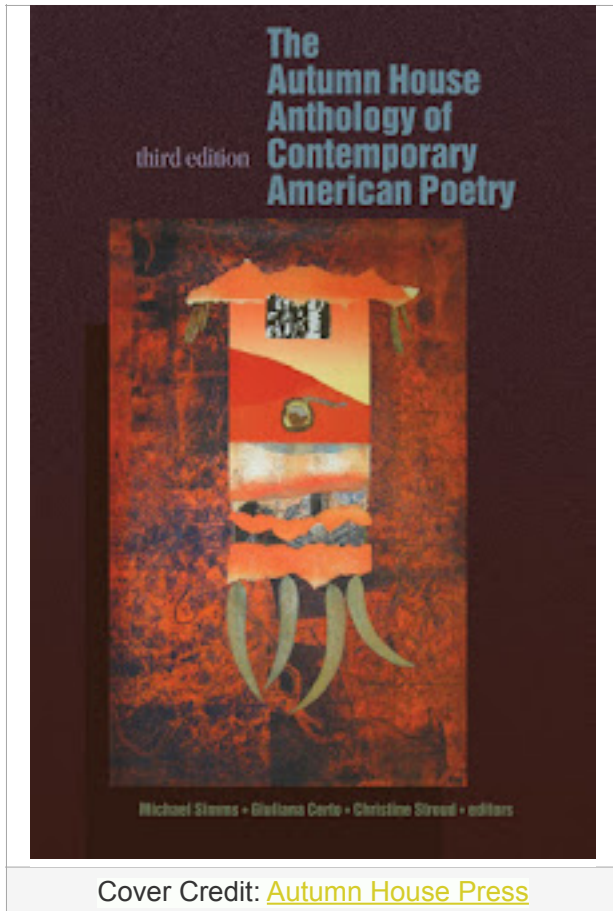


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A Particular Time and Place: A Review of *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, Third Edition, by Anthony Frame



The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry, Third Edition, edited by Michael Simms, Giuliana Certo, and Christine Stroud Autumn House Press (2015)

Reviewed by Anthony Frame

In his introduction to *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, Michael Simms writes, “Poetry is just like people talking.” He further explains the ways it goes beyond common speech, saying poetry, “has something special or amazing about it, something that makes us think, wonder, or marvel.” It is this idea of everyday language, heightened and crafted to give the reader a sense of amazement, that defines the aesthetic choices made by editors Michael Simms, Giuliana Certo, and Christine Stroud as they curated this collection of poems by 106 American poets. *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* offers a snapshot of the poetry landscape at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. These poems contain contemporary poetry’s celebration of American life and language as well as its concerns about inclusion and varied voices.

Narrative poetry dominates this anthology, which is clear from the first poem: “Collapsing Poem” by Kim Addonizio. This meta-Ars Poetica begins with a man and a woman arguing. It then discusses what it needs to do in order to give this moment meaning to the reader. Addonizio masterfully places the reader within this scene, writing, “And by now, if you’ve been moved, it’s because / you’re thinking with regret of the person / this poem set out to remind you of.” But even with audience interaction, the poem never leaves the story of the couple fighting. She ends by accepting that she cannot leave the narrative unless she is taken from it:

this poem won’t get finished unless
you drag me from it, away from that man;
for Christ’s sake, hurry, just pull up and keep
the motor running and take me wherever you’re going.

The ending of “Collapsing Poem” seems an apt metaphor for *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*. Although the editors, according to the introduction, value a variety of styles, they continue to return to narrative-heavy or narrative-influenced poems. Even poets whose works usually push far beyond the narrative mode are represented by their most narrative-influenced poems. Larry Levis’s lyric elegies, for example, are omitted in favor of two personal narratives, “The Poet at Seventeen” and “My Story in a Late Style of Fire.” Similarly, master of lyric meditation Li-Young Lee’s three selections are dependent on narrative techniques. For example, “The Hammock” opens:

When I lay my head in my mother’s lap
I think how day hides the stars,
the way I lay hidden once, waiting
inside my mother’s singing to herself. And I remember
how she carried me on her back
between home and kindergarten,
once each morning and once each afternoon.

Here, Lee presents his trademark language leaps in deep imagery with the boy hiding in his mother’s singing. Interspersed through these images, though, is a structure that relies on interactions between character, place, and action. “The Hammock” needs the relationship of the boy and his mother for an image like “day hides stars” to carry weight beyond its music. Compare this to opening of “The Sleepless,” from Lee’s collection *Book of My Nights* (BOA Editions, 2001):

Like any ready fruit, I woke
falling toward beginning and

welcome, all of night
the only safe place.

This poem lacks any narrative devices to pull the reader into the poem. Instead, Lee uses the language of the lines (the repeated “a” sounds) and the oddness of the imagery (such as the comparison of the speaker to a “ready fruit”) to engage his audience. *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* only represents this different style in a few lines in various poems, and it’s rarely on display in an entire poem.

The anthology does contain a few non-narrative poems. These are best represented by the multi-page works of Michael and Matthew Dickman. Matthew's "All-American Poem," though it does have a narrative backdrop, is structured as an address to the speaker's lover. Its tangents and associative leaps tear the narrative into a surreal journey through the speaker's psyche. "Let's live downtown," he writes, "and go clubbing. / God save hip-hop and famous mixed drinks." This type of stream of consciousness continues for six pages. His brother, Michael, destroys traditional narrative techniques even more in his poem, "The New Green," which includes lines like, "I left a note in my brain in red Sharpie it says *Don't forget the matches.*"

Beyond the emphasis on narrative, the poets selected for this anthology represent a range of well-known, highly recognizable names in the poetic world, including Alicia Ostriker, Rita Dove, Dean Young, and Jane Kenyon. Similarly, these pages include poets who were, at the time of publication, on the precipice of fame. Ada Limón, for example, was selected prior to the publication of her celebrated fourth book, *Bright Dead Things*. Four poems by Ross Gay were chosen a year before he won the prestigious Kingsly Tufts Poetry Award. The anthology also serves as a useful introduction to a number of poets who may not yet be quite as known but who certainly should be, such as Dawn Potter and Yona Harvey. "We've selected poems based on their importance to us," Simms writes in his introduction, "not on the fame of their authors." The variety of poets at varied stages of their careers represents the editors' commitment to poetry rather than the writers, and the editors should be celebrated for that.

The anthology should also be celebrated for its commitment to equity in publishing. Of the 106 poets in the anthology, sixty are female. Compare this with the most recently released VIDA counts and Autumn House's anthology ranks near the top in terms of gender parity. However, there is still a continued problem of racial parity in the contemporary literary world. Of the 106 poets, only 22 are poets of color and only 11 are women of color. Simms's introduction discusses a number of aesthetic considerations the editors used while making their selections. Although he does not discuss gender or racial parity as being an active part of the selection process, this anthology can stand as a symbol for growing social progress.

Any anthology trying to cover all of contemporary American poetry will, by definition, fail. The American poetry landscape is vast and multitudinous. This is, perhaps, why so many anthologies choose to focus on a specific type of poet or subject. But *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* succeeds as well as any anthology can, limited as it is by its 384 pages and the aesthetic preferences of its three editors. "Poetry," Michael Simms writes in his introduction, "captures the essence of what it is to be alive at a particular time and place." If this is the goal of the poem, it is also the goal of the poetry anthology, which Autumn House Press has reached.