

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz  
4110 Faith Ct.  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
(703) 472-6463  
[mtravies@gmail.com](mailto:mtravies@gmail.com)

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**The Portal**  
by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*My object all sublime / I shall achieve in time —  
To let the punishment fit the crime — / The punishment fit the crime;  
And make each prisoner pent / Unwillingly represent  
A source of innocent merriment! / Of innocent merriment!*  
Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Mikado*, Act 2

1

So far, the crowning point of my career as a Middle Eastern Studies scholar had been the release by Screeching Owl, Ltd. of my treatise, “*The Great Old Ones and Others – The Lost History of the Ancient Deities.*”

Screeching Owl was reluctant to take on publishing a six-hundred-page tome on the stories and myths surrounding the powerful deities from space that once ruled the Earth and have since fallen into a deep sleep. “There is no market for that kind of crap,” an editor proclaimed.

I was able to convince him and others at the firm that there *is* a market for this esoteric area of scholarship by citing novels, movies, short stories, and even Ph.D. dissertations dealing with the topic. I told them a good number of people dread the possibility that ancient monsters might just be waiting for a chance to return to reclaim the planet. In short, I overwhelmed their opposition with facts, figures and sales projections.

I was soon proved right: announcement of the impending release of my book in the trade press was followed by a healthy number of pre-publication orders; four months later, Amazon sales upon release of the work exceeded even the rosier predictions of the publishers.

2

At the end of the quarter, I was awaiting my first royalty payment. Since Screeching Owl was headquartered in London and I lived in rural New Mexico, payments would occur via SurePay, a multi-national company operating an online payments system that handles money transfers between consumers and merchants, and among business entities. Use of a middleman like SurePay was far more convenient and secure than payment by check or other forms of money exchange.

Thus, in the afternoon of last December 31, I received notice that a royalty payment of \$1,753.88 had come from Screeching Owl, and was told that I should sign onto my SurePay account to claim it. I became very excited, beaming with pride at my wife: “My first royalties from the book on the Old Gods have arrived!” She had been skeptical of the economic value of my research and writing of the book, so the money would also settle in my favor this dispute between us. But, more importantly, I could really use the money. I was a non-tenured college professor who specialized in an obscure branch of learning. Even in a remote corner of a less than prosperous state, life was expensive and we lived hand to mouth, like many Americans do these days. My mortgage payment was due in a week.

So, I checked onto my SurePay account, looking for the money that I would immediately direct to my bank account in Las Cruces. The money was not there. I tried multiple times over the course of the day, to no avail.

Because of the time difference, it was already New Year's Day in London, and all businesses were closed. I could not get hold of anybody, and was not about to pester my editor in the middle of the night; there was nothing she could do, in any case.

It was nine hours earlier in New Mexico than in London, but midnight was also approaching here. While everyone else was drinking and partying, I spent the last hours of the year trying to figure out how to get hold of my money.

3

When I signed into my SurePay account online, I was offered three help choices: go to the resolution center; ask for "community help;" and go to the message center and attempt to communicate by e-mail with someone. I tried all three. The advice from the "resolution center" would help only if I was disputing a transaction; here there was no transaction and nothing to dispute. The "community help" recommendation was to suggest that if I had not received an amount due because of a mistake, I should correct the mistake and try again; this I could not do, because I was not sure there was a mistake and, in any event, it was not my error but someone else's. Finally, the message center just raised all kinds of potential issues and offered suggested solutions. I kept asking to be transferred to a representative, and instead of complying, the site software kept demanding that I answer questions about my problem and suggesting inapplicable fixes. I kept calling for "customer service" and, later pleaded "human, human, human, I want to speak with a human!!" After an eternity and numerous tries, I was offered the option of sending a message describing my issue but warning that representatives would be available only during business hours and responses would be slow at times of high traffic. Thus, the first opportunity for a customer service contact would be 9 a.m. during working days. Since New Year fell on a Friday, that meant there would be nobody to help me until Monday.

Disheartened, I went to bed at 3 a.m., having missed all the New Year celebrations.

I was in a sullen mood on Saturday but contacted my editor right after I got up. She was at work and was able to look at the record of the royalty payment. “Yes, we transferred the money to your SurePay account Thursday evening, just before we closed shop.”

