

The SEARCH COMMITTEE

A full-page background image showing a long, straight asphalt road stretching into the distance. On both sides of the road are rows of tall palm trees. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The road surface is dark asphalt with a white dashed line down the center. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

*JOSÉ
SKINNER*

PRAISE FOR JOSÉ SKINNER'S *THE TOMBSTONE RACE*:

"José Skinner's long-awaited second collection measures up to, and indeed surpasses, his critically acclaimed debut *Flight and Other Stories*. Such dazzling storytelling was worth the wait."

—Rigoberto González, *NBC News Latino*

"Skinner's stories are smart and colloquial, conflicted and comical.... He doesn't pull punches with roles and he allows the individuals he follows to roam outside the box of assumed roles."

—*Austin American-Statesman*

"New Mexico is fertile literary soil for José Skinner's second story collection. The fourteen stories explore society through the lens of ethnicity, class, friendship, family conflict and generational friction. Believable, quirky characters, young and old, inhabit the stories."

—*Albuquerque Journal*

"Skinner allows his characters to speak in a language that is evocative, unsentimental and empirical."

—*Pasatiempo*

"The authenticity of José Skinner's experiences as a Spanish/English interpreter in the courtrooms of the Southwest hit harder than an NFL linebacker."

—*Latina*

"With verisimilitude, compassion and a surprising amount of nobility, Skinner navigates the mean streets of New Mexico with cunning and grace."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"[M]ultiple magical worlds, each story containing its own aching heart, artfully reflecting its own complex vision of modern-day New Mexico."

—Annie Dawid, *High Country News*

PRAISE FOR JOSÉ SKINNER'S *FLIGHT AND OTHER STORIES*:

"A varied, well-crafted and frequently daring collection of vignettes centering mostly around the complex interplay between whites and Latinos in the American Southwest. The characters are complex and fully realized, and Skinner's voice is confident yet nuanced throughout."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"The lonely voices in these stories—the best of which try for a neat resolution and then reveal its fragility—are all immediate, their talk laced with Spanish insult and endearment, comic, angry, anguished. He is a writer to watch."

—*Booklist*

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José Skinner



Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

For Melynda, *por supuesto*

The Search Committee is funded in part by a grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts. We are thankful for its support.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Ryan Hoston
Cover photo by Tails Kubi / Shutterstock.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025930185

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Printed in the United States of America

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Chapter One

The job candidate's flight was due to arrive at 11:33 a.m. and Assistant Professor William Quigley, who didn't teach until evenings on Wednesdays, volunteered to pick her up. The airport, which was surrounded on three sides by sugar cane fields and had ratty bougainvilleas spilling from chipped terracotta pots on its observation deck, looked like something out of a Graham Greene novel. Quigley called the aesthetic "tropical ramshackle," and he intended to use both the allusion to Greene as well as this clever coinage to charm the candidate if the chance arose.

Lest the airport itself be insufficient to convince her she had landed in the tropics, or at least the semi-tropics, lest it escape her that it was March and already 90 degrees and those were real royal palms lining the medians in the parking lot, he had dressed in his best tierra caliente outfit: cream-colored guayabera, bone-toned linen pants, Panama hat and the huaraches he'd bought across the border in Mexico, eight miles to the south. He'd been keen from the beginning to sell the South Texas setting to the applicants, trying to work palm trees and the beaches of Padre Island into the Modern Languages Association ad before conceding to the other members of the faculty search committee that those probably did make it sound too much like they were advertising a vacation resort rather than a tenure-track position in the Department of Languages and Literatures at Bravo University.

He'd written her name in the best block letters he could make, MINERVA MONDRAGÓN, on a flap he'd ripped from a box of copy paper. He felt simultaneously foolish and important as the arriving passengers eyed him and his placard with curiosity. It was unusual for someone flying into Providencia, Texas, to be met by a stranger. But the sign was necessary because the committee had not interviewed her in person at the MLA convention, only later by phone, so no one on the committee knew what she looked like. There was no image of her on the website of the school where she was finishing up her graduate work, or anywhere else on the Internet that he could find. There were several Minerva Mondragóns on Facebook, but none of them could have been her, except for the handful with blank silhouettes instead of pictures. He dared not message any of those because the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission representative had warned the members of the search committee not to contact any candidate through social media.

