

O URIZEL!

by Poppy Z. Brite

This story has never been published and never will be, except on www.poppyzbrite.com. I'm making it available not because I think it is some sort of lost masterpiece (far from it), but because it may give readers a look at how my fictional voice developed. In other words, it is just for fun.

Please read it in that spirit.

This one's a bit of a stinker, in my opinion. Consider yourself warned. It was written in September 1984, just for fun; I never revised it or attempted to sell it. It's kind of a goofy little foray into fantasy influenced by listening to a shitload of King Crimson, Robert Fripp, and Brian Eno, as well as Eno and David Byrne's collaboration "My Life In the Bush of Ghosts," and if you like that album, or even if you don't, you should check out African writer Amos Tutuola's novel from which they swiped the title. I think I must have been trying to affect Tutuola's "naive" style in this story, but only managed to sound stilted.

Back before things fell apart I used to live in the glass house on the blue plain. There was never anything on the plain, only one small black burnt tree that never grew and never quite died. And the ground was brown, but the translucent blue of the sky cast its shadow and its color over everything, so even now I call it the blue plain. As I said, my house was glass, but that did not matter, ever, because no one ever came onto the plain. Only sometimes (very seldom) would a Traveler pass by, but they were always intent on whatever mission they were headed for. Anyway, any unprotected Traveler knows better than to look through the walls of a glass house, especially in a place like the blue plain. He would see some very fascinating things, but then he might never be able to look away again. He would almost certainly never live to tell the tale of the sights he saw.

For the travelers, or most of them at any rate, were unprotected. I suppose they still are. I suppose they are still traveling across the blue plain, passing the empty glass house, longing to take shelter there but not daring to go in even though it is obviously empty. For glass houses can be deceptive. The walls reflect each other and seem like an expanse of empty rooms throughout the house, but within the reflections is the best place for something like Urizel to hide, and Urizel (or her ghost) would not take kindly to intruders in the house where her charge was raised.

My father was a spider, but not the kind you are used to. My mother was a witch, a red-haired one, which made her extremely powerful. But she cast too many spells and was taken by something even more powerful than herself. My father was gone (they never stay) and my mother knew that she was going to be taken, so, desperately, since she only had a few hours left, she cast one last spell. She called Urizel to protect me. I was a small baby and do not remember this very well, but I do remember that I was afraid of Urizel at first. She had no skin or flesh, only bare bones, and no eyes in the empty holes. A red light glowed in those holes. But she had long red hair like my mother. Since she could not feed me her own milk as my mother had done, she gave me something like green milk which came from a black winged animal that had come with her. This pointy animal stayed at the door of the glass house to add more protection. If anyone or anything had gotten past Ism, the animal, though, Urizel would have been even more formidable. Ism would have seemed gentle in comparison. When Urizel was angry with me, she would grasp me in her dry hands and shake me, and it was terrible to hear her bones rattle.

But when I grew into a boy, Urizel still protected me. She would watch over me when I played on the blue plain, because not all Travelers are good. If one even stopped to talk to me, she would swoop down with a shriek and

a rattle so terrible that even the bravest Traveler must be frightened away. Sometimes I wished she would not, for I would have liked to talk to some of the Travelers, but Urizel knew what was best for me. I no longer needed the milk of Ism, but he was my pet, and Urizel was almost my mother. She was something more as well, though, because I belonged to her and she belonged to me. Except for my true mother, the witch, who I could hardly remember, these two were the only beings I had ever known.

I was not to remain lonely for long. I spent my years playing on the blue plain, eating the strange food that Urizel brought from somewhere even though I never saw her leave (but every day when I came in from playing, the glass table would be piled high with green spheres, pale blue slices, and dishes full of an orange-red liquid, all of which were our food), and sleeping safely in a kind of glass bowl that had been provided for me as a bed. So my time passed until I was a young man. Then everything changed.

