

song, “Don’t Fence Me In,” still floats in the air. This book of poems, like their poet, migrates from east to west, and, in this movement lies his and their freedom.

Seter’s poems are not fenced in. He and they go out, and then out again . . . to woods, fields, trees, and more trees. And wherever the poems go, they take you along. Once you are out there, Seter’s poems like to question you: “Do you think we’d know joy if it attacked us?/ Who else watches this stand-off? Mountain lion? Bald eagle?/ . . . what else could this be but heliolatry?” You are part of this too, the questions say. They are both prod and invitation.

I accepted these invitations and was happy to go to the worlds Seter visited. And I enjoyed meeting also the characters who lived there. A favorite poem, “Golden Delicious,” cast back to the poet’s youth and noted, “What a pair we made, bookish boy and punk rock girl . . .” Such pairings often lie at the heart of poetry.

I also accepted the volume’s final command—“Go to the Blue Oak,” which an afternote points out is derived from Basho’s “to know the pine you must go to the pine.” Just so, and since we have no blue oaks in Maine, I went to a neighborhood white oak to see its lichen tats and run my fingers over its furrowed bark.

—Sandy Stott

Dammed if You Don’t

By Chris Kalman

Self-published, 2021, 170 pages.

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IN 2010, WHEN CHRIS KALMAN FIRST VISITED COCHAMÓ, A CHILEAN VALLEY of granite walls that has earned the reputation as the Yosemite of South America, it was a quiet little place. There was a single campground. Only the most motivated trekkers and climbers visited. Today, there are five campgrounds in Cochamó, and thousands descend on the valley each austral summer (November to March).

Dammed If You Don’t is fiction—it won the Mountain Fiction and Poetry award at the 2021 Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival—but is informed by the evolution Kalman has witnessed in Cochamó. The limited-edition book is a meditation on what might happen to such a place in a worst-case development scenario. It asks in no uncertain terms: Can you love a place to death?

The novella follows John Mercer, an American dirtbag climber who in 2011, with his friend Gary, “discovers” Lahuenco—the stand-in for Cochamó. Several years after climbers establish the first routes up the valley’s walls, Lahuenco is seeing more and more traffic. Mercer’s concerns are not just overuse by climbers and trekkers; a hydroelectric company may dam the Lahuenco river, thereby turning the valley into a South American Hetch Hetchy* and wiping out a rare, endangered salamander endemic to the area. The story follows Mercer as he navigates these competing threats to the place he loves.

Kalman uses a heavier hand with some themes than others—Mercer’s internal dialogues about “necessary evils,” “greater goods,” and the “democratization of wilderness” can feel overwrought—but he never forces dogma on us. The animating question, how to protect the purest places but also reap their benefits, remains just that. For those who have read Edward Abbey’s classic *Desert Solitaire* (first published by McGraw Hill in 1968), the question won’t be new, but Kalman’s delicate handling of the subject, his willingness to consider the issue’s complexity, will be.

Craig Muderlak’s black-and-white illustrations interspersed throughout the novella help bring Lahuenco to life. By the end of *Dammed If You Don’t*, with its brilliant and unexpected turn, readers will be itching to make a pilgrimage to Cochamó for themselves but also wondering if that would make them part of a bigger problem.

Kalman does argue—rightly so—that in the quest to protect natural places, we should look to indigenous models of conservation. At one point, Mercer reflects on how the Mapuche, the indigenous inhabitants of Lahuenco, “had managed to live here for thousands of years without disturbing or destroying the place at all. The model for true conservation was there. It was simply that modern man couldn’t seem to relegate his desires to his common sense.”

—Michael Levy

*Hetch Hetchy is a reservoir in the northwestern corner of Yosemite National Park. It serves the city of San Francisco. The work to build a railroad and dam in the valley took place between 1915 and 1923. A movement to dismantle the dam has gained traction this century.