

ERIK CAMPBELL

Consider What Passes for Kindness These Days

The farmers in 1942 Waterloo, Nebraska,
would meet at the train tracks,
their hands shoved deep and final in
their overalls fingering lint, always lint.

My father would stand with his father
whose withered arm hung limp at his side,
his right hand in his pocket like the other
complete, incomplete men, and wait with them

for the train to slow through town in
a coughing arc where the men were waiting
poised with their hands exhumed for the
gathering of coal that the hoboes would throw,

scooping it out, handfuls of black hail, yawlping
with beneficence, pleased with their work. The
farmers would scurry about the tracks still ringing
from the weight; they understood

each other's faces, the small acts that were
beyond shame when one had warmth. My father
would gather as his father would give a good-armed
wave to the hoboes, shouting above the train whistle.

Call it another day of heat, with coal in pockets,
everything chalky black. Hands at their
sides, collars up, not quite slouching
the warm walk home.