

The Goat Cutter

By Jay Lake

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Jay lake lives in Portland, Oregon, with his family and their books. In 2004 his short stories appeared in dozens of markets, including *Asimov's*, *Chiaroscuro*, *Postscripts* and *Realms of Fantasy*. His collection *Greetings from Lake Wu* was a *Locus* Recommended book for 2003 and his follow-up collection, *Dogs in the Moonlight*, is available from Prime Books.

About "The Goat Cutter", Lake explains: "Everything in this story is true in one form or another, except that the Bible bus sits a bit up the road from my mother's old farm instead of on the middle of her property.

"While I never personally met the Devil in the Texas woods, I'm pretty sure I heard him shouting on moonless nights. Life in Caldwell County can be, if anything, stranger than fiction."

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THE devil lives in Houston by the ship channel in a high-rise apartment fifty-seven stories up. They say he's got cowhide sofas and a pinball machine and a telescope in there that can see past the oil refineries and across Pasadena all the way to the Pope in Rome and on to where them Arabs pray to that big black stone.

He can see anyone anywhere from his place in the Houston sky, and he can see inside their hearts.

But I know it's all a lie. Except about the hearts, of course. 'Cause I know the Devil lives in an old school bus in the woods outside of Dale, Texas. He don't need no telescope to see inside your heart, on account of he's already there. This I know.

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Central Texas gets mighty hot come summer. The air rolls in heavy off the Gulf, carries itself over two hundred miles of cow shit and sorghum fields and settles heavy on all our heads. The katydids buzz in the woods like electric fans with bad bearings, and even the skeeters get too tired to bite most days. You can smell the dry coming off the Johnson grass and out of the bar ditches.

Me and my best friend Pootie, we liked to run through the woods, climbing bob wire and following pipelines. Trees is smaller there, easier to slip between. You gotta watch out in deer season, though. Idiots come out from Austin or San Antone to their leases, get blind drunk and shoot every blessed thing that moves. Rest of the

time, there's nothing but you and them turkey vultures. Course, you can't steal beer coolers from turkey vul-tures.

The Devil, he gets on pretty good with them turkey vultures.

So me and Pootie was running the woods one afternoon somewhere in the middle of summer. We was out of school, waiting to be sophomores in the fall, fixing to amount to some-thing. Pootie was bigger than me, but I already got tongue off Martha Dempsey. Just a week or so ago back of the church hall, I even scored a little titty squeeze inside her shirt. It was over her bra, but that counts for something. I knew I was coming up good.

Pootie swears he saw Rachel MacIntire's nipples, but she's his cousin. I reckoned he just peeked through the bathroom window of his aunt's trailer house, which ain't no different from me watching Momma get out of the shower. It don't count. If there was anything to it, he'd a sucked on 'em, and I'd of never heard the end of *that*. Course I wouldn't say no to my cousin Linda if she offered *to* show me a little something in the shower.

Yeah, that year we was big boys, the summer was hot, and we was always hungry and horny.

Then we met the Devil.

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Me and Pootie crossed the bob wire fence near the old bus wallow on county road 61, where they finally built that little bridge over the draw. Doug Bob Aaronson had that place along the south side of 61, spent his time roasting goats, drinking tequila and shooting people's dogs.

Doug Bob was okay, if you didn't bring a dog. Three years back, once we turned ten, he let me and Pootie drink his beer with him. He liked to liquor up, strip down to his underwear and get his ass real warm from the fire in his smoker. We was just a guy and two kids in their shorts drinking in the woods. I'm pretty sure Momma and Uncle Reuben would of had hard words, so I never told.

We kind of hoped, now that we was going to be sophomores, he'd crack some of that *Sauza Conmemorativo Anejo* for us.

