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Santa Selena

Author(s): Ilan Stavans

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SANTA SELENA

Saint, n. A dead sinner revised and edited.

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Ilan Stavans

During a recent trip to South Texas, a dignified old man told me Selena had died because heaven was desperate for another cherub. He described her to me as “a celestial beauty whose time on earth was spent helping the poor and unattended.” In San Antonio, a mother of four has placed Selena’s photograph in a special altar in her home, surrounded by candles and flowers, just beneath the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. “Please, Selena,” her improbable prayer goes, “let me remain a virgin . . . just like you.” (This despite the fact that, at the time of her death, Selena was married to Chris Pérez, her guitar player.) The collective imagination is stronger than anything reality has to offer: a young lady from Corpus Christi who spends a good portion of her days singing “selenatas” swears she sees the singer’s ghost appear on her TV screen every night—after she’s switched the set off. And a Spanish teacher I know in Dallas who recently lost her job has begun selling a poem of her own creation, “Adiós mi Linda Es-

trella” (“Goodbye, My Lovely Star”), to make money. She sent me a copy of the poem, a tribute to the pop star she considers her angel protector:

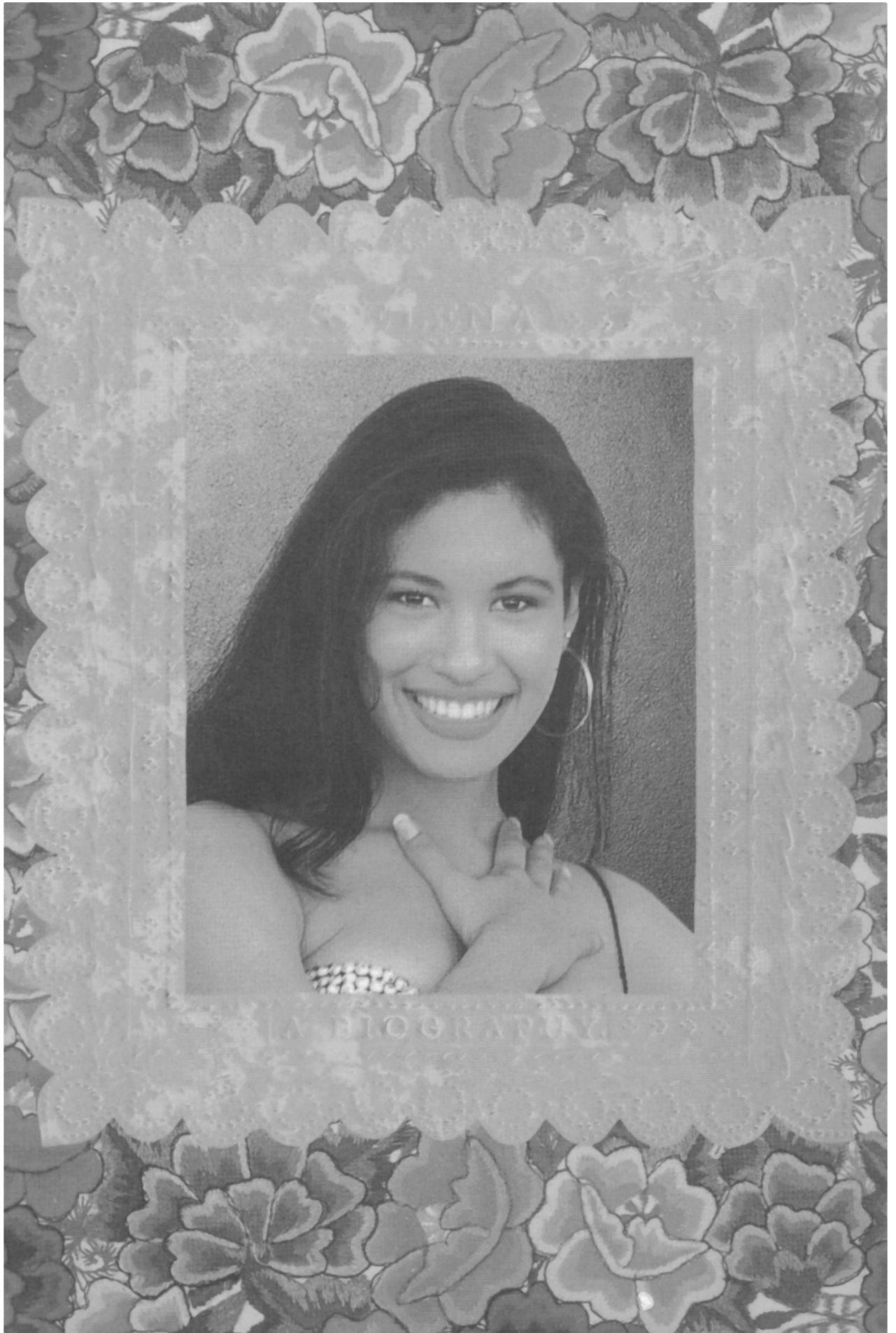
Do not cry for me, do not suffer for
me
Remember I love you with all my
heart
I know if you listen and do as I ask
I will be content because
I have completed my mission here on
my beautiful earth and
I can continue to sing to Our Father in
Heaven.

