

Judith Kitchen

an excerpt of

*Seconds**

. . . I confess that I have never been able to finish a book by Sharon Olds—by the halfway mark I usually find myself intolerant of how her poems never seem to reach for more than unadulterated self-absorption—so in a spate of newfound indulgence, I decided it was time for me to give her a second chance. . . .

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Copper Canyon Press does us a favor by publishing so many translations. How else would we encounter Scandinavian poets? *The Dream We Carry* contains a scattering of poems from every stage in the long career of the Norwegian poet Olav Hauge (1908–94), giving us work from each of his seven books and some of his never-before-translated last poems. Born in the western fjord region of Ulvik, Hauge spent his entire life there, working a small farm and writing the poems for which he is famous in his homeland. . . .

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Kevin Goodan's second book, *Winter Tenor*, consists of forty untitled poems and prose poems that strive to take nature's measure. If this is a linked sequence, the connections are not through narrative but through image and context. These poems have one setting—a farm—and they have one speaker—a somewhat impersonal "I" who is both observer and commentator. Beyond that, the seasons come and go, giving each poem its physical realities, but serving mostly as backdrop for larger cycles of life and death.

Second books are difficult. Unless the poet achieves a complete departure from the first (thus, effectively, writing two first books), he or she needs to establish a widening range and a deepening understanding to differentiate the new poems from the

*An essay-review of

ONE SECRET THING. By Sharon Olds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. 98 pp. \$26.95.

THE DREAM WE CARRY: SELECTED AND LAST POEMS OF OLAV H. HAUGE. Translated by Robert Bly and Robert Hedin. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2008. 128 pp. \$18.00, paper.

WINTER TENOR. By Kevin Goodan. Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2009. 80 pp. \$15.95, paper.

THE ONE-STRAND RIVER: POEMS 1994–2007. By Richard Kenney. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. 177 pp. \$25.95.

SPEAK LOW. By Carl Phillips. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. 68 pp. \$23.00.

earlier work. Yet surely something must also link the two books, remind the reader that these poems are the beginning of something that promises to grow larger. That “something” often turns out to be content, but it also extends to diction and syntax—those identifying markers that later become what we refer to as “style.” Then, too, there’s voice. . . .

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Richard Kenney’s *The One-Strand River* is a good example of a mind at play. That this collection contains poems written over a period of fourteen years after *The Invention of the Zero*, his previously published book, suggests that he has had time to turn his work in new directions, to give it a second wind, so to speak. The book is long—177 pages—and Knopf has done a beautiful production, providing ample space for eleven very diverse sections. Thus Kenney has been given room enough, and time, to explore the many facets of his imagination. The poems range from free verse to formal, personal to political, humorous to solemn, moving easily from nature to science to religion to riddle to fancy, and hitting all points in between. Whether in a mischievous sonnet or a set of formal quatrains, Kenney’s light touch can be felt throughout. There is no overarching tone but, rather, a sense that this kaleidoscopic mind engages the world from a multitude of directions and is willing to embrace it through a variety of moods and perspectives. . . .

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Sometimes a voice captivates us, fits like a second skin. We take on its dimensions, inhabit its spaces to the point where we identify with what it’s trying—in its own convoluted way—to convey. That’s what happened over the years as I read Carl Phillips’ continuing project—what I now can only think of as a “stay against harm.” Well, “stay” may not be quite the operative word, since the poems want to act as charm, chant, preventative. . . .