Doug Bob's place was all grown over, wild rose and stretch vine and beggar's lice everywhere, and every spring a huge-ass wisteria wrapped his old cedar house with lavender flowers and thin whips of wood. There was trees everywhere around in the brush, mesquite and hackberry and live-oak and juniper and a few twisty old pecans. Doug Bob knew all the plants and trees, and taught 'em to us sometimes when he was less than half drunk. He kept chickens around the

place and a mangy duck that waddled away funny whenever he got to looking at it.

We come crashing through the woods one day that summer, hot, hungry, horny and full of fight. Pootie'd told me about Rachel's nipples, how they was set in big pink circles and stuck out like little red thumbs. I told him I'd seen that picture in *Hustler* same as him. If'n he was gonna lie, lie from a magazine I hadn't stole us from the Triple E Grocery.

Doug Bob's cedar house was bigger than three double wides. It was set at the back of a little clearing by the creek that ran down from the bus wallow. He lived there, fifty feet from a rusted old school bus that he wouldn't never set foot inside. Only time I asked him about that bus, he cracked me upside the head so hard I saw double for days and had to tell Uncle Reuben I fell off my bike.

That would of been a better lie if I'd of recollected that my bike'd been stolen three weeks gone. Uncle Reuben didn't beat me much worse than normal, and we prayed extra long over the Bible that night for forgiveness.

Doug Bob was pretty nice. He about never hit me, and he kept his underpants on when I was around.

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That old smoker was laid over sidewise on the ground, where it didn't belong. Generally, Doug Bob kept better care of it than anything except an open bottle of tequila. He had cut the smoker from a gigantic water-heater, so big me and Pootie could of slept in it. Actually, we did a couple of times, but you can't never get ash out of your hair after.

And Pootie snored worse than Uncle Reuben.

Doug Bob roasted his goats in that smoker, and he was mighty particular about his goats. He always killed his goats hisself. They didn't usually belong to him, but he did his own killing. Said it made him a better man. I thought it mostly made him a better mess. The meat plant over in Lockhart could of done twice the job in half the time, with no bath in the creek afterward.

Course, when you're sweaty and hot and full of piss and vinegar, there's nothing like a splash around down in the creek with some beer and one of them big cakes of smelly purple horse soap me and Pootie stole out of barns for Doug Bob. Getting rubbed down with that stuff kind of stings, but it's a good sting.

Times like that, I knew Doug Bob liked me just for myself. We'd all smile and laugh and horse around and get drunk. Nobody got hit, nobody got hurt, everybody went home happy.

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Doug Bob always had one of these goats, and it was always a buck. Sometimes a white Saanen, or maybe a creamy La Mancha or a brown Nubian looked like a chubby deer with them barred goat eyes staring straight into your heart. They was always clean, no socks nor blazes nor points, just one colour all over. Doug Bob called them *unblemished*.

And Doug Bob always killed these goats on the north side of the smoker. He had laid some rocks down there, to make a clear spot for when it was muddy from winter rain or whatever. He'd cut their throats with his jagged knife that was older than sin, and sprinkle the blood all around the smoker.

He never let me touch that knife.

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Doug Bob, he had this old grey knife without no handle, just rags wrapped up around the end. The blade had a funny shape like it got beat up inside a thresher or something, as happened to Momma's sister Cissy the year I was born. Her face had that funny shape until Uncle Reuben found her hanging in the pole barn one morning with her dress up over her head.

They puttied her up for the viewing at the funeral home, but I recall Aunt Cissy best with those big dents in her cheek and jaw and the one brown eye gone all white like milk in coffee.

Doug Bob's knife, that I always thought of as Cissy's knife, it was kind of wompered and shaped all wrong, like a corn leaf the bugs been at. He'd take that knife and saw the head right off his goat.

I never could figure how Doug Bob kept that edge on.

He'd flay that goat, and strip some fatback off the inside of the hide, and put the head and the fat right on the smoker where the fire was going, wet chips of mesquite over a good hot bed of coals.

Then he'd drag the carcass down to the creek, to our swimming hole, and sometimes me and Pootie could help with this part. We'd wash out the gut sack and clean off the heart and lungs and liver. Doug Bob always scrubbed the legs specially well with that purple horse soap. We'd generally get a good lot of blood in the water. If it hadn't rained in a while, like most summers, the water'd be sticky for hours afterward.