Listen, Heaven does not thunder
The sun begins to hide
Our father has given us a new light
Look up to Heaven
The light comes from a divine star
That lights up all of Heaven
It is the Angel Selena
The most beautiful star of the world
and now of Heaven.

Goodbye, my lovely Star.

**Selena:
Como La Flor.**

*Jacket design:
Steve Snider.
Photo: John Dyer.
Courtesy of Little
Brown and Company,
New York*



Welcome to *la frontera*, the painful wound dividing Mexico and the United States, a land of kitsch and missed opportunities where outlandish dreams and workaday life intertwine. Encompassing twelve million people, its capital is Tijuana, where *el día de los muertos* (“the day of the dead”) is the most popular

Elvis, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, and Jerry García . . . roll over: there’s a new star in the pop firmament, one who gives voice to the silenced and the oppressed

holiday: an opportunity for the living to spend a wild night carousing in the cemetery at the side of their dearly departed. The flag of the region is red, white, and blue, but at its heart is an eagle devouring a writhing snake. *La frontera* is where NAFTA and Kafka cohabit, where English isn’t spoken but broken, and where *yo* becomes *I*, and where *I* becomes *Ay, carajo*—a free zone, autonomous and self-referential, perceived by Mexicans as *el fin del mundo* (the end of the world), and by Anglo-Americans as a galaxy of *rascuachismo* (bad taste).

Since her tragic death, Selena has become omnipresent in *la frontera*, the focal point of a collective suffering—a patron saint, of sorts. Tender señoritas cannot bring themselves to accept the idea that she is no longer with us. On radio call-in shows, her followers bemoan the injustice of her disappearance. A movie is in the works, several instant biographies have already been published (in Spanish and English), and more are on the way. Countless imitators mimic

her style, her idiosyncratic fashion, her smile: an upcoming national contest in Corpus Christi will soon crown the girl who impersonates Selena most perfectly, who loses herself in Selena’s chaste yet sexy persona. In fact, the whole of Lake Jackson, Texas, Selena’s hometown, has already become a kind of Graceland: pilgrims come to weep at her birthplace and to pay homage at the places she graced with her presence: her home, the neighborhood rodeos where she sang at intermission, the arenas where she entertained the masses. Her grave at Seaside Memorial Park is inundated daily with flowers, candles, and mementos, and the cemetery keeper has trouble disposing of the colorful offerings. Amalia González, a radio host in Los Angeles, says Selena had sojourned on earth in order to “to unite all creeds and races.”

