

Ritchie Valens

by Myrlin Hepworth

You were the child
of R&B and Jump Blues
Flamenco Guitar, and Mariachi.

Richard Valenzuela,
they called you Ritchie.
Said Valenzuela
was too much for a *gringo's* tongue.
Said it would taste bad in their mouths
if they said it,
so they cut your name in half to Valens,
and you swallowed that taste down,
stood tall like a Pachuco
and signed that contract
para su familia para su musica.
Ritchie Valens.
It was always about your music.

You felt it tumble inside your chest as a boy
playing guitar with only two strings.
When the neighbor caught you,
you thought he would be angry over your racket,
instead he helped you repair the instrument,
and taught you how to grip it correctly.

And you
left-handed boy playing a right handed guitar
repaid him by making the notes fly.
You could play and sing.

At seventeen you were signed to Del-Fi Records
and America wanted to pass you off as Italian,
but you did not have old blue eyes.
No, yours were young and brown,
brown like the dirt in the San Fernando Valley,
brown like the hands of your tios and tias
who worked in the fields for pennies,
died inside cantinas with broken hearts.
California's hands were filled with hate that day—bleeding
brown and white—master and slave.
And there you were in the midst of it all—young Chicano
kid from the barrio on American bandstand shredding
guitar strings while Dick Clark watched.

I swear Ritchie when I listen...
I can hear it all. I can hear the screams from the Zoot-Suit Riots,
I can hear the young gringo hipsters swarming you after a concert,

how you made them laugh and dance in their ballrooms—the children
sitting on the bleachers at your middle school swaying to your rhythm and blues—
the old men in your neighborhoods watching you play *rancheras*
as they shouted out, “*Canta lo muchacho! Orale!*”

How you made them all smile, Ritchie,
in a nation at war with itself
ashamed of the blood on its hands.
You were never ashamed
of who you were.
Took an old folk song
from Veracruz,
La Bamba,
Swung that Afro Mexican rhythm
into rock and roll, “*para bailar la bamba!*”
Sang all Spanish lyrics at a time when speaking Spanish
came with a wooden paddle punishment.
You played live at The Apollo
while Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley rocked!

You were a legend then, Ritchie,
before that night, before you boarded that plane,
before tumbled from the sky like a comet,
mere months before your 19th birthday.
Your body frozen near that lake in Wisconsin
the phrase “what if”
still sits on our tongues.

And America is still trying
to shape you into Hollywood,
still trying to bleach the memory of your skin.
Wrote a movie and said you never spoke Spanish,
even though you understood each *cariño* your mother
placed into your ears as a child.
The movie chalked your death
up to superstition and Mexican hoopla.

There are myths scattered in your legacy,
but I know, Ritchie,
we know:

It was always about your music and that music
cannot be disfigured. It plays forever in our hearts.
It is stuck inside Carlos Santana’s fingertips.
It drifts through alleys and walkways
plays on television sets during commercials
rides up elevators.
drifts into backyards
where there is some boy,
brown and dusty
desperately trying to play guitar

with only two strings.