Doug Bob would take the carcass and the sweetbreads - that's what he called the guts, sweetbreads. I figured they looked more like spongy purple and red bruises

than bread, kind of like dog food fresh outta the can. And there wasn't nothing sweet about them.

Sweetbreads taste better than dog food, though. We ate dog food in the winter sometimes, ate it cold if Uncle Reuben didn't have work and Momma'd been lazy. That was when I most missed my summers in the woods with Pootie, calling in on Doug Bob.

Doug Bob would drag these goat parts back up to the smoker, where he'd take the head and the fat off the fire. He'd always give me and Pootie some of that fat, to keep us away from the head meat, I guess. Doug Bob would put the carcass and the sweetbreads on the fire and spit his high-proof tequila all over them. If they didn't catch straight away from that, he'd light 'em with a bic.

We'd watch them burn, quiet and respectful like church on account of that's what Doug Bob believed. He always said God told him to keep things orderly, somewhere in the beginning of Leviticus. Then he'd close the lid and let the meat cook. He didn't never clean up the blood around the smoker, although he would catch some to write Bible verses on the sides of that old school bus with.

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The Devil lives in San Francisco in a big apartment on Telegraph Hill. Way up there with all that brass and them potted ferns and naked women with leashes on, he's got a telescope that can see across the Bay, even in the fog. They say he can see all the way to China and Asia, with little brown people and big red demon gods, and stare inside their hearts.

The Devil, he can see inside everybody's heart, just about.

It's a lie, except that part about the hearts. There's only one place in God's wide world where the Devil can't see.

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Me and Pootie, we found that smoker laying over on its side, which we ain't never seen. There was a broken tequila bottle next to it, which ain't much like Doug Bob neither.

Well, we commenced to running back and forth, calling out "Doug Bob!" and "Mister Aaronson!" and stuff. That was dumb 'cause if he was around and listening, he'd of heard us giggling and arguing by the time we'd crossed his fence line.

I guess we both knew that, 'cause pretty quick we fell quiet and starting looking around. I felt like I was on TV or something, and there was a bad thing fixing to happen next. Them saloon doors were flapping in my mind and I started wishing mightily for a commercial.

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That old bus of Doug Bob's, it was a long bus, like them revival preachers use to bring their people into town. I always thought going to Glory when you died meant getting on one of them long buses painted white and gold, with Bible verses on the side and a choir clapping and singing in the back and some guy in a powder-blue suit and hair like a raccoon pelt kissing you on the cheek and slapping you on the forehead.

Well, I been kissed more than I want to, and I don't know nobody with a suit, no matter the color, and there ain't no choir ever going to sing me to my rest now, except if maybe they're playing bob-wire harps and beating time on burnt skulls. But Doug Bob's bus, it sat there flat on the dirt with the wiry bones of tires wrapped over dented black hubs grown with morning glory, all yellow with the rusted old metal showing through, with the windows painted black from the inside and crossed over with duct tape. It had a little vestibule Doug Bob'd built over the double doors out of wood from an old church in Rosanky. The entrance to that vestibule was crossed over with duct tape just like the windows. It was but number seven, whatever place it had come from.

And bus number seven was covered with them Bible verses written in goat's blood, over and over each other to where there was just red-brown smears on the cracked windshield and across the hood and down the sides, scrambled scribbling that looked like Aunt Cissy's drool on the lunch table at WalMart. And they made about as much sense.

I even seen Doug Bob on the roof of that bus a few times, smearing bloody words with his fingers like a message to the turkey vultures, or maybe all the way to God above looking down from His air-conditioned heaven.

So I figured, the smoker's tipped, the tequila's broke, and here's my long bus bound for glory with Bible verses on the side, and the only choir is the katydids buzzing in the trees and me and Pootie breathing hard. I saw the door of the wooden vestibule on the bus, that Doug Bob never would touch, was busted open, like it had been kicked out from the inside. The duct tape just flapped loose from the door frame.