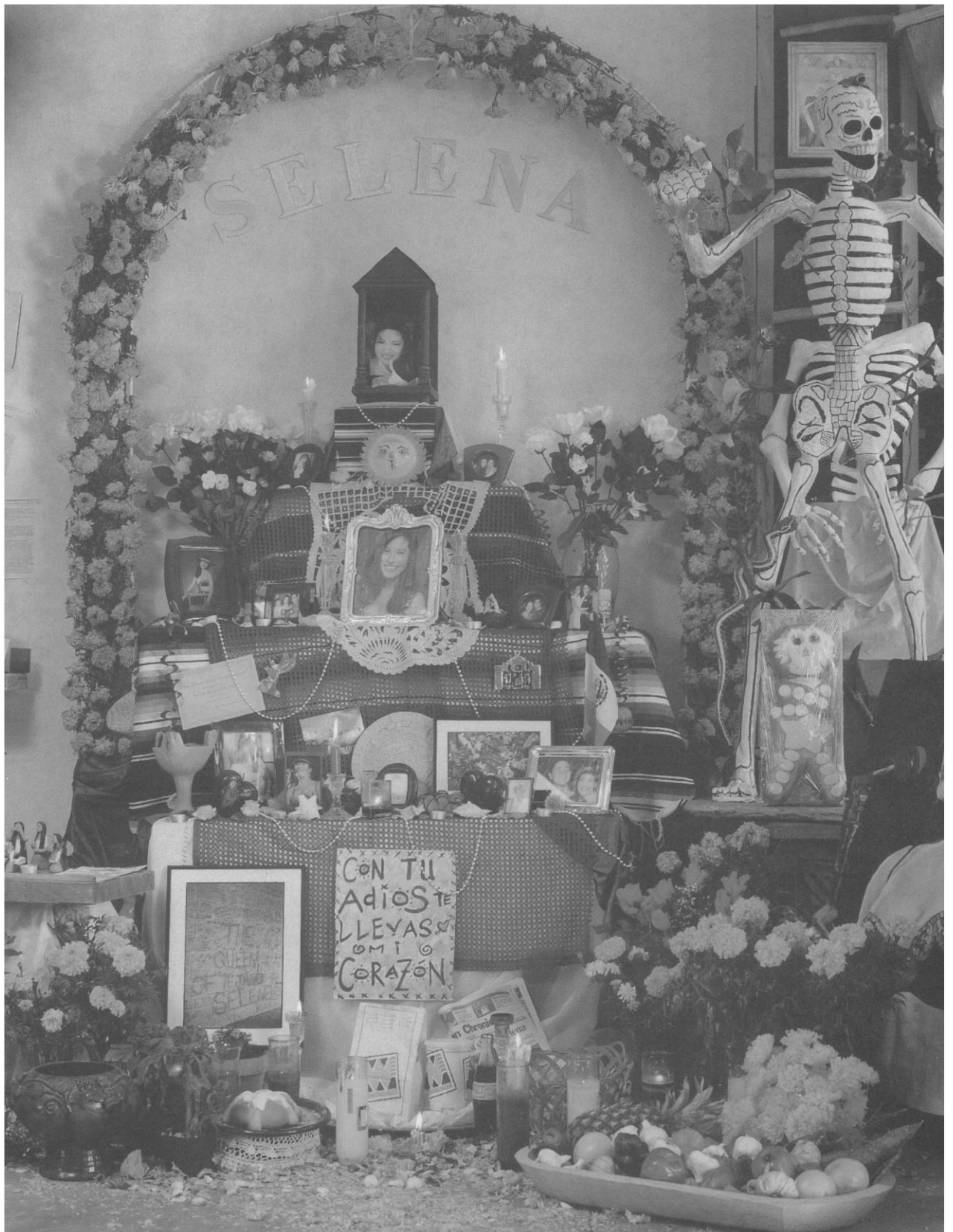
Elvis, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, and Jerry García . . . roll over: there’s a new star in the pop firmament, one who gives voice to the silenced and the oppressed. This until-yesterday unknown *tejana*, née Selena Quintanilla—awarded the Grammy for Best Mexican American Performance for an album titled, ironically, *Selena Live*—has instantly become the unquestioned queen of mestizo pop, part wetback and part *gabacha*.