“Let’s double-check something. To what account did you direct the transfer?”

“Why, to your ‘Oldgods1\$@gmail.com’ account.”

“Oh, you must have forgotten that I had to open a new account because of the hacking incident in November. It’s now “Newgods1\$@gmail.com.”

There was an embarrassed silence on the line. Then: “Let me see if I can get that transfer cancelled or redirected to you.”

“I’ll keep doing the same” I promised. “First one who gets this problem solved should tell the other right away.”

4

Monday went by, and then Tuesday, and Wednesday. I kept getting no response to my requests to speak to someone. The tone and content of my monologue with the computer turned more irritated and ultimately became abusive. I was on the line frequently with the editor, who was equally frustrated at her failure to connect with anyone. Finally, late Thursday evening, as I was getting ready for bed, three miraculous little dots appeared on the previously blank screen of my laptop and someone typed in: “Hello. This is Andrea. How can I help you?”

I was so shocked that I almost did not respond, but finally gathered my wits and explained: “In the transaction that I identified in earlier messages, the merchant sent me a seventeen hundred and fifty dollar payment, only it was sent to the wrong account.”

“Do you know the account to which it was sent?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have an e-mail account under that name?”

“No, but I can create one right away.”

“Please do that. I will open a new SurePay account for you under the new name. The money will appear on that account when you sign into it.”

Ten minutes later, the royalty payment was on its way to my bank.

5

A lot had happened in the intervening week. Failure of the royalty transfer had prevented me from paying two credit card balances, resulting in the imposition of late charges and a drop in my credit rating. Automatic payments to a couple of utilities and internet service providers had failed, causing my accounts to be threatened with suspension. My wife was increasingly mad at the dereliction of my head of household duties and refused to cook for us, forcing upon me the indignity of eating at fast food Mexican restaurants. I had lost sleep, my blood pressure had risen to stratospheric levels, and the lack of an outlet for my anger was surely shortening my life.

I shared my frustration with the Screeching Owl editor and she was sympathetic to my complaints but unhelpful. “That’s the way the world runs these days. Anyone with power over even a small corner of the Internet can lord over you.”

I was too upset to concede she had a valid point. Instead, I persisted: “I want revenge. There must be something I can do to get back at those bastards.”

There was a brief silence, while I could almost hear the wheels inside her brain turning. “Well,” she finally said. “Aren’t you the world’s leading expert on the Great Old Ones?”

“Yes, but...”

“Why don’t you enlist their help in getting you satisfaction?”

It was perhaps intended as a throwaway remark, but it got me thinking.

## 6

Opening a portal to the realm outside time where the Old Ones are confined was not that difficult for an expert like me. Without getting into boring details, all that was needed was a supply of each of the four elements (wind was hardest to get; I had to fish out a desktop fan from the days before air conditioning); white chalk, to draw a pentagram within a large circle of the floor of the attic; many lit black candles for atmosphere; and some knowledge of Akkadian, the ancient language of Assyria and Babylon. I positioned myself outside the circle, extinguished all extraneous lights, and recited an invocation from a version of the Tablet of Destinies I had found in a Baghdad museum.

I had to try the invocation four times, more and more loudly, until a vague form of dun colored mist began to materialize in the pentagram. Even before fully forming, the presence made itself known: “Stop that racket, will ye? It’s quite annoying.” This, in English with a decidedly Jersey Shore accent.

I had expected to summon a vast, threatening ghost like the jinni that appeared before Aladdin in *The Arabian Nights*. I was ready to cower, prostrate myself, and beg for the apparition’s indulgence. No need. What came out into the circle was a misshapen, gray, hairless little figure with an oversize head, small beaded eyes gleaming with malice, twisted limbs, and oversized claws. It was naked and of indeterminate sex, and seemed more pitiful than awe inspiring.

“Who... who are you?” I questioned, half in fear, but at the same time fighting to refrain from tittering.

“My name is Bingaith. I’m one of the countless spawns of Shub-Niggurath, the Mother of all.”

“Are you *really* one of the Great Old Ones?” I questioned, indelicately suggesting doubt.