I have said that I was a young man now, but I still went out every day to play on the plain, since Urizel had not taught me any differently. One day I had ventured slightly farther from the house than usual and could not see Urizel anywhere, even though I knew she was probably nearby. Suddenly a strange sound came down from the sky to me. At that time I thought it must be trumpets, but I have heard real trumpets since then, and they are not they same. But I did not know this and I said, "Trumpets! I can hear trumpets!" Then I could see nothing except the brown dust being blown up from the plain. A great wind had arisen and I had to cover my eyes against the dust. Presently I heard a voice say, "Open your eyes, my child; I will not let the brown dust into them. You must see me now, for I cannot stay long." Although it had been twenty years, I thought I had heard the voice before. Yes, for when I uncovered my eyes, I saw that it was my mother the witch who had appeared to me. I fell to my knees. "My mother, you have come to me?"

"You can see that I have, and with good reason. I cannot stay long, my child, but I look at you and see that what I had feared is true. You are so very pale and thin, and your eyes are hollow and too dark. Do you know what has caused this?"

"I know that my hair and eyes are black and my skin is white," I said, "but I do not know why."

"It should not be so," my mother told me. "You are a young man now, almost grown. You should be healthy and strong. Shall I tell you why you are not?"

"Yes, if I need to know."

"You will die, child, if you do not know. Have you never guessed? It is Urizel. She no longer wants what is best for you. She loves you still, but she wants to possess you; she wishes you to become like her. If you remain in that house she will kill you at night and leave you in your bed until you too become a bone-creature. Then you will come back to life with great powers — though not so great as her own. You may choose this life if you please, but I think you will not like it."

"How can I escape it?"

"You must become a Traveler. You will go to the City of Red Grass that lies to the east of this plain. Have you heard of the Rubicon?"

"I have heard the word from Travelers. I have never known what it meant."

"My child, there are many dangerous things on this plain. They have never hurt you because you have been under the protection of Urizel. Unprotected Travelers, however, have to be very careful; even so, sometimes they do not survive. You've seen the bones on the plain. But there is an invisible barrier to the east, toward the City, called the Rubicon. This marks the end of the plain. If a Traveler can cross this barrier, he need not fear any of the harmful things on the plain, for none of them can pass over or through the Rubicon. And neither, now that she has been here so long, can Urizel."

"But she will catch me and bring me back before I can ever reach the Rubicon."

"Not if you reach it before tomorrow's dawn. I have a little power left. I have put an invisible shell around you so that Urizel cannot see you, touch you, or even know where you are until the light comes tomorrow."

(I should mention that on the plain there is no sun. At night the sky becomes a slightly darker blue and a pale silvery moon rises high in the sky. At dawn the moon sinks below the horizon and the sky lightens, but I had never seen the sun until I reached the City.)

"Urizel cannot hear us now," my mother continued. "She knows something is strange, though, so you must not go back to the glass house. Immediately after I leave, you must start east toward the Rubicon and the City. Walk away from the black tree; that is ears. You will not be able to see the Rubicon, for it is an invisible wall. But you will know when you are coming to it, for it is marked by a long line of black trees growing along its base. No one has ever climbed over the Rubicon, or tunneled under it, or gone around it; it stretches into the sky and under the ground and north and south farther than anyone can go, or cares to go. But most true Travelers know the secret of the Rubicon; among the line of twisted black trees, there

are a few red trees. Directly behind each red tree lies a doorway which passes through the Rubicon. Before dawn comes tomorrow you must find one of these doorways.

“By that time Urizel will have regained all her power, but for the time being she will not be able to follow you. However, she may be able to increase her power as time passes; her fury at losing you will help that. For this reason you must seek protection in the City, for I can give you none; in truth, I no longer exist. You must go to a man in the City. Crimso Farquhar is his name. He is one of the most powerful wizards I have ever know, far more powerful than I ever was. He was my friend and will protect you. Tell him that you are my son. If he asks for proof, which he may well do (he is a suspicious sort), show him this word.” My mother handed me a slip of paper with a word I could not read written on it. “Farewell, then, and beware Urizel!” Her image began to fade in front of my eyes; in a few minutes she and the fiery-red glow surrounding her were gone, but I could still hear her last words echoing across the empty plain, “Beware ... Urizel!”

