

Two Poems

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE

Spoilage

When the can company switched me to working near the heavy presses, my ears rang all the time, a high-pitched dial tone. Their doctor said that was normal, not to expect workman's comp

or time off. The company didn't offer ear plugs, and we were too stupid or heedless to buy them. No safety gloves either, for those who had to handle tinplate that whipped out razor sharp.

One guy took a week to get stitched up, his hand like a job by Dr. Frankenstein. They gave us 15-minute breaks twice a day, but the union steward said, "Don't let me

see your ass back here inside 45." I ate lunch from the machines: the cafeteria food stank like soup-kitchen leftovers. An efficiency expert said to speed the lines way up, which made

some of us go haywire now and then, driving forklifts into walls, shoving screwdrivers into cogs that moved the conveyer belts. "Brrrr-*reakdown!*" somebody'd whoop, to a wave of cheers. One day

I shoved a hand truck into a 10-foot stack of gallon oil cans, watched them crunch in, topple, and gimp across the floor like busted wind-up toys: *Havoline Motor . . . Keeps Your*

Engine Mike Reid, our asshole foreman, would try to get you fired for stuff like that

or if you worked too slow. But the building took up a city block, so there were lots of places

out of sight. Anyway, we weren't surprised to read about some guy showing up at work one day and shooting every white shirt he could find. Halfway into my second summer,

the company sent us letters saying they'd had \$100,000 worth of "spoilage" so far that year, and would we please "help our team get back on track." Then came another letter,

asking us to consider buying stock, to boost our "sense of ownership." No shit: "ownership."

Bob Steele

1907–1988

He rode out of our Zenith after school,
in black-and-white days filled
with antique oaters starring Hoppy,
Lash, Roy, Tex, all hailing from when
Republic Pictures cranked out 50 B-flicks
of The Three Mesquiteers. Bob,
worth the other two and all the rest,
was “Tucson Smith” in *Lone Star Raiders*,
Pals of the Pecos. *Shadows on the Sage*.
Saddlemates, *Riders of the Rio Grand*
—where hats were black or white
and goodness could drop villainy
with a Colt .44 from half-a-mile away.

Work-clad, lean, taciturn, and, yes,
steely-eyed, maybe a little on the short side,
he showed the rules for manhood: shoot
straight, ride like a Mongol archer,
call women “Ma’am,” don’t croon
like Gene or swagger like the Duke.

When he traded his six guns for a gat
in *The Big Sleep*, he could have won
a staring match with Bogie if the script
had given him a shot. You could buy
Bob Steele comics in the Fifties. After that,
the parts got smaller and his dark hair
whiter, till he wound up playing geezers:
“Trooper Duffy” on *F Troop*, and last,
“Charlie” in *Nightmare Honeymoon*.

A footnote now, he filled theaters
on weekends before the War, and on

school-day afternoons for us, his posse
from Generation Picture Tube.
Bob Steele, as the script must read,
grew old, then died, but, saddlemates,
you should have seen him ride.