

TREATMENT

ERIC REITAN

*They descend
relentless as eagles swooping
to reclaim their eggs*

The premiere of his treasonous poem began as a festival. The crowd at the Great Amphitheater overflowed onto the grassy hill, humming with excitement to hear the Poet Laureate of Earth. Judas wasn't quite sure where this celebrity came from. His poems about loss were born of second-hand feelings, more pity than pathos. But somehow, amidst too much death, they'd struck a chord.

Now he struck another; or perhaps it was a hammer blow he struck. As he read the poem the festival mood began to fade. Adoration withered on a thousand faces.

As the last couplet ceased to echo, a single voice hurled out his name like a curse.

As a child he hadn't known. On official documents it was J David Smith, just the "J" without elaboration.

"What does it mean?" he'd asked his parents once.

His mother turned away red-faced. "Ask your father."

Daddy shrugged as if it were a trifle. "The day before you were born the preacher said we all should bear the betrayer's name. In our hearts, none are better than him."

And now, with a poem, he'd restored to his name its original resonance. In the silence between that shouted "Judas!" and the arrival of the EarthForce peacekeepers, he read the crowd, looking for something else amidst the expressions of dismay and betrayal. Something he was praying for. A different kind of shattering.

###

His interrogator's face was round, almost kindly. The brown eyes were warm. According to the placards on the wall, Dr. Claude Veritas was a graduate of the prestigious Hanfield Institute of Psychiatric Medicine and a Colonel in the EarthForce Medical Corps.

"You know," Judas said, "if you want to convey the illusion that you're a real therapist, you might consider a beard."

"I'll keep it in mind. Your parents called you David, yes?"

"That's right."

"So when did you decide to go by your first name?"

"When I started college I had my friends call me Judas."

"Why?"

Judas smiled. "Careful, Dr. Veritas. You're beginning to talk like a real therapist."

"Maybe that's what I am."

"Speaking of names, is Veritas an Orwellian joke?"

Veritas riffled through the folder in front of him. "I think you misunderstand. I'm not here to brainwash you. I'm here to explore the *possibility* that your views are...born of something other than insight."

"Like some deep, subconscious urge to live down to my name."

"So why did you decide to go by Judas?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you what Christianity's about? It's about being straight. If you're gay you might as well have nailed Jesus to the cross yourself."

"I detect bitterness."

"I guess your years of psychological training have paid off."

"Have you had contact with your parents since you came out?"

"I received an excommunication letter from their church. Obviously my father's work."

"What did it say?"

"I think the fires of perdition were mentioned."

“I see. How did that make you feel?”

“Did you really need to ask *that*? You could’ve said, ‘Why do you think your father wrote the letter?’ Work on your creativity. You’re talking to a poet here.”

Veritas chuckled. “When did you get the idea that the powerglobes were eggs?”

“As a gay man I’m *obsessed* with reproduction. Can’t make babies, so I can’t stop thinking about them. It’s only natural I’d look at the globes and see little baby aliens powering the Earth.”

“Judas, let’s not be disingenuous. You *can* make babies. You just choose not to.”

Judas laughed.

Veritas’s mouth twitched as if he were trying not to join him. But then he sighed. “Do you think EarthForce hasn’t studied the globes? If there were little aliens inside, wouldn’t EarthForce know?”

“Of course they know.”

“Judas. The Kraals are the most dangerous enemy humanity has ever faced. If it were as simple as giving back a bunch of eggs, don’t you think we’d do it?”

“The powerglobes mean limitless clean energy. We’re addicted.”

Veritas tapped his bottom lip. “I love Clementine oranges. I eat several a day. There’s no shortage, and they’re healthy. Am I an *addict*?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether the citrus farms use slave labor.”

Veritas shook his head. “All you have are poetic hunches, Judas.”

“The Kraals came fifty years to the day after the Explorer Five brought the powerglobes home. The Kraals are slower than us. Fifty years slower than the Explorer Five. And every attack targets the globes. They don’t destroy them. They *seize* them. They’re *reclaiming their young*.”