Of course by then I knew I could never return to the glass house. I must set out on my journey straightaway, before any more time was wasted, for if Urizel caught me before I reached the Rubicon, that would be the end of me. I did not concern myself at all with how I would eat during the journey, for I had never liked or needed to eat much. Sometimes I would go without food for three or four days and only eat when Urizel made me. As for water, there were several small springs running east and west on the plain; I could probably follow them all the way to the City.

So without further delay I set out walking away from the black tree. The sky darkened and the moon began its silvery arc across the sky, but I could see no sign of the Rubicon. Then a bit of light began to creep up from the horizon, staining the sky a faintly paler blue, but still the line of black trees had not appeared. Soon Urizel would be after me. I began to run. Soon my hair and clothes were soaked with sweat, but I was not tired at all, and I thought I could see a faint black line on the eastern horizon. I ran faster. As I drew close to the line, I caught sight of a red streak. It was the Rubicon, and I had found a doorway! The sky had grown much lighter. A terrible shriek ripped through the air not too far behind me. With a burst of terrified strength I shot toward the Rubicon, ducked behind the red tree, and flung myself through the invisible doorway. Urizel’s shriek of fury was abruptly cut short as I collapsed to the ground on the eastern side of the Rubicon. Apparently even her terrible sounds could not carry through the magic barrier. I could see the misty domes and spires of the City far in the distance,

but I did not have to get there just yet. I curled my body against the invisible wall and slept.

When I awoke the sky had darkened and the moon had risen. I did not know whether I had slept two days or only one, but I felt refreshed and safe for the time being. However, I knew that soon I must start toward the City, for my mother the witch had told me that I must seek safety before Urizel was able to cross the Rubicon.

I began to walk toward the line of the City on the horizon. Soon I realized that I was thirsty and walked slightly off my path toward a path of dusky-red vegetation where I knew a stream would be. This vegetation was very strange to me as I had never been off the blue plain and thus had never seen any trees or plants except the twisted black one. I only recognized the red matter as vegetation by recalling certain picture books that I had seen as a child. There was one book my mother had left me. It was very old and I could not read the words, but the pictures showed a small, wrinkled man guarding a stream and talking to Travelers who attempted to cross it. I wondered if there would be a man at this stream, too. When I got there, however, the stream seemed to be deserted until I knelt to drink, at which time I saw a pair of large, mottled, round eyes staring at me from beneath the water. I drew back in fear. For a moment I thought that some Traveler had been drowned, but I saw that the eyes were alive. I could not see who or what they belonged to, though, until the creature rose and hovered slightly above the surface of the water. I had not been able to make out its shape when it was underwater because it was of the same color and pattern as the stream's bottom — dark gray and brown, irregularly spotted, blotched, and shiny. The creature might have been a kind of fish, but it looked like no fish that I had ever seen a picture of. First of all, and most noticeably, it had two great flat wings attached to its flat narrow body. Also it had a long, pointed tail with a bright blue barb on the tip. The two eyes, widely spaced on the top of its flat head, still regarded me. I thought it might speak to me, but it only looked at me silently until I wondered whether I might drink after all. It did not look very dangerous, though, so I knelt again and bent my head to the water. But just before I opened my mouth to drink, I felt a sharp pain in the back of my neck — the creature had lashed its tail across my neck like a whip and pierced my skin with the blue barb. Now it retreated downstream and continued to watch me. I passed my hand across the stinging spot, which did not really hurt much and was not bleeding at all. When I bent my head to the water once again, the creature made no move toward me, so I drank until my thirst was gone. The water was clear and cold, and it felt

good to my dry throat. Despite the sting, I felt better than I had since I started the journey.