I stared all around that bus, and there was a new verse on the side, right under the driver's window. It was painted fresh, still shiny and red. It said, "Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand."

"Pootie."

"Huh?" He was gasping pretty hard. I couldn't take my stare off the bus, which looked as if it was gonna rise up from the dirt and rumble down the road to

salvation any moment, but I knew Pootie had that wild look where his eyes get almost all white and his nose starts to bleed. I could tell from his breathing.

Smelled like he wet his pants, too.

“Pootie,” I said again, “there ain’t no fire, and there ain’t no fresh goat been killed. Where’d the blood come from for that there Bible verse?”

“Reckon he talking ‘bout your Uncle?” Pootie’s voice was duller than Momma at Christmas. Pootie was an idiot. Uncle Reuben never had no twelve thousand in his life. If he ever did, he’d of gone to Mexico and to hell with me and Momma. “Pootie,” I tried again, “where’d the blood come from?”

I knew, but I didn’t want to be the one to say it.

Pootie panted for a little while longer. I finally tore my stare off that old bus, which was shimmering like summer heat, to see Pootie bent over with his hands on his knees and his head hanging down. “It ain’t his handwritin’ neither,” Pootie sobbed.

We both knew Doug Bob was dead.

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Something was splashing around down by the creek. “Aw, shit,” I said. “Doug Bob was - is - our friend. We gotta go look.”

It ain’t but a few steps to the bank. We could see a man down there, bending over with his bare ass toward us. He was washing something big and pale. It weren’t no goat.

Me and Pootie, we stopped at the top of the bank, and the stranger stood up and turned around. I about shit my pants.

He had muscles like a movie star, and a gold tan all the way down, like he’d never wore clothes. The hair on his chest and his short-and-curlies was blond, and he was hung good. What near to made me puke was that angel’s body had a goat head. Only it weren’t no goat head you ever saw in your life.

It was like a big heavy ram’s head, except it had *antlers* coming up off the top, a twelve-point spread off a prize buck, and baby’s eyes - big, blue and round in the middle. Not goat’s eyes at all. That fur kind of tapered off into golden skin at the neck.

And those blue eyes blazed at me like ice on fire.

The tall, golden thing pointed to a body in the creek. He'd been washing the legs with purple soap. "Help me with this. I think you know how it needs to be done." His voice was windy and creaky, like he hadn't talked to no one for a real long time.

The body was Doug Bob, with his big gut and saggy butt, and a bloody stump of a neck.

"You son of a bitch!" I ran down the bank, screaming and swinging my arms for the biggest punch I could throw. I don't know, maybe I tripped over a root or stumbled at the water's edge, but that golden thing moved like summer lightning just as I slipped off my balance.

Last thing I saw was the butt end of Doug Bob's ragged old knife coming at me in his fist. I heard Pootie crying my name when my head went all red and painful.

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The Devil lives in your neighborhood, yours and mine. He lives in every house in every town, and he has a telescope that looks out the bathroom mirror and up from the drains in the kitchen and out of the still water at the bottom of the toilet bowl. He can see inside of everyone's heart through their eyes and down their mouth and up their asshole.

It's true, I know it is.

The hope I hold secret deep inside my heart is that there's one place on God's green Earth the Devil can't see.

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I was naked, my dick curled small and sticky to my thigh like it does after I've been looking through the bathroom window. A tight little trail of come itched my skin. My ass was on dirt, and I could feel ants crawling up the crack. I opened my mouth to say, "Fine," and a fly buzzed out from the inside. There was another one in the left side of my nose that seemed ready to stay a spell.

I didn't really want to open my eyes. I knew where I was. My back was against hot metal. It felt sticky. I was leaning against Doug Bob's bus and part of that new Bible verse about Uncle Reuben under the driver's window had run and got Doug Bob's heart blood all down my back. I could smell mesquite smoke, cooked meat, shit, blood, and the old oily metal of the bus.

