

The Best American Poetry, 2009 (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2009, 239 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper). Guest Editor **David Wagoner**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

In reviewing a collection such as this, I try to heed three personal mandates. I wish first to draw attention to poems or even parts of poems that move me emotionally and intellectually, that make me feel, as Emily Dickinson suggested, “barefoot all over,” so touched by the poem that I experience life and language freshly for having read it.

The opening lines of Bruce Bond’s “Ringtone” do just that:

As they loaded the dead onto the gurneys
to wheel them from the university halls,
who could have predicted the startled chirping
in those pockets, the invisible bells
and tiny metal music of the phones,
in each the cheer of a voiceless song.

To envision this moment with its “voiceless song” seems to me a remarkable act of the imagination. Bond recreates the atmosphere of the grim killings at Virginia Tech, invents or describes a particular instant during that day, laces it with bitter irony concerning our reliance on electronic communication, even introduces a bit of gallows humor, without ever undermining the serious nature of the scene he depicts.

The note Bond strikes rings throughout the most recent volume in the Best Poems series, leading me to look, as my second mandate, for the editors’ aesthetic. What do David Lehman and David Wagoner identify as characteristic of poetry in the United States at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century? And third, more generally, while recognizing the specific vision of these editors, I wish to explore what their selection shows about our nation. Will they provide a reflection, however fragmented, of our national character at this moment of its history?

One great service David Lehman has provided as series editor involves precisely the opportunity to regard the state of our poetry and our culture during the past twenty-three years. The continuity of his role, combined with the changing of the guard of annual editors, has guaranteed both consistency and variation