“That’s one *theory*, Judas. Here’s another. The globes are an energy source. Nothing more. But while the Explorer Five was off saving the world, they got the attention of some nasty aliens. Maybe the Kraals *eat* the globes.

Or maybe they want to eat *us*, and the focus on the globes is tactical. Take them away and our throats are *bared*.” Veritas fixed Judas with a hard stare. “Your parents rejected you, Judas. It must be *nice* to think of parents who’ll travel all the way across the galaxy to save their young.”

###

Judas shifted in his cell. A single bulb, secured behind a steel grate, blazed over his cot. It was powered by a generator outside the city, probably adjacent to one of the old coal plants that, in an earlier age, had spewed carbon dioxide into the skies. The new generator would be quiet, clean, with a single powerglobe at its heart and a ring of EarthForce troops surrounding it. They’d be armed with Kraal-killers—each weapon powered by a single globe.

Take them away and our throats are bared.

He wouldn’t be surprised if, at their next interview, Veritas invoked Pascal’s Wager.

It was the obvious move, and so far Veritas had been nothing but obvious. He’d seen the ploy about his parents’ rejection coming before the interview even started. And yet, somehow, he couldn’t stop thinking about *them*, about his childhood, about the red swing in the yard. Some of his earliest memories were of Daddy swinging him while singing silly songs. At its highest forward arc the swing carried him to the kitchen window, and on summer afternoons he’d see Mommy at the stove, her hair in a bun, her brow furrowed as she studied some recipe.

At bedtime it was Mommy who stroked his brow. “God watch over you in the night and keep you safe, little one.” But on nights when he couldn’t sleep, he’d call for Daddy. Daddy would sit by the bed and sing: “Jesus loves me, this I know.”

You have chosen the path that leads to death. You have set your life against His will. For the good of the whole this evil must be put from our sight.

Judas remembered holding the letter, resisting the urge to crumple it as he read his father’s words. He remembered Daddy’s steady hands on the swing, pushing with endless patience while little David cried out, “Faster! Faster!”

Back then he was David even in his own heart.

###

Judas rubbed his forehead. He thought about saying nothing. With the constant glaring light in his cell, he wasn't sleeping well. He knew enough about brainwashing to know that was part of it.

But conversations went two ways. Veritas wasn't the only one here with power. "Can't you hear their screams?"

"Screams?"

"They've gotten worse since we invented the Kraal-killers."

"Those sonic booms are a *terror tactic*. They can't attack us directly anymore, so they terrorize us from the skies."

"Think, Veritas. A single globe can power a city for decades. But each Kraal-killer drains a globe in three blasts. They've stopped their attacks because they don't want their children to die."

"Another poet's theory." Veritas glanced at a paper on his desk. "I see you studied philosophy in college." Veritas looked up from the paper. "Ever read Pascal's Wager?"

Judas couldn't help himself. He started to laugh, and it became a manic thing. It wasn't funny, but his body heaved and his head throbbed, and every time he tried to stop, to say a word, the laughter came convulsively again.

And he thought about his father's anger. It had been a contained thing except that one time when his mother was in the hospital. For a week Daddy had been feeding him sandwiches, frozen pizza, precooked noodle dishes. On the seventh day, while Daddy was getting ready to ladle macaroni, David imagined vomiting all over his father's plate. Saucy noodles plopped down and David watched his father, imagining that he was eating vomit. The manic laughter started on its own.

"Stop it," Daddy hissed.

But David couldn't stop. He saw his father's growing rage but there was nothing he could do. Daddy's chair crashed backwards and David kept on laughing, the mania shaking him even as his father seized him by the shirt and dragged him from the table.

When the blow came, the pain wasn't what finally stilled the laughter. What made it stop was the look on his father's face: the horror as he backed away, staring at his hand.

It was the memory of his father's self-loathing that brought the laughter under control. Judas held the image of it behind his closed eyes, like an image a Buddhist would focus on to still the mind. He wiped away the tears. He met Veritas' kindly eyes. "I never was a fan of Pascal's Wager."

