and hobbles towards the lights. She will beg them to call an ambulance or take her to the nearest hospital. No curandero this time. And if--when--she gets better, she will charge a proper price for her lampshades and for the haircuts she gives on the beach. Maybe she will even test the waters of human affection again. It will not be easy. But at least those damned vibrations have stopped.

A Whole Year Without Drowning

Houlihan discards his guilt at the water's edge.
Chill Pacific tentacles tow his ankles in.
He dives below the surf, casts free his past,
takes the salty secretions of Yemenjà into his lungs,
lets her cross-currents tug their war
over the sponge-like carcass he has sloughed.

A pelican swoops at two bodies, veers off.
One moves, rises on unsteady limbs,
drags its fellow beyond the water's reach,
with hand and mouth, human skill and flattery,
redeems its life from the sea-goddess,
then offers it back to fate
with kicks and blows and unkind blasphemies.

The pelican intuits carrion, yet Houlihan twitches.
The lifeguard has saved the year, Playa Chisme's first
with no drowning. He has gone to its fiesta.
Houlihan is reborn, into a world of pain.
He cries from every orifice, convulses with cold
and possibilities, crawls among worlds in grains of sand
back to our own.

[end]

Notes

Houlihan's Wake

The title tips its hat to *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce's novel in which a man comes back to life during his own wake. At the end, Houlihan intends to use the lifeguards' party to indulge his own feeling of being reborn.

On my first day in "Playa Chisme", I noticed a man sitting in a yoga pose on the beach, hatless in the noonday sun. I asked about him, and learned that he had come to Playa Chisme to die, because he wanted to spend his last days in a really beautiful place. It is an extraordinarily life-affirming place, and last time I visited the yoga man was still there, though he now wore a panama hat and hugged the shade. Houlihan, too, is determined to die there, and finds it just as impossible.

First published in **The View From Here**.

Phoenix Mexico

I wrote this for the 2001 Biennale art exhibition in Venice. They set up a "Bunker Poetico" adjoining the exhibition space at the Arsenale site, where they displayed a selection of poems on the topic of peace, including this one. I was dead chuffed to be on view among the best of contemporary art, as I thought, but when I actually went there, it turned out that Venetian weather had taken its toll: summer rain had left most of the poems illegible. Fortunately, this one was included on the Biennale website, under the flag of Mexico. It is essentially a call to avoid romanticising the civilisations of the past. Their people deserved better; the survivors still do.

Murals

Mexico has a tradition of great mural painters, including Diego Rivera and Orozco. You can see some of Orozco's finest work at the Instituto Cultural de Cabanas in Guadalajara, a building which has been a lunatic asylum, a barracks, a jail and an orphanage holding up to 3,000 children. The best way to view the painting on the ceiling is to stretch out on a bench

below them, especially if you're still suffering from jet-lag, which will make them seem more hallucinatory than they might otherwise appear: the human stain in all its gore.

First published in **Dead Snakes**.

Leaking Grail

The small, picturesque town square in Ajijic was under threat from property development that would drive away the tourists it was meant to attract in place of the low-income artists who had come to live there. Down the road, the town's main draw, beautiful Lake Chapala, the country's largest natural lake, was being invaded by water hyacinth and drained away to provide Mexico City and Guadalajara with water. The construction workers epitomised the destruction of the ground beneath their feet.

First published in **Transparent Words**.

Missionary

“Playa Chisme” is a fictionalised amalgam of villages on the Pacific coast of Mexico, some way south of Puerto Escondido. “Chisme” is the Spanish for “gossip”, which is one of the preferred occupations among those who live or sojourn there, as in countless small places. Latin men do tend to get bowled over by blondes, I guess because they seem exotic. “Elke” was easy on the eye and clever enough to let her body do the talking. In retrospect, I regret being influenced by the gossip, because adults can look after themselves. Nevertheless, she was supposedly there to look after disabled children, and I thought the way she made it clear how little that job meant to her revealed a colonialist attitude, so I lost respect for her.

First published in **Dead Snakes**.

Mazunte Jazz Hurts

Mazunte is a small town on the Oaxaca coast, south of “Playa Chisme”. Wonder of wonders, it has a jazz festival. Each # represents a

number played by the band in which Hamish plays. I have tried to make him as much of an outsider as possible to highlight the unifying power of good music. It is, of course, a speeded-up coming-of-age episode in which the hero fails to get the girl (who does not fall for his musical success) but finds himself. Even I find it hard to imagine dark futures at an open-air jazz festival on the Pacific coast of Mexico!

First published in **Pyrokinjection**.

Dolores

The story of the poem, *Mazunte Jazz Hurts*.

First published in **The Camel Saloon**.