A voice at my elbow startled me. "Hello, young Traveler. Is the water safe to drink?" This was a fat old Traveler who had come up silently beside me. If he had wanted to harm me, he could have easily done so without my ever being aware of his presence. I would have to be more wary. This Traveler was not a pleasant-looking man. The dark brown robe he wore was too tight across his belly and under his arms. It was also too short, so I was able to see his thick, hairy ankles. His small, rheumy eyes glittered at me in a not altogether kind way, and his hands were filthy with animal grease. I hoped he was not going to the City, for if he was, he might wish to travel with me. I wanted companionship, but not of this sort. This man, I felt, would harm me if he could.

"The water is safe," I told him. "Drink all you want." I had wished to rest for a few moments, but if I left now, perhaps this old Traveler would not be able to catch up with me later. Without speaking again I walked away from the stream. But I had not gone far before I heard a strangled cry and turned to see the old Traveler lying dead or dying on the bank of the stream. The winged creature, which the man had not noticed, was still hovering far downstream, so it could not have done him any harm. I thought I understood. The water of the stream was poisonous, but the creature's sting had made me immune to the poison. I did not know why the creature had chosen to sting me and not the old Traveler, but perhaps it was a good omen for my journey. I continued walking toward the City.

Some may think me heartless for my reaction, or nonreaction, to the old man's death. It affected me as it did for two reasons: firstly, because I had never cared about any beings but my mother (who had died so long ago that I could hardly remember), Urizel, and Ism (neither of whom I believed could die). Therefore, although it may sound selfish, I feared no death but my own. Secondly, I had never been taught that it was "mannerly" to pretend to care about anything which did not truly affect you. And, remember, I had never seen the sun.

After walking for another very long time I came to a vast gate in a wall which was inscribed with many different languages and symbols, none of which I could read. This was one thing I had never been taught. I knew that this was the gate to the City. What I did not know, though, was that this wall did not surround the City, because the City was the beginning of the World. The wall, although invisible in some places (such as the Rubicon at the end of the blue plain), surrounded all the Plains. It had been created far back in time to keep the evil things of the Plains from escaping into the World.

But not all of the wall was as sturdy as the Rubicon, and it had crumbled in several places.

The gate was not open, but a man stood beside it with a great ring of keys at his belt; he lounged against the wall and appeared to be asleep. I touched his shoulder. "Sir, I must enter the City. Will you open the gate for me?"

"Urrr?"

I thought that he did not speak my language, but he was only waking up. He stood blinking uncertainly at me. I could see that he was slightly older than me, about the same height, and just as thin as me; our main difference lay in our features. My cheeks were hollow and my eyes dark and sunken, but his features, even in his just-awakened state, were sharp and bright. Mostly awake, he grinned at me. "You want to get into the City?"

"Yes."

"There's a toll, you know. Fifty pieces of your land's smallest money unit or a gift of comparable value." He held out his hand. I looked at it and said, "I have nothing."

He began to make suggestions as to what I might give him in order to be let in. "Alabaster? Ale? Amethysts? Aphrodisiacs? Balloons? Bronze? Cheese? Carnations? Chocolate? Drugs? Dreams? Electroencephalograms?" I kept shaking my head until he tired of making suggestions and realized that all I had were the rags on my back. His shoulders drooped. "All right. I'll let you in for the price of a secret. You must tell me your business here."

"I come to see the wizard Crimso Farquhar," I told him.

The gateman looked very surprised and without another word unlocked the gate and led me through into the City.

Never had I expected all the light and color! I was not prepared for it. It blinded me momentarily. Tall, tall buildings studded with shiny things and different colored stones — not glass! Anything might be waiting inside them! Hundreds of multicolored flags and banners waving from rooftops, some with letters on them, some blank. Smells of savory food and perfume and spices. Fire in the sky — the sun! People everywhere — more than I had known existed. And BELLS! From the sky, from a tower with a spired dome on top, from the blank-faced shimmering buildings, from everywhere came the deafening sound of bells! They resounded through the City. I thought the sound would crush me where I stood.

