



## ★ **Water I Won't Touch**

**Kayleb Rae Candrilli**

Copper Canyon Press (Apr 20, 2021)

Softcover \$16.00 (96pp)

978-1-55659-617-9

“Haven’t we all chewed / through something tough and survived?” asks poet Kayleb Rae Candrilli in their collection *Water I Won’t Touch*, an intimate exploration of gender.

Candrilli’s writing is poised yet vulnerable, always suggesting that the tender petal of a flower flutters just under the narrator’s gruff, ultra capable, rabbit-hunting, gun-loading, truck-driving exterior. Layered images of nature and casual brutality permeate the unrhymed stanzas. In “Sand & silt,” a boy seizes the narrator’s ankles in the black silt of the cattail flats. The violence of this act is inextricable from both the land and the violence of manhood, which, the poem suggests, inflicts pain on others as much as the person who carries it. Elsewhere, this dichotomy of delicacy and danger is woven into “Echo,” where a pre-op sonogram identifies the healthy movement of the narrator’s aorta. These elegant poems play with the paradoxes of beauty and hideousness, suggesting that they are not opposites, but proximal.

With frequent nods to alcoholism and a family history of addiction, the collection has plenty to say about stereotypes of rural America. When the narrator’s awareness of their gender, and the necessity of hiding it, becomes apparent, they struggle with drinking, displacement, and naming their desires. However, in spite of this, the collection can be lighthearted, too. Several poems include conspicuous references to pop culture, such as “My partner wants me to write them a poem about drew barrymore” and “My partner wants me to write them a poem about sheryl crow,” suggesting that home is not merely a physical location, but a time, a place, and a shared sense of community for which one yearns.

*Water I Won’t Touch* loops through the eddies of transgender experience, finding solace and surprises at the intersections of illness, transformation, connection, adaptation, and joy.

CLAIRE FOSTER (May / June 2021)

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