Dog Day Sundown

The residents of the beautiful, relatively unspoilt bay that houses “Playa Chisme” are divided over what to do with their golden egg. There are those who would tend it, content to see their poverty recede year after year. A minority would smash it and sell the contents to the highest bidder. To make it attractive to the concrete merchants, they have first to get rid of the superannuated hipsters and the youngsters who have drifted there from five continents. Although they cannot round up the hippies, who are mostly well integrated into the local community and its economy, they can, and sometimes do, round up their dogs and dispose of them in a variety of reputedly barbaric ways. The sunsets are amazing.

First published in **Dead Snakes**.

Mushrooms

Most of the characters in this story are based on real people who live, or just hang out, on Mexico's Pacific coast. To preserve their privacy, I have turned them all into Bulgarians and changed their physical appearance. Like the long-stay foreigners I met there, they argue violently about trivial things, yet when a real emergency arises, they immediately wake up and band

together, and hidden talents come to the fore. I have put some nasty, racist statements into the mouth of the narrator, Ivaylo. He says things about immigrants in Bulgaria that I often hear said about immigrants in Italy, where I live, and which, years ago, I often heard said about Italian immigrants in London. I hope, by moving them to a new context, to make clear both the inevitability and the stupidity of such statements.

Visions

Masonic ceremonies were advertised in a building in Guadalajara adorned with frescoes by Orozco. I imagine him taking a small revenge. A church next door harnessed more-modern art to repackage the old lies through which Orozco saw so clearly.

First published in **Other Voices**.

White Whale Island

The protagonist, Grace, is based on a young Australian woman whom I encountered in “Playa Chisme”. Her swim back to land and life, though, comes from the true story of a former student of mine in Angola. Despite being an Air Force helicopter pilot, which the Reagan régime had made a very dangerous occupation, he survived the civil war, became an air-taxi co-pilot, and crash-landed in the sea. He swam a long way to shore, the only survivor. He recounted how he had, several times, been tempted to give in to his exhaustion and let himself drown, but each time he had called up the image of his mother and of his daughter, and thus found the strength to go on.

First published in **Eunoia Review**.

A Whole Year Without Drowning

The poem of *Houlihan's Wake*.

First published in **The Camel Saloon**.

About the Author

Bryan Murphy travelled extensively as a teacher of English as a foreign language before settling in Italy, where he worked as a translator for a United Nations agency. He now concentrates on his own words.

His poetry has appeared in places ranging from the Venice Biennale to the Brighton Evening Argus, as well as a multitude of literary magazines, and his stories have an international following.

His short play, *Bar Londra*, is in the repertory of the Turin Theatre Company. He has recently appeared as an actor in both plays and films.

To discover more work by Bryan Murphy, visit:

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[Other e-books by Bryan Murphy](#)

Goodbye, Padania: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CVZZD6S>

Breakaway: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00DJE8C5E>

Linehan's Trip: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CPOH188>

Linehan Saves: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00DILOSHO>

Murder By Suicide: <http://www.amazon.com/Murder-By-Suicide-ebook/dp/B00CA5JYXW>

Heresy: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00C790R28>

Now read the opening of Bryan Murphy's e-book, "Linehan Saves":

Linehan Saves

Yingmeng, China, April 2020.

“I want a man! A man!”

Seán Linehan slams the door in the young woman’s face. She takes a step back, stands still for a moment, then adjusts her dress to its most opaque and walks away down the corridor, shaking her head.

Linehan leans back against the other side of the hotel room door and tries to control his breathing. *God, she was beautiful.* He staggers over to the armchair next to the bed, flops into it, pulls out his phone and calls Mo.

“Show-un! Good to hear you. What can I do for you?”

“A man! I want a man!”

“You don’t like Miss May? Everyone likes Miss May.”

“I want a man,” he groans.

“Miss May is the best we have. Most pretty. Very sweet.”

“A man.”

“You will see. She is an excellent interpreter. The bestest.”

“Look, Mo, I’m here to work. How can I work if my very sweet, most pretty interpreter keeps turning the front of her clothing transparent?”

“You don’t like?”

“Yes, I do. Too damned like. So if you people really want the 2030 World Cup, you’ll get on to the agency double quick and have them send me a male interpreter. A good one. Who wears normal, old-fashioned Western or Chinese clothes!”

A wave of tiredness hits Linehan. *Jesus Christ*, it feels late.

Mo is talking. “Sure thing, Show-un, I’ll do that. Whatever you want. Are you OK? You don’t seem quite yourself.”

“You’re right. I’m not the Seán Linehan you met in Switzerland. And I’m not your typical corruptible sports executive. See? I’m the new, improved version. Seán Linehan in shining armour. So you guys had better clean up your act. Get it?”

Mo is laughing softly. “You seem jet-lagged.”

“Yes, I am, my friend. You can’t imagine. It’s been a long, long journey.”

For more, go to:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00DILOSHO>