I was allowed to take only three personal possessions to El Norte. We would be traveling by bus for three days and two nights, my mother, my brother, and I, to meet with my father and grandparents at the U.S.–México border. My mother packed our clothes. My brother made his selections but he refused to show me—those three things were the only things that were only his and he wanted to keep it that way. I chose a green car, a Beetle that looked like a plastic honeydew melon; *The Little Drummer Boy*, a book with a gold spine; and a toy soldier, the biggest among the smaller armies that my cousins knocked down by rolling marbles across the kitchen floor.

“Why are you taking this thing? It takes up too much room,” my mother said. The soldier poised with a pointed rifle was a clunky *L* in my suitcase.

“Because,” I said, “I want to impress those gringos. I bet they’ve never seen anything like *this*.”

My mother raised her eyebrows but packed the soldier, and I would always remember him that way, snug among my shirts and socks, resting his weapon all the way to another country. I would come to understand his loneliness also because once we settled into our California house, he got
tossed inside a box with a book and a miniature car for company—all three objects going cold next to the refrigerator when the electricity got cut off and the house didn’t feel like home.