The stream of arriving passengers slowed to a trickle, petered out. No Minerva Mondragón. How could she have missed him? As he descended the escalator to baggage claim, a slender young woman in a black suit and a pointy-collared white blouse rose toward him on the adjacent steps. (Later he'd learn that the suit, fitted so nicely at the hips and flared at the bottoms, was fashioned after the one Pam Grier wore in the film *Jackie Brown*. A bit of cosplay, perhaps; her CV listed two conference papers on blaxploitation films.) He inched the placard up so she could see it, and when she passed him, she took notice and burst into laughter.

"Yes, yes!" she said, and reached out as if to grab him, although by then they were well separated.

She came back down the escalator to where he stood, sign at his side, feeling his face flush, which deepened the flushing in idiotic circularity.

Her fingers were as small and slender as the pencils he gave his students for filling in the bubbles on their faculty

evaluations, but the strength of her grip conveyed a self-confidence that put him paradoxically on alert and at ease. His own hands were disproportionately meaty and shaking a small woman's hand in his mitt always felt awkward. Certain Latina colleagues in Languages and Literatures greeted each other, and sometimes other men as well, with cheek kisses, and that seemed to him a much more appropriate way of greeting a woman than seizing her hand. He believed the kissers were all Mexicans or Mexican Americans or other sorts of Latinx. He couldn't tell the difference. He'd been living on the border and teaching at Bravo almost three years now and he still had a hard time solving for the X. Among themselves, they could distinguish Puerto Ricans from Cubans, say, and even Monterrey Mexicans from Mexico City ones, based, he supposed, on accents and lexicon. He'd heard New Mexicans like Ms. Mondragón were a breed (though he'd never use such a word!) unto themselves: tough mountain people as opposed to the gentler, more pastoral Tejanos. But what did he know?

"You don't have any other luggage?" he asked, eyeing the leather bag slung over her shoulder.

"No. I was just down here looking for you."

He supposed it made sense for her to have gone to baggage claim to look for him; indeed, that's where he'd headed when he realized he'd missed her coming through the arrival gate. But he felt it somehow put him at a disadvantage for her to have been actively looking for him instead of staying upstairs, bewildered, waiting to be found.

"Is that sugar cane out there?" she asked as they walked to his car.

"That's right!" he said, sounding a bit too surprised, he supposed, but most visitors had no idea what that monstrous grass was.

He told her about the conflict between the sugar baron and the airport people over burning the fields at the end of the year. "They have to burn at night when the airport's closed.

Even so, the airport people are always lodging complaints with the FAA over the soot."

"Sugar baron? Sounds like a powerful man." She had mobile lips poised to say wry things, and she seemed to find the idea of a sugar baron amusing.

"That he is."

He was tempted to add that every so often Mexican immigrants hiding in the fields got burned alive in the fires. The sugar people insisted they gave fair warning by announcing the impending burns on megaphones from all corners of the fields, and that they couldn't help it if the immigrants mistook this for the Border Patrol trying to frighten and flush them out.

But Quigley didn't mention this macabre detail. One didn't want to distress a candidate with such stories.

"It's like a Graham Greene novel down here sometimes," he said. He stopped, turned, spread his arms. "Just look at that terminal—tropical ramshackle. Total Greenland!"

"Greeneland" had become a literary term for a Third World place where nobody knows whom to trust; but he didn't go on about it, for fear of appearing pedantic.

The plan was to take her to lunch and then to her committee interview. After the interview, he'd drive her to her hotel so she could rest. Another committee member would pick her up at seven and take her to dinner, to which everyone in the department was invited. Quigley was disappointed that no faculty member had responded to his invitation to join them for lunch, but ever since the dean's office stopped picking up the tab, attendance at these meals had dropped off drastically. He could only hope a few would show up for the dinner. He couldn't since he taught on Wednesday nights.