But in all my senses, in the feel of the rusted metal, in the warmth of the ground, in the stickiness of the blood, in the sting of the ant bites, in the touch of the fly crawling around inside my nose, in the stink of Doug Bob's rotten little yard, there was something missing. It was an absence, a space, like when you get a tooth busted out in a fight, and notice it for not being there.

I was surrounded by absence, cold in the summer heat. My heart felt real slow. I still didn't want to open my eyes.

"You know," said that windy, creaky voice, sounding even more hollow and thin than before, "if they would just repent of their murders, their sorceries, their fornication, and their thefts, this would be a lot harder."

The voice was sticky, like the blood on my back, and cold, coming from the middle of whatever was missing around me. I opened my eyes and squinted into the afternoon sun. Doug Bob's face smiled at me. Leastwise it tried to. Up close I could tell a whole lot of it was burnt off, with griddle marks where his head had lain a while on the smoker. Blackened bone showed through across the cheeks. Doug Bob's head was duct-taped to the neck of that glorious, golden body, greasy black hair falling down those perfect shoulders. The head kept trying to lop over as he moved, like it was stuck on all wompered. His face was puffy and burnt-up, weirder than Doug Bob mostly ever looked.

The smoker must of been working again.

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The golden thing with Doug Bob's head had Pootie spread out naked next to the smoker. I couldn't tell if he was dead, but sure he wasn't moving. Doug Bob's legs hung over the side of the smoker, right where he'd always put the goat legs. Cissy's crazy knife was in that golden right hand, hanging loose like Uncle Reuben holds his when he's fixing to fight someone.

"I don't understand . . ." I tried to talk, but burped up a little bit of vomit and another fly to finish my sentence. The inside of my nose stung with the smell, and the fly in there didn't seem to like it much neither. "You stole Doug Bob's head."

"You see, my son, I have been set free from my confinement. My time is at hand." Doug Bob's face wrinkled into a smile, as some of his burnt lip scaled away. I wondered how much of Doug Bob was still down in the creek. "But even I cannot walk the streets with my proud horns."

His voice got sweeter, stronger, as he talked. I stared up at him, blinking in the sunlight.

"Rise up and join me. We have much work to do, preparations for my triumph. As the first to bow to my glory you shall rank high among my new disciples, and gain your innermost desire."

Uncle Reuben taught me long ago how this sweet bullshit always ends. The old Doug Bob liked me. Maybe even loved me a little. He was always kind to me,

which this golden Doug Bob ain't never gonna be.

It must be nice to be loved a lot.

I staggered to my feet, farting ants, using the ridges in the sheet metal of the bus for support. It was hot as hell, and even the katydids had gone quiet. Except for the turkey vultures circling low over me, I felt like I was alone in a giant dirt coffin with a huge blue lid over my head. I felt expanded, swollen in the heat like a dead coyote by the side of the road.

The thing wearing Doug Bob's head narrowed his eyes at me. There was a faint crinkling sound as the lids creased and broke.

"Get over here, *now*." His voice had the menace of a Sunday-morning twister headed for a church, the power of a wall of water in the arroyo where kids played.

I walked toward the Devil, feet stepping without my effort.

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There's a place I can go, inside, when Uncle Reuben's pushing into me, or he's using the metal end of the belt, or Momma's screaming through the thin walls of our trailer the way he can make her do. It's like ice cream without the cone, like cotton candy without the stick. It's like how I imagine Rachel MacIn-tire's nipples, sweet and total, like my eyes and heart are in my lips and the world has gone dark around me.

It's the place where I love myself, deep inside my heart.

I went there and listened to the little shuffling of my pulse in my ears.

My feet walked on without me, but I couldn't tell.

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Cissy's knife spoke to me. The Devil must of put it in my hand.

"We come again to Moriah," it whispered in my heart. It had a voice like its metal blade, cold from the ground and old as time.