"What are you gaping at?" asked my guide. "It's only the clock — dinner-time."

"Take me to the house of Crimso Farquhar," I managed to say before a cloud of shimmering blue light obscured my vision.

Much later, or so it seemed, I awoke in a more comfortable position than I had been in since the last time I had slept in the glass bowl which had served as my bed before. I was reclining on a pile of silken pillows, covered from foot to chin with a soft blanket spun of hair. Far above my head, strange, quiet music was playing. The air smelled faintly of rich spices. It must be a beautiful place I was in; I was almost afraid to open my eyes for fear I had been dreaming.

Someone touched my shoulder. "Are you finished fainting yet?"

I recognized the voice of my guide from the City gate, which of course let me know that it was not a dream, that I had not after all been put to sleep forever by Urizel back in the glass house. I opened my eyes. The room was dark, and all I could see was his cheerful face hovering above me.

"Where have you taken me?"

"Where you asked me to. You, my friend, are in the house of the great wizard Crimso Farquhar. And he wishes to see you ... right ... NOW!" With that ominous declaration he jumped up and trotted from the room, leaving me to lie in the dark awaiting the arrival of the great Farquhar.

Presently I heard the door creak open. I was so afraid that I shut my eyes; at least I would not have to see the wizard right away. I heard footsteps padding across the room. Then someone sat beside me. I felt my body tense.

A low, smooth voice said, "Open your eyes and look at me, Traveler. You'll see I'm not so fearsome after all."

I was still afraid, but I had been bidden by a wizard to open my eyes, and my salvation rested upon this man. I could refuse him nothing. So I opened my eyes and looked —

— and felt foolish. To all appearances, this man was not to be feared. It was hard to tell surely, as he was seated, but I guessed that he was probably not as tall as I was. His eyes were actually rather fearsome, dark and deep-set, but their mysterious effect was lessened by a pair of round wire-rimmed spectacles. He wore a loose, flowing black shirt, pants of the same fabric, and a deep red sash about his middle. I could tell by his hair that he was an extremely powerful magician. There is great power in hair, and for this reason most witches and wizards allow their hair to grow as long as it will. Crimso Farquhar's dark hair was cropped very short. This told me that he did not even need the power of his hair. He did not look fearsome, but I knew that he could be fearsome if he so wished.

"Speak," he told me.

I did not think I could, but he touched my forehead and suddenly my whole story came pouring out. This unnerved me a bit, since I knew that he had worked magic on me, but I could not stop speaking. I told him of my mother the witch and the overuse of power not belonging to her which had caused her to be taken away. I told him of my life with Urizel and my mother's visit. I told him of my meeting with the man who had guided me through the City.

Farquhar's brow creased slightly. "Do you know the identity of the man you met at the gate?"

"Why, he is the gatekeeper. He brought me here."

"Did you try to open the gate before you asked him to open it?"

"No, for he had the key."

Farquhar sighed. "Child, the gate to the City is never locked. That man is my friend, but he is a swindler. I suppose he asked you for a toll. I hope you gave him nothing."

"I gave him only a secret; I told him why I had come to the City. I brought nothing on my journey except a small slip of paper which my mother told me to give to you."

"Have you the slip of paper?"

"I think so." I had concealed the paper in the ripped hem of my garment. When I felt for it, it was still there. I gave it to Farquhar.

"Solecism," he read aloud, and after a moment, burst into rich, dark laughter. "Yes, you are indeed her son! This used to be one of my most powerful words, but I'd almost forgotten it. Now that you have brought it back to me, it will have a renewed power. My life has been a solecism. I hope you will stay here, child. The swindler and I shall care for you."

"What about Urizel?"

"She is dead already," he told me.

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