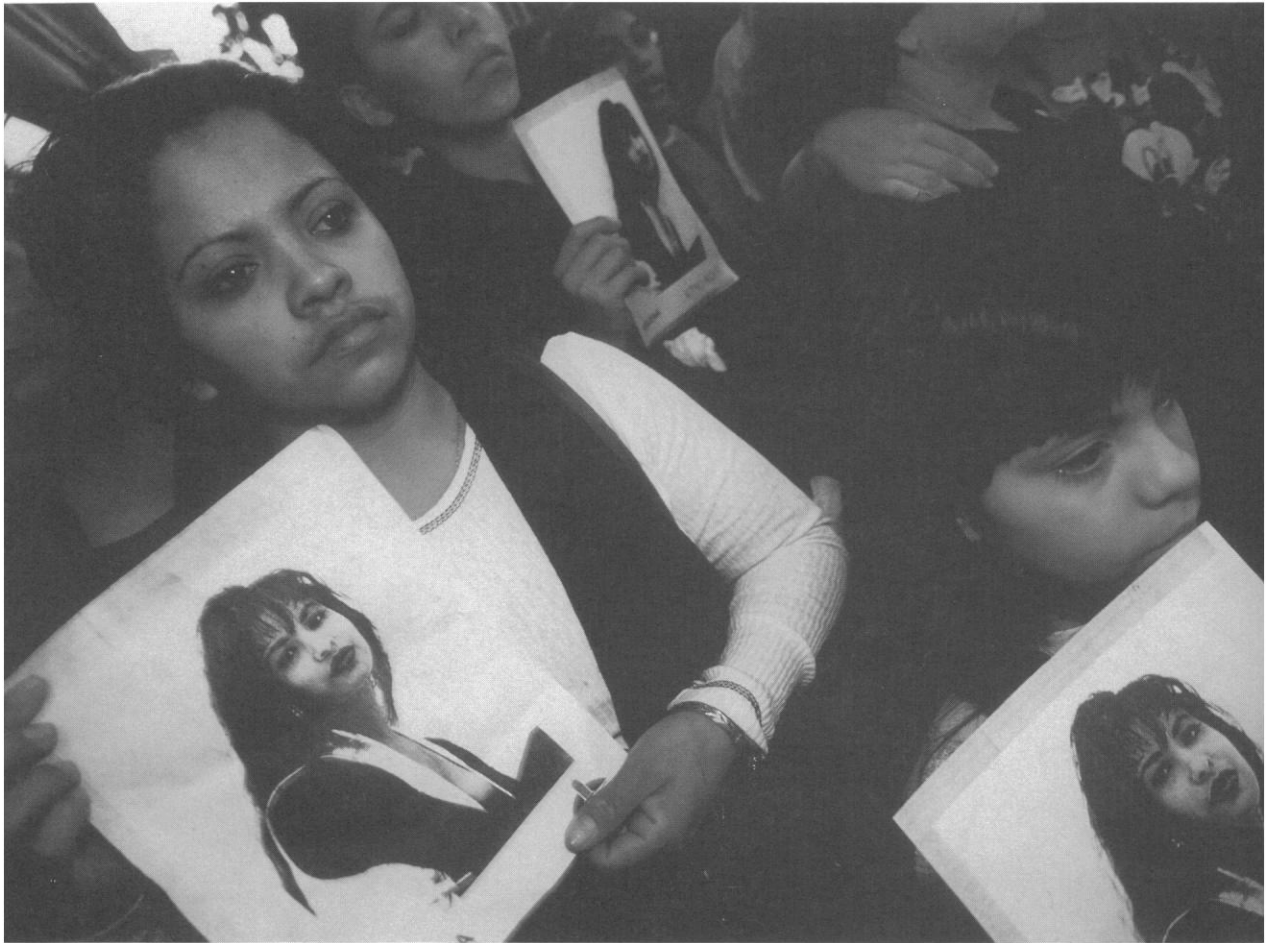
. . .

Selena’s life may have been tragically short, but death has given her an imposing stature. At 1:05 P.M. on Friday, March 31, 1995, she became immortal: just short of her twenty-fourth birthday, she ceased to exist as a pop singer of modest means but high ambitions, poised to cross over to a mainstream market, and became not only Madonna’s most fear-

**“Day of the Dead”
remembrance of
Selena**

©Barbara Laing





Jan Sonnenmair,
People Weekly

some competitor (her album *Dreaming of You*, which included a handful of songs in English, sold 175,000 copies in a single day), but a cult hero, a Hispanic Marilyn Monroe—an object of relentless adoration and adulation. Magically, she has joined Eva Perón in the pantheon of mystical and magical *hispanas*, protectors of the *descamisados*, immaculate personifications of eternal love.