"Where would you like to go to lunch?" he asked. "We have a lot of good Mexican places around here."

"Mexican? What a surprise."

How to evaluate her wryness? As a sign of easy collegiality, or as a potentially troublesome sarcastic streak? Again, he wished one of the more experienced committee members had

deigned to join them. Personally, he believed he liked her attitude. Wasn't her response better than a fake and overeager "That sounds great!"?

"Well, more like Tex-Mex," he amended. "The real thing's across the border. Margaritas made with fresh limes. Seven kinds of mole."

"Let's go there."

"To Mexico?"

"Sure, why not? Is it too far?"

"No, no, it's not far. Eight miles."

He surprised himself by hanging a left on Alamo Avenue and heading south to La Reina, the city on the Mexican side. It was as if her suggestion were a challenge he couldn't refuse.

"There's a great place right on the plaza down there called Las Brasas," he said. "They make the guacamole right at your table with the biggest, butteriest avocados."

The thought of the guacamole didn't entirely melt the tension that had dropped into his stomach like an ice cube as soon as he had accepted her challenge, because how could she not know about all the trouble in Mexico with the drug cartels? Yet it had been months since he'd heard anything about shootouts in La Reina, so he supposed things were relatively calm at the moment. At any rate, he would refrain from mentioning the situation, just like he'd refrained from telling the hideous story of the "wetbacks" (as many locals, Hispanic and Anglo alike, blithely persisted in calling immigrants from the south) burned alive in the sugar fields. She was the third candidate they'd interviewed for the position, and if she turned it down as the first two had, the provost would likely not authorize a new search and perhaps eliminate the faculty line altogether, and Quigley's committee would be seen by the whole department as having failed.

"A plaza in Mexico," she said, almost dreamily. "That sounds nice."

She settled into her seat with a sensuousness that sharpened his caution. He was single and available, but as the EEOC rep had twice reminded the search committee, it was forbidden to inquire into a candidate's marital or relationship status. If he was to learn about her own availability, he'd have to wait for her to reveal it. Meanwhile, he hoped she realized that the seats were leather—a Bravo academic's salary wasn't great, but how bad could it be if a young assistant professor could afford a new, fully loaded Camry with leather—okay, leatherette—seats?

"We'll park on this side and walk across the bridge. The plaza's only two blocks from the river."

"This is better than driving across?"

It is if you like to see the hubcaps still on your car and your job candidate's bag in the trunk when you come out of the restaurant, Quigley thought.

"It's faster," he said, which was also true.

Quigley had recently learned that "plaza" didn't just mean a town square. It was also the drug cartels' word for "turf." This new knowledge had darkened his image of the La Reina plaza proper, which he had known as a sunny place filled with balloon-men, shrieking children, strolling lovers and old guys getting their shoes shined. Now he pictured it empty, with machine-gun-toting narcos circling it in their black SUVs, though surely this was an exaggeration. What did he know? He hadn't been to La Reina in over a year.

"Actually, maybe we don't have enough time," he said, slowing, looking for a place to turn around.

"That's too bad," she said, sounding genuinely disappointed. "That must be one of the attractions of working here? The proximity to Mexico?"

"Well, for me it was. Is. What the hell, let's go." He sped up.

She laughed the same merry laugh she'd laughed on the airport escalator. He felt himself blush again.

"The situation doesn't frighten you?" she asked.

"The situation?" he said, the ice cube recrystallizing.

“The narco situation. The ‘exceptional situation,’ as some politico from down here put it.”

Okay, then, she’d brought it up, not he. “Oh, you have to keep your eyes open. But that’s a good idea wherever you are, right?”