"What do you want?" I asked. I must of spoke out loud, because Doug Bob's burned mouth was twisting in screaming rage as he stabbed his golden finger down toward Pootie, naked at my feet next to the smoker. All I could hear was my pulse, and the voice of the knife.

Deep inside my heart, the knife whispered again. "Do not lay a hand on the boy."

The golden voice from Doug Bob's face was distant thunder in my ears. I felt his irritation, rage, frustration building where I had felt that cold absence.

I tried again. "I don't understand."

Doug Bob's head bounced up and down, the duct tape coming loose. I saw pink ropy strings working to bind the burned head to his golden neck. He cocked back a fist, fixing to strike me a hard blow.

I felt the knife straining across the years toward me. "You have a choice. The Enemy promises anything and everything for your help. I can give you nothing but the hope of an orderly world. You choose what happens now, and after."

I reckoned the Devil would run the world about like Uncle Reuben might. Doug Bob was already dead, and Pootie was next, and there wasn't nobody else like them in my life, no matter what the Devil promised. I figured there was enough hurt *to go around already* and I knew how to take it into me.

Another one of Uncle Reuben's lessons.

"Where you want this killing done?" I asked.

The golden thunder in my ears paused for a moment, the tide of rage lapped back from the empty place where Doug Bob wasn't. The fist dropped down.

"Right here, right now," whispered the knife. "Or it will be too late. Seven is being opened."

I stepped out of my inside place to find my eyes still open and Doug Bob's blackened face inches from my nose. His teeth were burnt and cracked, and his breath reeked of flies and red meat. I smiled, opened my mouth *to speak*, but instead of words I swung Cissy's knife right through the duct tape at the throat of Doug Bob's head.

He looked surprised.

Doug Bob's head flew off, bounced into the bushes. The golden body swayed, still on its two feet. I looked down at Pootie, the old knife cold in my hands.

Then I heard buzzing, like thunder made of wires.

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I don't know if you ever ate a fly, accidental or not. They go down fighting,

kind of tickle the throat, you get a funny feeling for a second, and then it's all gone. Not very filling, neither.

These flies came pouring out of the ragged neck of that golden body. They were big, the size of horseflies. All at once they were everywhere, and they came right at me. They came pushing at my eyes and my nose and my ears and flying right into my mouth, crawling down my throat. It was like stuffing yourself with raisins till you choke, except these raisins crawled and buzzed and bit at me.

The worst was they got all over me, crowding into my butt crack and pushing on my asshole and wrapping around my balls like Uncle Reuben's fingers right before he squeezed tight. My skin rippled, as if them flies crawled through my flesh.

I jumped around, screaming and slapping at my skin. My gut heaved, but my throat was full of flies and it all met in a knot at the back of my mouth. I rolled to the ground, choking on the rippling mess that I couldn't spit out nor swallow back down. Through the flies I saw Doug Bob's golden body falling in on itself, like a balloon that's been popped. Then the choking took me off.

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I lied about the telescope. I don't need one.

Right after, while I was still mostly myself, I sent Pootie away with that old knife to find one of Doug Bob's kin. They needed that knife, to make their sacrifices that would keep me shut away. I made Pootie seal me inside the bus with Doug Bob's duct tape before he left.

The bus is hot and dark, but I don't really mind. There's just me and the flies and a hot metal floor with rubber mats and huge stacks of old Bibles and hymnals that make it hard for me to move around.

It's okay, though, because I can watch the whole world from in here.

I hate the flies, but they're the only company I can keep. The taste grows on me.

I know Pootie must of found someone to give that old knife to. I try the doors sometimes, but they hold firm. Somewhere one of Doug Bob's brothers or uncles or cousins cuts goats the old way. Someday I'll find him. I can see every heart except one, but there are too many to easily tell one from another.

There's only one place under God's golden sun the Devil can't see into, and that's his own heart.

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I still have my quiet place. That's where I hold my hope, and that's where I go when I get too close to the goat cutter.