“You mortals are always classifying things. I’m great enough” Bingaith replied, a bit peevishly.

“O, Great One, pardon my ignorance!” I was quick to abash myself. “I summoned you to seek assistance on a grave matter.”

“I’ll decide whether your matter is grave and warrants my intervention. And I will set my price if I deign to help you.”

I described my grievances against SurePay and my generalized anger at how modern society has made people enslave themselves to machines so they can spend more time watching stupefying tripe in front of their television sets.

Bingaith listened to my tirade without registering any reaction. However, when I ran out of steam he commented: “I’m familiar with your problems. I learned English watching *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*. I can tell you that early on, when humans were barely above the level of apes, things were simpler and people were closer to the demands of their genetic imprint. Hunting, eating, mating and not getting killed by a predator were the main preoccupations of those of your kind. You have perverted what Nature intended for your species and gotten yourselves in all sorts of trouble. Why should I help you with your self-inflicted difficulties?”

I replied tartly: “I don’t understand why you are so picky. From all I’ve read, those of your kind were utterly defeated in a war that took place eons ago, and are imprisoned in a frozen hell outside time and space. You linger there hoping to come back one day to rule the Earth. I

have brought you back and given you a chance to open the door to the Old Ones so they can return. Why are you reluctant to venture in?"

Bingaith's response was full of undisguised contempt. "The bonds that tied us have loosened with time. We can return to this planet, as we have done to many others, any day we want, provided we are extended a proper invitation. The question is why would we want to rule a dump of a world on the verge of ruin?"

"Perhaps things are less dire than you believe. Maybe you should get a better understanding of the modern world before giving us the back of your hand."

Bingaith stared at me fixedly, exuding evil from his loathsome features. "Alright. I'll do as you ask. I'll wreak havoc on that company against which you hold a grudge. But if returning to this world is not to my liking, I'll come back to collect from you. In blood."

7

Several days went by. I awaited anxiously for news of the destruction of the SurePay headquarters that Bingaith had promised. Surely, a catastrophic event of that nature would have been all over the news media. But there was silence.

I refused to believe that even a minor Old deity would renege on his commitments. When the suspense proved too great to endure, I conducted another summoning. Again, I had to repeat the words of the incantation several times before getting a response; but, this time, what materialized in the portal was quite a different figure.

Bingaith was no longer naked, but was dressed in a three-piece pinstripe suit, with a white shirt and a silk power tie. He was outfitted with Louboutin dress shoes and wore enormous Giorgio Armani sunglasses that covered most of his hideous face. The claws had been carefully manicured and, what could be seen of his skin, appeared suntanned.



“What do you want now?” was his harsh greeting.

Trying not to sound irritated, I responded: “I was wondering when you are going to make good on the promise you made about SurePay.”

Bingaith opened its mouth in a horrible imitation of a smile that displayed all his sharp teeth. “Clearly, you don’t get news here in the boondocks. It was done three days ago.”

“Come on, the destruction of the headquarters of a big Silicon Valley company would have been in all the newspapers.”

Bingaith’s attempt at a smile became even more horrible as it grew wider. “Who said I promised that the company headquarters would be destroyed? That was your idea, not mine.”

“So, what did you do instead?” I almost shouted.

“Well, being from the area around Babylon and such, I had never made it to California. It is really very nice out there. I like it.”

“And?”

“Here, this will explain everything to you.” Bingaith produced a piece of paper from the inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to me. Its heading read: “SurePay announces reorganization, outlines plans to increase profitability.” Below was a summary of a press release:

“SurePay (Nasdaq SUPY) announced last night a complete revamping of its management team and an ambitious plan to streamline its money transferring services. All members of the Board of Directors and the company’s upper management have agreed to resign; each one is to receive a bonus payment in the tens of millions of dollars. In their place, a new Board and executive team have taken over the management of the multi billion-dollar company. At the helm of the new team is Rashid Ahmed Bingaith, a native of the United Arab Emirates and a graduate of the Wharton Business School.

“In a conference call with the business press, Mr. Bingaith announced plans for a drastic reduction of personnel at SurePay’s offices, with the goal of making the company’s services nearly 100% automated. ‘The human element has been the main source of inefficiency in our operations. Our aim is to have our services provided by state-of-the art, proven software that will make monetary transfers even faster and more reliable than they are today’ said Mr. Bingaith....”

