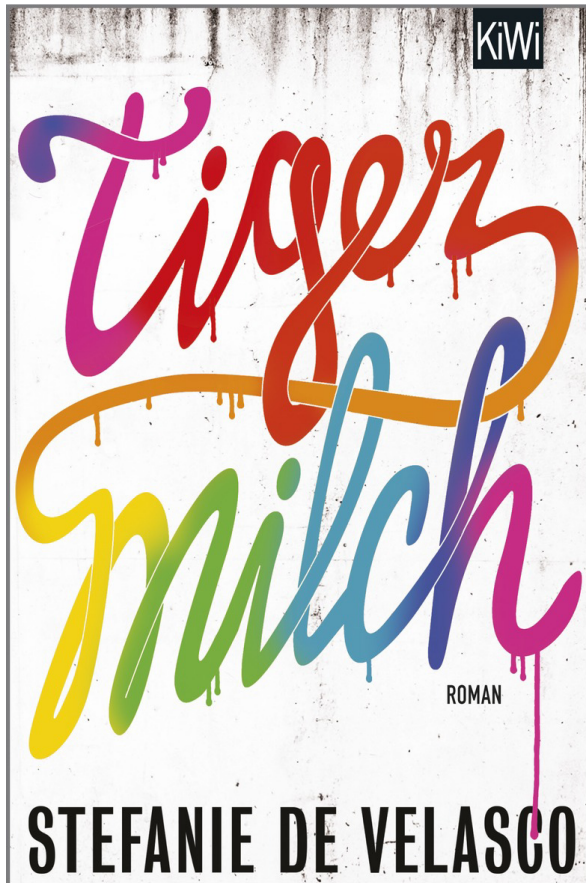


Sample Translation (Pages 1 - 20)
Translated by Tim Mohr

TIGERMILK
by **Stefanie de Velasco**
novel

Stefanie de Velasco: Tigermilch
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I wouldn't have even noticed it if mama hadn't run into Frau Stanitzek on the street. I know it was Frau Stanitzek because she already owned the convenience store in the building where Jameelah lives now. I can still remember how they stood around talking and laughing forever, and then they talked some more, and then came more laughter. I wasn't paying attention to them. I was bored. I remember I was holding onto the baby carriage a brace myself. Because the sidewalk was so icy.

Jessi was lying in the carriage. She was still a baby then. An accident. Mama had cried when she found out she was pregnant again. She was sitting in her room, on the corner of the bed, the corner of the same bed she had shared with papa in earlier years. Rainer was sitting next to her. He took her in his arms and suddenly they both began to cheer up. I remember that I watched all of this through a slit in the doorway and that I had to pee really bad. The pregnancy test was still sitting next to the bathroom sink. It was one of the cheap paper ones and the ends were curled up like a dried-out slice of cheese on a sandwich put out for display at the bakery.

And then I saw it. It was lying in the snow, it was green, and it was steaming. Someone must have just spat it out. It looked like a little balled-up lump of pizza dough—about the right size for my Barbie doll to make a pizza out of—except it was green, and it had tooth marks in it. I was still holding on to the baby carriage. I had mittens on and they were connected by a cord that ran up each sleeve of my jacket and across my back. My Barbie was stuffed into one of the mittens. And as mama and Frau Stanitzek chatted away, the upper body of my Barbie crept out of the mitten and bent down. With an outstretched arm she speared the gum and then stuck it in my mouth. It was still a tiny bit sweet, and it tasted like Waldmeister syrup with a hint of cigarettes. Later, when I was eleven and took a drag on a cigarette for the first time, I immediately thought of that piece of gum. And then today, again I had to think of that piece of gum—the way it was just lying there in the snow, and the taste of it—because today for the first time I put a condom on using just my mouth. An old prostitute's trick, says Jameelah, guys love it. I'm only explaining all of this because I think I had a childhood memory for the first time today, and you can only remember something as a childhood memory once you're no longer a child. Jameelah says she can't remember anything from her childhood.

Then maybe you're still a child, I said to her. Then she thought of something. She remembered how she found two bunnies in a dumpster, how they weren't quite dead, but almost. It was one summer in Iraq when I was still little, and my cousin killed them with a tennis racket. Other than that I don't have any memories, Jameelah says, which is probably for the best, I don't want to grow up anyway, at least not really, not all the way, just enough so that I can get into all the clubs and so people don't think they're going to get thrown in jail if they chat me up.

