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Winter Night Tanka

Kenneth Lawrence Beaudoin

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Winter Night Tanka

A warm cup with an
old friend sometimes will stay the
season,
and friendly
talk melts all the ice outside
with promise: spring is assured.

—*Kenneth Lawrence Beaudoin*

When the Bough Breaks

Now handle him easy, bury him deep,
Cover his long black body well.
Stand back, let all the family weep
In shadows that his eyes compel.
Here no one goes his bond or bail
And silence like a mourner's veil
Imprisons us, locks out your eye
From mine. So let the mother cry
A little. Later, weeds will grow,
Cover him up with weeds knee-high,
Handle him easy, bury him slow.

Death is a broom we hold to sweep
Our Sunday houses clean, no bell
To wake whatever dreams we keep—
Maybe the shadow within his cell
That measured him for each detail.
The fingers on the hard bed rail
That opened slowly, light and shy,
That drummed away the lighter sky.
Maybe the bones that could not know
How lips must move from sigh to sigh.
Handle him easy, bury him slow.

No wind or rain blows down to seep
Through muddy shoes, only a swell
Of weeds a shovel turns dirt-cheap.
The air is heavy, holds the smell
Of honeysuckle, dusts this trail
Of headstones as the women wail
And lean and sway. The air is dry.
The weeds around him pass him by,
Run wilder. Let the whole place go,
They'll never find him if they try.
Handle him easy, bury him slow.

Behind the courthouse, up the steep
And broken steps—he tried to yell
But not from counting days or sheep—
Ten men came from the night's hotel,
Bound, then took his black and frail
Skin and bones from the county jail.
Here is the grave. While you and I
Said eeny, meeny, scotch or rye,
They caught that nigger by the toe,
He hollered and they watched him die.
Handle him easy, bury him slow.

The river that washed him in a heap
Didn't bleach him, didn't spell
His name on water. Let him sleep.
Forget him; let the others tell
Their story. What's a lynching tale?
Leaving, we step as if to nail
That coffin down. Come next July
Days will be warm, people won't pry
So much. Then come December, snow
Will make this visit of ours a lie,
Handle him easy, bury him slow.

—*Philip Legler*