Quigley didn’t want the “situation” to frighten him. If he became frightened, it would keep him away from Mexico altogether and indeed rob him of one of the main perks of working at Bravo. Ms. Mondragón was right, it was a definite benefit to be able to pop over to Mexico on weekends or after work, maybe even get a cool summer place in the mountains around Monterrey or Saltillo. True, he hadn’t been to Mexico in months, but not, he told himself, because he was scared to go. He’d just been awfully busy this semester with service work—search committee work, for example. Heck, even the seasonal Texans, old retirees from Iowa and Minnesota who came south every winter, still ventured there, though in much reduced numbers from previous years. Rumor had it that the State Department might soon issue a travel warning for all of northern Mexico, but that hadn’t happened yet. The job candidate wanted to visit Mexico, and it was his job to show her around, get her interested in the area. So, yes... Let’s go.

Chapter Two

As befit a candidate for a position in Border Studies, she peered intently at the currency-exchange houses, the bulk clothing warehouses, the used car lots—all those border enterprises that thickened on either side of the road as they approached the bridge. He refrained from sharing with her his thought that any number of them might be involved in laundering drug money.

“A lot of blood banks,” she observed. “Quick cash for the migrant journey north.”

A moment of silence as Quigley considered this. Then he pointed to a sign in front of a doublewide trailer: ¡Bienvenidos, Hermanos Transmigrantes!

“Is that some kind of migrant welcoming station? Pretty bold, if so. What might the Border Patrol think?”

“No, no, that’s for people heading south,” she said. “See those cars in the lot? The ones with the chains? They’re being towed all the way down to Central America, and these transmigrante places are where they get the manifests for transport through Mexico.”

Her actual writing involved borders not in any geopolitical sense but as “sites of cultural liminalities,” as he recalled from her dissertation abstract, whose title, if he remembered correctly, was *Red Oni, Blue Oni: Transposing Tropes of Domestic Power in La Familia Burrón*. She’d included the first couple of chapters of the dissertation in her application, but

he hadn't read much beyond the abstract; he took its promise to show how "nomadic and hybridized forms of critique could provide a transdisciplinary gaze at transcultural worlds" as a warning to back off. Culture studies wasn't his field, and he didn't want to wade into a bog of jargon. (As committee member Charles DeWitt had quipped, trying as always to live up to his surname, the poppier the subject, the boggier the analysis.) The actual subject matter seemed entertaining enough, though. *La Familia Burrón* was a popular Mexican comic book about a lower middle-class family in Mexico City, and oni referred to certain Japanese mythological figures featured in manga and other Japanese pop culture. The mother in the Burrón family was a perfect personification of red oni—impetuous, defiant, full of wild schemes—while the diminutive father was quintessentially blue—level-headed, serene and often caught off-guard by his wife's antics. Truth be told, the only question he or anyone else on the committee would have about the dissertation was whether it would be finished by the time she'd be hired in the fall. She'd completed her coursework and passed her comps at the University of New Mexico's Department of Comparative Cultural Studies, but the dissertation was still a work in progress, so she was therefore abd, all but dissertation.

The very word "liminalities," along with the fact that *La Familia Burrón* was a comic book, was bound to set off a few in the Languages and Literatures old guard at Bravo, who grumbled that these new fields—Border Studies, Culture Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Masculinity Studies, Fat Studies—didn't belong in their department, or in any other for that matter. But since the position had been the idea of the chair and the dean—two men, both named Garza, of one mind in so many matters that faculty often referred to them collectively as the "chean"—there was nothing the old guys (and they were all guys) could do about it. It hadn't helped that Quigley, in a discussion about the new position at a department meeting, had spoken of "border" as a "floating

signifier,” because then they must have imagined the new hire floating around on her signifier ready to land on their toes with any number of new courses of her concoction. What if she proposed, say, a course on the border between Romantic and Modernist literature? That would make neither the Romantics nor the Modernists happy. No, when the old guys thought of the word “border,” it was best for them to think it meant *this* border, the border near whose bridge Dr. Quigley and Ms. Mondragón were now parking, the border that imperceptibly flowed rather than floated: the Rio Grande.

Quigley inhaled the smoky smell of Mexico. Not a fragrant smoke—more like burning tires. Whenever he heard some oil-patch Texas politician rail against government regulation, he felt like inviting them to smell the unregulated odors of Mexico, eat the frankenfish from the polluted Rio Grande, visit the not-exactly-built-to-code slums on the hill-sides of La Reina and otherwise enjoy the many delights of a country operating under what he understood to be a minimally functioning government.