The two of us, me and Jameelah, we really are grown up now. Which is why we buy striped thigh-high stockings with our pocket money. When you start to buy your own clothes, you're grown up. After school we lock ourselves in the girls bathroom and take off our pants. Underneath are the stockings. Our t-shirts hang down just enough to cover our asses, and the stockings come up to the top of our thighs—it makes guys crazy. I always get milk from the cafeteria during our lunch break. I have a calcium deficiency, you can tell by the white flecks on my fingernails. Jameelah and I go to the discount supermarket and buy a bottle of cheap brandy, maracuja juice, and a plastic bottle of chocolate milk. The cashiers don't usually care that we're not eighteen. We dump the chocolate milk down the toilet and rinse the bottle out. Chocolate milk is for children. We drink tiger milk. This is how it's done. We pour a little of the school milk, a lot of maracuja juice, and a decent slug of brandy into the chocolate milk bottle. Jameelah stirs it with her fingers. She has really long fingers and wears lots of rings, all of them stolen. She doesn't steal just rings. She swipes perfume, nail polish, basically anything that doesn't have one of those things on it that sets off the alarm when you leave a shop.

We take turns drinking from the chocolate milk bottle while we ride the above-ground subway toward Kurfürstenstrasse. As we cross the city on the elevated steel rails, the train rocks us back and forth. And Jameelah starts making up stories again. Just imagine, she says, looking at me with her huge dark eyes, picture it in your mind. It sounds like Once upon a time, but it's not once upon a time—it's more like, This is how it could be. I close my eyes and everything starts to spin a little. I imagine the train is a flying carpet and now, any second, Jameelah will start to tell some story or other.

Just imagine that when you're seventeen or whatever, when your breasts have stopped growing, just imagine, that for a few days each month they filled up with tiger milk. How crazy would that be? I mean, how crazy would guys go over that?

Shut up, Jameelah, you're the one who's crazy.

Jameelah giggles loudly.

No, seriously, think about it. The same way you get breasts and you start to get your period, what if you got tiger milk once a month?

TMS?

Tiger milk syndrome. Miger silk tyndrome.

Jameelah loves switching letters around. Word-crunching, she calls it. She makes lust out of list and sex out of Beck's. Put a six-pack of sex on your shopping lust. We also talk in our own O-language. Forget saying someone took a hit off a pipe, they take a hot off a pope.

You know, I always used to think that being a teenager just meant you were old enough to have tea. What about you?

Jameelah laughs and shakes her head and her long earrings jangle.

What's the Arabic word for teenager?

No idea, says Jameelah. Who cares? What do you think about the idea of getting tiger milk for a few days a month as a gift from nature, a gift from god, from some god of sex, as, you know, a celebration of ovulation.

You're wasted. And I don't know. Every month for your whole life? Wouldn't that end up being a pain in the ass?

Jameelah squints her eyes and thinks it over for a second. Okay, she says, how about only until you have a kid? Only up to then, right, that's the way nature planned it, because by then you'd have a husband anyway.

I nod and Jameelah looks at me conspiratorially.

In that case, she says, you can never have kids, because then it would stop.

Nobody in Germany has kids anymore anyway. I saw it in a magazine.

They do in Iraq.

You're not in Iraq.

Yeah, but I might be soon. In three months.

What? Why?

I don't know. My mother got a letter from the immigration department.

She gets stuff from them all the time.

Yeah, but this was different.

What do you mean?

It was a different color.

For some reason this makes me laugh.

What, like a blue letter? I say.

Jameelah glares at me.

It's not funny. They might deport us.

Deport you? Why?

Jameelah looks at the floor and fidgets with the chocolate milk bottle, squeezing the plastic sides and making them loudly pop back out.

No idea. But my mother's worried.

They can't just kick you out.

You have no idea how it works, says Jameelah. It can happen just like that.

You don't even know any Arabic, I say.

That's not true. I can understand it. But even if I didn't, it doesn't make any difference to them. They don't care.

So, what now?

We just have to wait now, says Jameelah. They'll send us notice one way or the other sometime in the next three months. My mother wanted to try to get us naturalized.

Naturalized? You mean, become actual German citizens?

Exactly.

Is that difficult?

Pretty difficult, yeah. You have to fill out all kinds of paperwork and take a test. If you pass the test you get a real German passport instead of the stupid residency card we have now. Then we wouldn't have to constantly run around to all these government

offices anymore, we wouldn't have to get our residency permits extended all the time. Man, if that ever happens, if I ever become a German citizen, I'll throw a huge party.