How many of us from outside *la frontera* had heard of her before the murder? Not many. But even if we had heard some of her songs on the radio, we could not have fathomed her appeal: her mu-

sic is *cursi*—melodramatic, cheesy, over-emotional. Tejano rhythms, which Selena was in the process of reinventing, are a jumbled fusion of rock, jazz, pop, and country, seasoned with a hint of rap—an endless addition resulting in a subtraction. But that's not the point: her *conjunto* pieces, as well as the mental imbalances of Yolanda Saldívar, the administrator of her fan club and her killer, are only props in a theatrical act in which Selena is the star regardless of her talents. She was a symbol, not a genius.

Selena's father, Abraham Quintanilla Jr., whose family has been in South

Texas for at least a hundred years, forced her to learn Spanish in order to further her career. She debuted at age five with Los Dinos, her father's group. (He was a vocalist.) Less than twenty years later, with a sexy public persona built around a halter top and tight pants, she was worth more than \$5 million. Since she passed away just as her crossover dreams were beginning to materialize, her legend was never—will never be—forced to confront the conundrum of assimilation: she will go down as a brave, courageous chicana—perhaps ambivalent toward, but never ashamed of, her background. “You’d see her shopping at the mall,” people in South Texas say, wistfully. “And you’d see her working at home. A real sweetheart.” Some recalled how accessible she was—*una de nosotros*: Selena never turned up her nose at Mexican popular entertainment, performing in variety shows like *Siempre en Domingo* and the melodramatic soap opera *Dos mujeres, un camino*, starring Erik Estrada. Small parts, no doubt, but the real *sabor*. Had Selena been visited by the angel of death only a few years later, it would have been a very different story: she would have been an American star, and her tragedy would not serve to highlight the plight of *la frontera*.

Now Selena is ubiquitous: on TV screens and CDs, on book covers and calendars, on velvet slippers and plastic bracelets, on shampoo bottles and makeup advertisements, on designer clothes and piñatas. She is a present-day Frida Kahlo: a martyr whose afterlife *en el más allá* promises to be infinitely more resonant than whatever she managed to achieve *en el más acá*. In *la frontera*, she has been made into a heroine, an ethnic

mass-market artifact. “Thanks to her *tejanos* are being heard,” a disk jockey from Houston told me. “She put us in the news—and on the front page.” And so she did: Rosa López was merely a bit of Hispanic seasoning in the O. J. Simpson mix, but Selena has turned *la frontera*—whose children, adopted and otherwise, include film director Robert “El Mariachi” Rodriguez, performance artist

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Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and novelists Laura Esquivel and Cormac McCarthy—into a banquet of possibilities for the media. The trial and sentencing of Saldívar alone has catapulted Selena to eternity, winning more newspaper columns for Latinos than the Zapatista rebellion. Even Texas Governor George W. Bush, whose knowledge of *tejano* culture is close to nil, was quick enough to declare April 16, 1995—Selena’s birthday and Easter Sunday—to be *el día de Selena*. There’s even a motion to put her face on a postage stamp.

Selena’s was a life quilted by sheer coincidence but which, studied in retrospect, shows the deliberate design of a well-patterned tapestry. The murder itself (which, strangely, took place on César Chávez’s birthday) is already legendary, rivaling the Crucifixion for pathos and histrionics: Saldívar—whose much-lauded punishment is life in prison—comes out of Room 158 of the Corpus Christi Days Inn on Navigation

Boulevard, with a .38-caliber revolver. Selena stumbles ahead of her, wounded, bleeding, and crying for help. She names her assassin and then dies, in close-up. Cut! Roll the commercial. The next scene takes place minutes later, as Saldí-

As long as *la frontera* remains a hybrid territory, hidden from the sight of Anglo-America and ignored by the Mexican government, people north and south of the Rio Grande will continue to pray to their new Madonna

var seals herself in a pickup truck and, holding the pistol to her temple à la O. J., threatens to commit suicide and keeps the police at a standstill for nine-and-a-half hours. Blood, tears, desperation—the recipe lacks not a single ingredient. Saldívar had been a good friend of the singer, and her business partner in Selena Inc., the company which managed the singer's boutiques and beauty salons in Corpus Christi and San Antonio. So what went wrong?