Veritas cocked his head. If Judas were to guess, he'd say the man's puzzled look was genuine. "We don't know who's right." Veritas said it carefully, as if expecting his words to set off another explosion of mania. "So we have to bet. We have to go with the *safest* bet." He leaned forward, and his voice gained momentum as if he were reassured by Judas' silence. "What if we go with your theory, bet that the powerglobes are baby Kraals, and we're wrong? It would mean *the end of the world*. If we bet the other way, we fight a war we can win. Even if we're wrong, what have we lost?"

It was as if Veritas were setting him up. Maybe he was: drawing him in with a calculated show of weakness. But Judas only had one move.

"Our souls," he said.

Veritas gazed at him steadily.

Judas pressed on. "Do we risk being compassionate fools, or moral monsters? Socrates said it thousands of years ago. 'It's better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.'"

Veritas blinked. "My God," he said. "You're still a Christian, aren't you?"

"No."

"Love your enemy, even if it means the end of the world. *You want your parents to take you back.*"

"This isn't about my parents."

"I have news for you, Judas. The only way your parents will take you back is if you start screwing girls."

###

He'd been lying in his cell for hours, staring at the ceiling, when he felt the rumbling. His cot rattled against the wall and the bulb winked out. He sat up, blinking into the blackness.

It was delicious. The pleasure of it—of the darkness—made him shudder. He sank back down. When sleep came it was as if he were sinking out of his own body, out the back of his head, through the cot and the floor, sinking into the rich, welcoming earth.

Then the lights blazed on again.

###

“I want to show you something.”

There was a monitor perched on a rolling stand. Veritas pressed a remote and chaos filled the screen. A city on fire. Rioting. *Giant space lobsters* ripping through the streets. It's what the tabloids called them. Journalists had always been bad poets.

“Last week a dozen Kraals dove into the Atlantic. Yesterday they came up again. The ground turned molten beneath the soldiers' feet. At a dozen power plants around the world. At the same moment. The damned things bored their way up through the earth. The soldiers were roasted before there was even a target for their Kraal-killers. And then the damned monsters snatched up the powerglobes and launched themselves back into space. Except the two that decided to slag New York City on their way out.”

Judas watched the images of devastation. He'd seen it all before, but not enough to make him numb.

Veritas turned off the screen and returned to his desk. “There's a damned *movement*, Judas. Three million dead in New York, and there's a movement to give the Kraals what they want. Hand over the globes and hope for the best. It'll be our death.”

“Or salvation.”

Veritas snorted. “Your father's religion is in your bones, Judas. Except you want to *be* Christ.”

“I'm a poet. I want to speak the truth.”

“The only difference between prophets and fanatics is that the fanatics are *wrong*.” He paused, studying Judas’ face. “People are afraid, Judas. They think EarthForce has failed, and even the wildest poet’s theories are looking good. Someone’s put your damned poem to *music*, for God’s sake. Not very good, though. Sounds too much like *Home on the Range*.”

Judas laughed. But the vision of Manhattan, a city in flames, remained. And he could see his father, hands raised over his head, brow furrowed. He could almost hear the words of the prayer, fervent and sure.

“You want something from me.”

Veritas sighed. “An MP in the World Parliament has taken up the so-called *Judas’ Solution* and is pushing it hard. Before yesterday people laughed at him. Today he has a following. Tomorrow...” Veritas shrugged. “EarthForce is designing a new weapon, something that should turn the tide of this war. But it’s useless without the powerglobes.” Veritas paused. “A disavowal from you—now, before this takes on more momentum—might be enough.”

“They’ll say I’ve been brainwashed.”

“Don’t tell the world you’re wrong. Admit you *might* be. Ask the world how they want to *bet*.”

Veritas picked up the remote and turned the monitor back on. Judas didn’t want to watch, but he couldn’t help it. The spokes of Liberty’s crown were just cresting the thrashing waters. He pressed his fingernails into his palms to suppress a burst of manic laughter.

“You might want to know,” Veritas said, “that your father was in New York City on business when it happened. He hasn’t been heard from since the attack.”

