

that “we are not self but species.” The poem “Apocalypso for a Small Planet” opens with “& the radio reports how in 2050 / farming Massachusetts will be like farming Georgia— / all’s flux, no one can say what will grow in Georgia.” While the poem grapples with cynicism and helplessness in the face of global warming—the speaker’s friend “says my hunger / to be near zucchinis // will not save the planet from real hunger”—Taylor’s deft lyric holds all the tensions of living under the threat of ecological disaster and degradation. The poem endures to beautifully suggest “these cucumbers are more art than science” and, despite all uncertainty, the speaker returns to the small but mighty task at hand: “here I work a plot that also grounds—”

Taylor knows the poetic pathways of Hesiod and Virgil that lead to farming the land and she brings her own wry yet sincere modern sensibility to the genre of the pastoral. The speaker contemplates her exigency and place in relation to her proximate ecosystem and larger global systems. In “Elsewhere Food,” she observes concerns both immediate—“Failures gnaw the crop”—and faraway— “Elsewhere famine, elsewhere flood. / Rainforest clear-cut for pasture.” Taylor’s strength is that she brings both the local and global perspectives into view. Deceptively quiet and simple, Taylor’s poetic vision grasps both granular textures of the seeds she plants in the earth and the looming, pressing concerns blooming on the global scale.

## Adèle Barclay

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***Opium Eater: The New Confessions* by Carlyn Zwarenstein, Nonvella, 117 pages, \$16.90**

If you have ever read a memoir about drugs, you’ll recognize the ritual: the fantasizing; the anticipation; the gush of relief. Writers from Jim Carroll to Irvine Welsh to Ann Marlowe have described it memorably. Joining this pantheon now, with a twist, is Carlyn Zwarenstein with *Opium Eater: The New Confessions*, a sensuous and compelling meditation on using opioids to treat chronic pain. It’s also a delicate ode to the drug’s history.

Opium was first isolated from the poppy plant by the ancient Sumerians, who called it “the plant of joy.” By the nineteenth century, Roman-

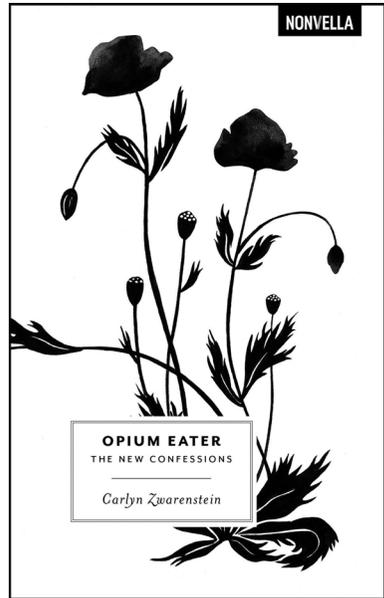
tics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge were taking it to have mystical, creative visions. But opium's desirability came with demons. Thomas De Quincey, whose 1821 *Confessions of an Opium Eater* Zwarenstein's title riffs on, could have easily been cast on *Intervention*. Today, we consume 42,000 tonnes every year while 69,000 die of overdoses. The plant of joy is now the drug of pleasure and agony.

Zwarenstein, a Toronto writer, paints this rich, ambivalent social history as a backdrop to her own story. She started taking opioids four years ago to treat chronic pain brought on by a spine condition akin to rheumatoid arthritis. Her drug of choice, Tramadol, masked her grinding aches and lifted her depression. In lyrical descriptions you can almost feel the honeyed relief: "Something shifts . . . gravity stops pounding me into submission . . . there's a pleasant weight on my eyelids, as if I'm falling into a dreamless, restorative sleep . . . it's wonderful." Zwarenstein finds more energy to be creative, a pain-free reprieve that feels "charged and electric."

Zwarenstein worries, though: is she coming to depend on the drug too much? Some of the book's most thought-provoking sections query our common sense ideas about dependence. If dependency means living a fuller life, is it really a problem?

The classic drug memoir follows an arc of bottoming out and finding earthly redemption, of learning how to live *without* drugs. Provocatively, *Opium Eater* presents a narrative about learning how to live *with* drugs, along with techniques like meditation. In doing so, it offers an alternative to the idea that opioids inevitably derail life, and counters the stereotype of opioid users as drug seekers. Zwarenstein rallies for sufferers whose pain is "vastly underrated or mismanaged, resulting in further desperation."

Zwarenstein, whose writing is thoughtful, honest, and elegant, opens her life to us as she guides us expertly through history, citing resources



from literary biographies to online drug forums. With a little wink, she even includes a “pain playlist” with songs by Neil Young, Elliott Smith, and The Velvet Underground. This book is so satisfying that at a slim 117 pages, you’ll be left wanting even more.

**Lauren Kirshner**

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***Paper Teeth* by Lauralyn Chow, NeWest Press, 178 pages, \$19.95**

Alberta writer Lauralyn Chow opens her debut short story collection *Paper Teeth* with a description of a Chinese restaurant. There’s an English menu, a Chinese menu, and an “unwritten menu of non-replicable Chinese dishes, food that no other table is served,” setting the table for Chow’s humorous exploration of family tensions. The interconnected stories in *Paper Teeth* follow the Lee family of Edmonton. Unlike their parents, the Lee kids—Lizzie, Pen, Tom, and Jane—never learned Chinese, opening a communication gap that widens throughout their lives.

The ten stories, each named after a Chinese restaurant menu item, provide brief, funny glimpses into daily life with the Lees. Although the stories span from the 1920s to present day, Chow eschews the familiar tack of the multi-generational immigrant epic. Instead, she offers amusing and poignant snippets in her rambling comical prose. Chow’s stories resist a linear narrative of the “immigrant experience” by dropping us into the middle of familial conflicts with no discernible beginning or end. Time bends and loops throughout the stories as Chow telescopes events from the future and past in her frequent asides. The result is a cluster of stories that use gentle humour to negotiate family ties, religion, race, and cultural difference.

While food doesn’t feature prominently in every story, it often func-