I stopped reading. “What did you do to the old managers of SurePay?” I didn’t really want to know, but felt compelled to ask.

“Why, we ate them” chortled Bingaith, as a viscid tongue flickered in and out his mouth. “And then we replaced them with some of my brothers, which I brought over through your portal.”

I became a little nervous. “Where does that leave me?”

“You have nothing to fear. I am extending you professional courtesy. After all, it was your idea that got us involved again in human affairs. By the way, I am starting to convince others among the Old Gods that it is time for them to make their comeback to Earth, and that corporate takeover is a much better way for them to rule than through carnage.”

“Does that mean that I will have to summon each Old God who wishes to re-enter our planet?”

“No. As long as the original portal remains intact, they may come and go freely without your involvement. But I have to go now. I have a company to run.”

A week afterward, my attic had become the Grand Central Station of Old Gods traffic. The comings and goings were frequent and noisy enough that we had to cordon off the portion of the family room that lay beneath the attic and had to give up use of the entertainment center. My

wife was increasingly livid; I had explained to her that I was running a delicate experiment in the attic and the commotions would soon cease, but she was not assuaged.

Then, some recently reorganized companies began attempting to acquire each other, in a series of wild proxy fights between factions of the Old Gods. I no longer dared enter the family room, since some of the raucous sounds coming out of the attic above were blood curdling.

I became tempted to move to a nearby motel for fear that the fights would spill to other parts of the house and would impact us. However, I was concerned that abandonment of the premises might cause the portal to collapse and direct the ire of the deities against us, so I did nothing. But after weeks of ceaseless turmoil, I judged that I had to do something to at least clarify our situation.

I tiptoed into the attic one mid-afternoon, usually the quietest time for otherworldly appearances. The room was eerily quiet. I started going through the invocation routine and was in the middle of my recitation from the Tablet of Destinies when there was a rush of hot air and Bingaith materialized on the pentagram.

His looks had worsened since our last encounter. He was naked, like the first time we met, and exhibited what appeared to be burn marks, missing chunks of anatomy, and other signs of physical distress.

I could not contain my amazement, and again asked an indelicate question: “Bingaith, you look like hell. What happened to you?”

Bingaith snapped its teeth in an attempt to take a bite off my body. I jumped behind a recliner and found myself apologizing again to the little monster.

“A million pardons, I didn’t mean to criticize. But you are not wearing fancy clothes or designer dark glasses. I was merely noting the change.”

“Mortal, watch your every word. I must come when you summon me, but that doesn’t mean I have to be nice to you.”

“Oh, you are always nice to me,” I replied hypocritically.

“OK, stop the bull. Why have you forced me back?”

I came clean with my misgivings. “I was happy to see how you fixed my grievance with SurePay and just as glad that you took care of several other corporate malefactors. But then I have been reading accounts that suggest you guys are going at each other, and that concerns me. Where is it all going to end? And what’s going to happen to us mortals?”

Bingaith seemed to be ready to jump at me again, but restrained himself:

“The Old Gods had been away from this planet for so long that we had forgotten how nice things can be around here. Earth is, for the most part, beautiful and you monkeys are easy to manipulate and control, and are tasty snacks to boot.

“I made a bad mistake. As more among us came over through the portal at my suggestion, there was increased appreciation for how pleasant life can be in this corner of creation. And that was the problem: there are too many of us and too little Earth to enjoy. Our kind doesn’t like to share, we prefer to overcome others by force and consume all who challenge us.

“So, we have been fighting with each other for dominance over the world. And as is the case with the human nations, some of us are stronger than others, and after a while the weaker ones have been disposed of, and what’s left are several factions of what you would call super-powers.

“Alas, the spawns of Shub-Niggurath are not the greatest of the Old Ones. We had the advantage of getting here first, but since then several of the mightiest Old Gods have come

through the portal: Baoht Z'uqqa-Mogg, Cthulhu, his sister Cthaeghya, Gisguth, and others. I and my team were eliminated in the first round of the fight, but the battles among the strongest Old Ones continue.”