###

“Our God is an awesome God, son. He reigns in heaven above with wisdom, power, and love. And He hears your prayers. Do you hear me, David? He hears them, and he knows what’s in your heart. These feelings have been put in you by Satan. To indulge them is...” David’s father closed his eyes and shuddered. “Every time you...you do what you do, *Satan* is your lover!” When his eyes flew open again, they shone with tears. “Open your heart to Christ, David. He’ll cleanse you.”

“I’ve tried that every day since I was twelve.”

“No. You haven’t. God reads the deepest wishes of your heart. A part of you refuses to give it over to God.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Because you haven’t changed!”

David felt it, that moment when everything went cold inside him and he knew his world would never be the same. “Damn you to hell, Father.”

###

It was his mother’s voice. Judas wedged the crude flip-phone more firmly under his chin and glared at the orderly in the doorway. “Why are you calling me?”

“Your father’s dead.”

Judas said nothing.

“He was on the ferry. He...wanted to see the statue. He was talking to me on the phone when it started.”

“And you’re calling me? Father wouldn’t approve.”

He could hear her sob. He thought about snapping the phone shut and handing it back to the orderly.

“You’re just like him,” she said.

“I’m *nothing* like him.” He knew it wasn’t true. “I’m sorry for you.”

“He was so stubborn. He’d rather cut off his own son than be wrong. But I believe—I believe it, David—I believe he would’ve come around.”

“Guess we’ll never know.”

###

His Daddy died two weeks after David’s sixth birthday, on the Sunday the new pastor came. David was sitting in the back pew, flanked by his parents, when the thick-set preacher told the congregation about his dream. “I saw someone with eyes half-open, a man whose heart belongs halfway to

Christ. I saw him poised between a lukewarm faith and true commitment. A good man, but a man afraid to give his whole heart.

“Christ appeared to me in my dream and said this man would be here today, here in *this* church. He told me to invite him forward, to invite him into the bosom of Christ.” The preacher paused. His hands had been raised, his eyes closed, but now he lowered his arms and swept his gaze over the congregation. “Who is this man?”

In the silence that followed, David’s Daddy rose and jostled his way to the center aisle. He walked forward, and the preacher raised his arms and called upon the name of the Lord. David watched the frenzied prayer that followed. His Daddy swooned and fell into the preacher’s meaty arms.

His father said he’d been born anew, but David knew it was death. Daddy no longer sang to him. It was prayers now, prayers with one hand in the air. The compassion in his eyes had been burned away by conviction, and all that remained was Father.

Daddy was gone.

And so David decided it was time to die, too. He’d be Judas.

###

“You killed him.”

Judas sighed and rubbed his temples. “I’d expect more subtlety from you, Veritas. Make *me* think it. What are they *teaching* you guys at EarthForce interrogation training these days?”

“Not that it matters anymore, but it’s psycho-indoctrination, not interrogation.”

Judas looked at Veritas. The man’s face looked harrowed. “And here I thought we’ve been having a philosophical debate.”

Veritas let out a growl. “You’re not even a very good poet.”

Judas raised an eyebrow. “Is this some new strategy? The *insult* technique?”

“You don’t get it, do you? This isn’t a game. It’s the *fate of the world.*”

Judas sat up straighter. “You’re a true believer, aren’t you?”

Veritas didn't answer.

Judas shook his head. "Even if the World Parliament votes to hand over the powerglobes, do you really think EarthForce will *comply*?"

"Of course not."

Judas blinked. And then he saw it, the deeper thrust of Veritas's meaning. Judas had said the words himself. Not even a *common enemy*, not even the threat of *annihilation*, could unite a bickering humanity. *Too many poets causing dissension in the ranks.*

Judas imagined EarthForce turning its guns on the World Parliament. He imagined the Eastern Bloc, suspicious of EarthForce and its agendas, raising an army to oppose the coup. And the Kraals, waiting above. "Maybe I need to write another poem."

"What'll you write?"

Judas rubbed his eyes. "Something about my father."

###

It was the first thing he saw when his cell door opened. It sat on his cot, the size of a golf ball. "What's *that* doing here?"

The orderly didn't reply. When Judas didn't move, the man shoved him into the cell and slammed the door.

Judas stared at it. His tongue felt thick. In all his life he'd never before seen anything but pictures.