You might find the answer in cyberspace, where a Selena homepage on the World Wide Web has kept her *admiradores* up to date since a few weeks after her death. Or simply tune in to *El Show de Cristina*, the Spanish-speaking Oprah Winfrey, which was among the first TV programs to capitalize on Selena's tragedy by devoting several episodes to her family's sorrows. Or you might give up on investigating the logic and become a *selenomaniaco* by building up your pile of collectibles: nightgowns,

hats, purses, money holders, sleepers, umbrellas, and a lot more—all sporting her beautiful photograph. Or, if you are ready for a deeper investment, keep in mind the seventy-six-page special issue of *People* dedicated to Selena, which retailed at \$3.95 and now sells for more than two hundred dollars. There is also, of course, the notorious April 17, 1995, issue of the same magazine, which appeared in two different versions: 442,000 copies with Selena on the cover, for sale in Texas, and 3 million issues, featuring the cast of the TV show *Friends*, for the rest of the country. A single copy of *that* Selena issue has auctioned for over five hundred dollars. My own favorite item is the advertisement for the colorful T-shirt on sale at Selena Inc. (\$10.99), which is marketed as a sign of loyalty: "Tell the world of your love for Selena and her music with one of several full-color designs." One size fits all.

For those inclined to read more about it, an illustrated tribute to *La Virgen Selena* is now available, complete with photos of her grave, third-grade class, and mourning mother, plus a snapshot of the singer and her killer cavorting at a fan club appreciation party at the Desperado's Club in San Antonio during the Tejano Music Awards in 1993. Or you might want to bring home the most complete of Selena's (at this writing) thirteen biographies, titled *Selena: Como la Flor* (Selena: Like the flower) and written by Joe Nick Patoski, a senior editor at *Texas Monthly* and coauthor of the best-seller *Stevie Ray Vaughan: Caught in the Crossfire*. Patoski's definitive report on the life of *la reina* will tell you

how many hours a day she exercised to keep up her figure, the names of her favorite stores, the shoes she was wearing at the time of her death, and all the skinny you will never find in the *National Enquirer*. (That paper, with its anti-Hispanic bias, ignored Selena's story altogether.)

Never fear: Selena will survive all aggressions, and her apotheosis is not yet complete. That apex will most surely be reached with the release of the Hollywood movie by director Gregory Nava (who brought you *El Norte*, a film about the plight of poor Guatemalan immigrants in *el otro lado*, as well as *La Familia*, a transgenerational melodrama to end all melodramas). From the moment Selena's body hit the hotel floor, a pitched battle has raged over securing the movie rights to her story. (Patoski devotes several pages of his biography to the wrangling.) By all accounts, her father is firmly in command of choosing the screenwriter and, more importantly, who gets to play his daughter. (He also chooses who gets to play himself: unidentified sources claim that he rejected Edward James Olmos as too ugly.) Selena will surely do wonders for Nava's career. She has already granted so many miracles—one more should not be a problem. Next in line for redemption is Victor Villaseñor, a Chicano writer known for his *Roots*-esque family epic *Rain of Gold*, who is under contract to write the "official" companion to the film. Although the second book of his family saga was almost unreadable, it will be hard to go wrong with Selena for inspiration.

Inspiration is what she is all about. Just when Latinos were convinced no one cared for them, along came Selena. As long as *la frontera* remains a hybrid territory, hidden from the sight of Anglo-America and ignored by the Mexican government, people north and south of the Rio Grande will continue to pray to their new Madonna. They have realized that the best way to conquer the mainstream culture of the United States is by media storm, a subversion from within. They are confident that sooner rather than later all *gringos* will make room for Latino extroversion and sentimentality. Sooner rather than later, the *National Enquirer* will publish a report on her return to earth in a UFO. A new, darker-complected Elvis is here to capture the imagination of a nation: SELENA IS ALIVE.