“If we’re gonna walk across, I’d better change shoes,” she said.

He opened the trunk for her, and she bent over to change from heels to flats. She grabbed his arm for balance. That strong grip again.

They followed a ramp onto the bridge. Scads of people were crossing on both sides, the American authorities inspecting the vehicles coming in.

She paused on the bridge to contemplate the river. “The water’s so green,” she said. “And clear.”

“Looks refreshing, doesn’t it?” Quigley said, sweat prickling his scalp. “But I wouldn’t drink it.”

“Of course not.”

What a silly thing to say, Quigley thought. “Don’t drink the water!”—that tired old cliché about the Third World. (Come to think of it, wasn’t “Third World” politically incorrect now? Or just geopolitically obsolete? “Underdeveloped”

or “developing” sounded so paternalistic. “Emerging,” downright larval. You could just say, bluntly, “poor countries,” but poor for whom? Forbes’ second-richest man in the world that year was a Mexican, the telecommunications mogul Carlos Slim.)

“By the way, you might want to put your phone on roaming,” he said. “Or turn it off. As soon as we cross that marker, the calls are international.”

“The satellites are that accurate, huh?”

“Yeah. Well, not quite. There’s a Dreamer who got deported and dumped down here—one of those kids whose parents brought him to America illegally, you know, undocumented, when he was little—and sometimes you can see him pressed up against the fence here on the Mexican side, that corner right there, talking on his cell to his friends and family in the US. He can get reception right in that spot. The US is the only place where he has friends and family, poor guy. I had him in one of my comp classes, before they deported him. He doesn’t even speak Spanish.”

He felt a clutching at the cuff of his pants and jerked his foot back.

“What is it?” she said. “Oh! Children!”

Three tiny, stained hands mushroomed their way through the gaps in the bridge deck and opened, palms up. He had forgotten about the child beggars who somehow managed to crawl along the bridge’s trestle. Though you couldn’t see their faces, you could hear their high-pitched supplication. As always, Quigley didn’t know whether to acknowledge the oppressiveness of charity by not giving—and risk appearing callous—or give and risk being seen as naïve and self-congratulatory. Minerva delved into her shoulder bag; taking his cue, he searched his pockets for change, making sure to hold back quarters for the turnstiles, their only barrier before entering Mexico.

They pressed coins into the little palms and watched the hands clamp shut and withdraw.

The guardhouse at the end of the bridge on the Mexican side stood empty.

“Nobody to check our papers, ey?” she said.

“Nope, no I.D. needed to walk south across the bridge,” he said, feeling, as he always did when crossing like this into Mexico, a kind of giddy elation at the freedom of it. No documents—that was the upside of no regulation. Just waltz right in.

“Crossing back into the US, that’s different,” he added. “Oh, goddammit.”

“What?”

“You didn’t bring your passport, did you?”

“No.”

“Neither did I, but I think you’re supposed to have a passport now to re-enter the States.”

“I think you’re right. It used to be so easy. Say ‘American’ and they waved you in.”

It was a post-9/11 thing, this passport deal. He’d overheard a colleague outside his office door recounting to another professor how he’d forgotten his, and the border agents, in trying to decide whether to let him back in, had peppered him with questions about his place of birth, Fairbanks, Alaska. “They wanted to know what kind of birds were native to the area. I said, ‘penguins!’ and that did it. Penguins are a southern hemisphere thing and there’s not a penguin within 10,000 miles of Fairbanks, but I knew that was what they wanted to hear.”

“No offense, but you *are* a US citizen, aren’t you?” Quigley asked her.

“Of course.”

Problem was, Quigley thought unhappily, she looked plenty Mexican enough to hold them up on the way back. How long of an interrogation would the CBP officers subject her to? Would they now be able to get lunch, through US immigration and to the meeting with the search committee on time? Dammit, he hadn’t had time to think this little jaunt through and here they were.