In truth, it looked very much like an egg.

Finally he went to it and picked it up. It was heavy for its size. A thrill went through him. The photographs had never fully captured the *color* of the egg.

It was a color he couldn't forget. He'd seen the Kraals when they'd attacked the power station outside Salt Lake City. He'd been hiking in the hills, and one of them had soared close, the sun shining off its enormous carapace. Like silvery milk.

"My God." He closed his fist around it.

Why put it here, into his hands? Proof of all his speculations. It warmed in his grip. He could almost feel the life stirring within.

He'd grown used to tuning out the screams, but he heard them now: distant roars of power and pain rumbling down from heaven.

###

"You're the one who named them, aren't you? Kraals."

"I'm good with names. What is it you *want*, Veritas?"

"There were twenty more attacks last night. And while EarthForce was distracted, they hit Paris. Millions dead. And the Louvre..." Veritas closed his eyes. "It's gone, Judas. The *Mona Lisa*. Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*."

"Flandrin's *Nude Youth Sitting by the Sea*. I get it, Veritas." Judas' hand was in his pocket. He couldn't get himself to leave it behind. Or leave it alone. He turned it in his fingers. "What do you want me to say? If you want to save the Uffizi, *give back the globes*."

Veritas sighed. "There are four stages to psycho-indoctrination. With a receptive patient, you can get past the first stage in a matter of days."

"What's your point?"

"There isn't *time*. If you're going to recant, you've got to do it *now*."

Judas stared. He saw the twitch of Veritas' left eye. "You know that's not going to happen. Not after I've seen the globe."

Veritas fixed Judas with a sharp gaze. "The vote is tomorrow. Mandate 2136.87B. *Judas' Solution*. How does that make you feel?"

"If it happens," Judas said, "if they really give them up, it will be...a vindication."

"Mass delusion isn't going to *vindicate* you. It'll just prove that desperation can drive an entire civilization insane."

Maybe that's what happened to the Kraals. "I wasn't talking about vindicating myself," he said. "I was talking about humanity."

"Your father's *dead*, Judas. You've got nothing left to prove to him."

"This isn't about my father."

Veritas snorted. “The World Parliament has requested a written statement. Your words. *Whatever you want to say*. It’ll be read on the parliament floor before the vote.”

Judas blinked. “Someone’s...what? Protecting me?”

Veritas snorted again. “Of course. Had my hands not been tied—believe me, Judas, you’re not nearly as clever as you think. You’d be standing on the parliament floor tomorrow, reciting a poem to stir the soul. A poem about unity, about standing together to *fight* when real evil descends from the skies. And you’d believe *every word*.”

###

Judas was trembling when the monitor was brought into his cell. He’d spent most of the night writing what he needed to say. Not a poem. Just words.

Judas cupped the globe in his hands as he watched the screen. “Any minute now,” he said to it. In his cell it had been easy to start talking to it, imagining the life within.

A woman with silver hair approached the central podium. The parliament seats were ranged about like pews. The woman’s face was gaunt, parchment stretched over a skull. He didn’t recognize her. “The words of Judas Smith,” she said.

I’ve held a globe. They are the stuff of the Kraals, the same milky stuff of power. We love our children with a ferocity that leaves no room for compromise. When we look at ourselves we see frail human flesh and the reality of sin. But when we look at our children we see the breath of God, and we are astonished. And we want them, always, to be that thing we see in them, the thing that gives us hope. In our children we see the promise of our own redemption. This is why, so often, fathers grow to hate their sons, and mothers weep at their daughters’ failures. And it is why we protect them so fiercely. It is why the loss of our children is an affliction almost beyond imagining. As it is with us, so it is with the Kraals.

The woman stepped down from the podium, and the voting began.

Judas held the globe almost tenderly when the results were announced. He found himself rocking where he sat. And then, for the first time, he was crying for the Daddy he’d lost too many times.

###

Judas was led into the bright sun of a crisp fall day. An EarthForce jeep waited at the door, blocking his view of the tarmac. Soldiers shoved him into the back of it. Veritas sat on a bench inside, his face expressionless. Judas sat down opposite him, flanked by two soldiers.