Bingaith fell silent. I waited a bit to see if he would resume his tale, but he seemed to have run out of steam. So, I asked still another indelicate question:

“What happened to you then?”

This time Bingaith was able to get hold of my shirt and began pulling me towards him. I clung onto the arms of the recliner and fought for dear life to avoid being consumed. At length, Bingaith appeared to calm down. He let go of my shirt and continued:

“We losers are confined back in the prison outside time from which we had escaped. But now we are watched by our siblings to ensure we do not try to make a comeback.”

“Does that mean that the more powerful of the Old Ones will continue to make war on each other?”

“Yes, and sometime soon they will turn against humans openly and enslave them all.”

“Will we ever get relief from this plague?” It felt hopeless.

“You will get a bit of relief from us each month. The Old Ones must return to their place of captivity for one night and one day, at the rising of the full moon. We use that time to settle scores, resolve grievances, and plan future forays into other worlds.”

“Every month?”

“Yeah. Like eight days from now, when the full moon returns. You will get a quiet day then. Enjoy it.”

I agonized day and night over the Old Gods problem, and in the course of a week I developed a plan and got ready to carry it out. By the early afternoon of the day the full moon was to rise, I had bought (paying cash) a large container of chlordane, a highly flammable insecticide, at a lawn care store. I filled every corner of the attic with chlordane-soaked rags, tied to each other by a thin strip of cloth soaked with chlordane that would serve as the trigger. I did not use gasoline because chlordane is odorless, whereas the smell of gasoline could give the game away. I sprinkled the rest of the chlordane into the fireplace to increase the combustion potential.

I went to bed as usual, but did not sleep. I got up carefully, making sure not to wake up my wife, and stared in silence out of the kitchen window until the full spring moon rose into heavens.

After waiting a few minutes out of caution, I climbed the stairs to the attic and opened the door to a welcome, silent darkness. I took out a book of matches, lit a match to the strip of cloth, closed the attic door, and ran downstairs as fast as my legs would carry me.

I was out of breath when I reached the bedroom, and the breathlessness lent credibility to my voice when I screamed at my sleeping wife: “FIRE!” – “FIRE!” – THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE!!!! WE NEED TO GET OUT!!!”

We barely had time to clear the front door, half naked, as blinding flames and smoke erupted out of the attic and moved quickly through the clapboard house. We were shivering with cold and shock when the fire brigade arrived. They handed us blankets and cups of steaming coffee to get warm as we watched the firemen fight in vain to save the house from the engulfing fire.

The insurance company investigators had trouble reaching a conclusion as to the causes of the fire. On the one hand, they found a couple of partially consumed rags in the ruins of the attic. Those might or might not have been soaked with something, but that something had evaporated. There were also a number of strange things strewn around, including gardening soil, a large vat that had contained water, and a charred vintage fan. On the other hand, the house was not worth much and the insurance recovery would go mainly to the mortgage company. Their investigation of my affairs showed that I was a renowned scholar, in no financial trouble.

At the end, they paid off a couple of hundred thousand dollars for the house and its contents. I dickered over my share of the settlement proceeds, but pocketed the small payment that was due us. I never had thought that I would some day make money out of committing arson.

This all happened six months ago. In that period, I wrote a sequel to my treatise, this time a semi-fictional narrative entitled "*Conversations with the Old Ones*." I did not mention Bingaith by name and advanced the concept that, contrary to popular belief, the world would take a turn for the worse if the Old Ones came back to restore order. Screeching Owl literally tore the manuscript out of my hands and published it in record time. It is now number four in the New York Times non-fiction best sellers list.

My wife and I have found a new source of discord: what to do with the insurance proceeds and the royalties we are getting. We'll probably end up buying a condo in Taos, as far from our former abode as we can get without leaving New Mexico.

I would have gladly accepted the loss of all my possessions as just punishment for past misdeeds. It would have been worth it to end up penniless, just to make sure that the portal for the migration of Old Ones into this world was closed.

My contract with Screeching Owl requires that all royalty payments be made by direct bank-to-bank transfer. I reckon that banks are safe, at least for the time being. Although these days one never knows.

THE END