“Where are we going?”

“To witness the fruits of your labors.” Veritas smiled, a tight smile that concealed something. Anger? No. Nothing so simple.

The jeep rumbled into motion. The back window was open, admitting brisk dusty air. Judas sat in silence. *The fruits of my labors*. The monitor had remained in his cell, and he’d been allowed to watch the reports as the globes were gathered up, as cities went dark. Old nuclear facilities were firing up, and the World Parliament claimed to have a plan for renovating the abandoned coal generators. Scientists assured the public that studies of the globes had yielded extraordinary insights, that viable alternatives were only a few years away.

It was all announced with cheerful enthusiasm. But the audience grew smaller as the world was descending into darkness, and even the news anchors’ smiles couldn’t hide the birth pangs of chaos.

But the Kraal attacks had stopped. So had the screaming from the skies. Somehow the Kraals understood. He imagined them waiting, enormous and impenetrable, for their children to be gathered up.

“We’re going there,” Judas said. “Aren’t we? To the place where they’re being collected.”

Veritas offered a curt nod.

No one had come for his globe. It rested still in his pocket, and it would travel with him now to the gathering place in the Mojave Desert, to be added to the vast and precious offering.

Judas looked at Veritas. “Why didn’t they fight it?”

“What?”

“Where’s the coup? The civil war?” In fact, the gathering of the globes had all the efficiency of a military operation.

Veritas smiled thinly. “Maybe you convinced them.”

Judas fingered his own globe. That’s how he thought of it: *his own*. It felt warmer than it had before.

He wasn’t fool enough to think a poet’s words had moved EarthForce high command. “The Eastern Bloc,” he said. “They did something.”

Veritas shrugged. “Something like that.”

Judas sat in silence. And then he remembered sitting in Veritas’s office, and Veritas speaking with fierceness in his eyes: *EarthForce is designing a new weapon, something that should turn the tide of this war*. Judas felt a sudden chill. *My God*. He looked up and met Veritas’ gaze.

Veritas’ eyes widened a fraction. “Crap. Take his globe.” The soldiers next to Judas looked up. “Take it NOW!”

Judas was seized from both sides. He tried to fight, but these were trained soldiers. Their arms were steel. They yanked away the globe, even as he cried out.

“Out the window! Now!”

The globe flew out the back of the jeep. Judas staggered after. He clutched the rear window’s low sill, looked back into the dust cloud, trying to see its silvery gleam. He felt as if his heart had been torn out.

“It’s how they know.” Veritas’ voice was calm again. “They need direct contact. Skin to skin. They read our thoughts.”

“I...” Judas stared out the back of the jeep. He was about to say he didn’t understand. But he did. “The new weapon,” he whispered. “All the globes...all of them in one place...are they *bait*? Or the power source.” He was still staring out the back of the jeep, fruitlessly searching for the globe.

“Both.” A small laugh. “I doubt we could’ve done it without you, Judas. You may have saved the world after all.”

Judas thought he saw a glimmer through the dust. His heart skipped. He rubbed his eyes. An illusion born of hope? But no. There it was again. Growing larger, and not just because it was drawing near.

It was *unfolding*. Petals of milky silver blossomed outward, growing more beautiful as he watched. Manic laughter threatened to bubble up, but he swallowed it down. “Too late, I think.” He turned to Veritas.

Veritas looked at him. “What?”

Judas smiled. “They’re hatching.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Eric Reitan is a philosophy professor at Oklahoma State University, where he specializes in ethics and the philosophy of religion. His short fiction has appeared in numerous venues including *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Gamut*, *Deciduous Tales*, and the *Alien Invasion* anthology from Flame Tree Press. He is the recipient of the Oklahoma Writers Federation's Crème-de-la-Crème award, the Rose State Outstanding Writer award, and fourth place in the 2019 Writers' Digest Short Story Competition. His academic books include *Is God a Delusion?* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), which was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Title. *The Triumph of Love: Same-Sex Marriage and the Christian Love Ethic* (Cascade, 2017) is his most recent book.