Sounds good to me, I say.

Yeah, says Jameelah, but it won't be just any old party. It'll be a potato party.

A what?

A potato party. Orkhan and Tayfun did the same thing. Like in that one movie, you know, where the guy serves nothing but things made out of potatoes.

I look out the window of the subway car. Three months, I think. I don't want to think about it, I don't want to think what would happen if Jameelah wasn't around anymore. I grab her hand and hold it tight.

Things are always changing, whether or not you want them to, says Jameelah.

No, I say, everything will stay the same if we want it to. When you're grown up, you can keep things the way you want. You decide everything as an adult. That's the good part of being grown up. And anyway, three months? Do you know what that means?

Jameelah shakes her head.

Three months means we have the whole summer in front of us.

I have a pebble in my shoe. I kind of like it when I have a pebble in my shoe. It's like someone's there, like someone's accompanying me through the world. I can play with it if I get bored, roll it around with my big toe, round and round like a circus horse being paraded around the ring. I don't know why, but when I have a pebble in my shoe I never feel like I'm alone.

Jameelah and I put our feet up on the seat bench opposite us. The pebble tumbles down toward my heel and diamond shaped clumps of dirt fall from the soles of our Chucks onto the seat. The dirt is from Tiergarten—sometimes as part of detention we have to go to the park and collect things. Jameelah kicks her shoes against each other and the dirt rains down on the seat. She smiles and takes a big gulp of tiger milk.

Leave some for me, I say.

We still have the bottle, she says, kicking her backpack. Dangling from the zipper is the luggage tag I gave her back in elementary school, the one with the cartoon mouse.

The mouse used to be white but it's gray now. That's how long me and Jameelah have been best friends. On the front of the backpack, handwritten with a sharpie, it says *Love you, my angel, from Anna-Lena*. Anna-Lena is clueless. It's a load of shit that she loves Jameelah. And a load of shit that Jameelah's an angel.

Some old man, typical senior citizen, walks past us.

Get your feet down, he says.

We're getting out at the next station anyway you old Nazi, says Jameelah.

The idiot stands there with his mouth open. Jameelah chugs the rest of the tiger milk and drops the bottle on the floor. At the station we get out and sit down on a bench to mix another round in an empty soda bottle I have in my bag.

Crazy, says Jameelah as she pours brandy into the bottle. There are some words with magical power in Germany. When you say one of them the world comes to a complete halt. Nazi. The world just stops and stares at you.

More like words that are cursed, I say. The old bastard felt insulted. You know how it is with the word Nazi.

Yeah, okay, that's true. Nazi is a bad example. But if you think about it, there really are words that make people stare at you, whether they feel personally insulted or not. I mean, think about it. If I just said Nazi out loud, not even at anyone, people would stare. Or Jew. You can't say Jew. Even though it's really just a normal word.

That's another bad example.

Jameelah puckers her lips, thinking it over.

True, true. But you know what I mean. Like...I can't think of a good one right now.

The last few drops of school milk trickle into the soda bottle with the brandy.

Vagina, I say.

What?

Vagina's one of those words, I say.

Jameelah looks at me blankly for a second.

Vagina, vagina, she yells, exactly, that's what I mean. It's just a normal word.

No reason to shout, I say.

What, you, too? You said it first, she shouts, that's exactly what I mean, you can't say it, you just can't say it.

She jumps up and the mouse on the tag on her backpack swings around like it's lost its mind.

New game, says Jameelah. She's wearing about a thousand bracelets and they're all jangling in my face. Let's try to think of all the totally normal words in the world that you're not allowed to say.

Only if you come up with the next one, I say.

She thinks.

Nazi, Jew, vagina. It's not that easy to think of another one.

Jameelah grabs a pouch of loose tobacco out of her backpack and starts to roll herself a cigarette. She tries to sprinkle the tobacco out smoothly and evenly on the rolling paper. Precision work she's doing. Neither of us says anything for a while. Because we both know what's coming and we both know we could still reconsider it. But I don't want to reconsider it. And anyway, it was Jameelah's idea originally.

We're going to do it again, right? I ask.

Jameelah doesn't react. She just sits there calmly rolling her cigarette.

Come on, I say.

Jameelah licks the edge of the rolling paper and shoves the finished cigarette in her mouth. She looks at me.

You think we should? she says, pulling her Zippo out of her backpack.

I think we should. It was a good fucking laugh last time.

More like fucking crazy.

Yeah, it was fucking crazy. But it was fun, too, right?

Her dark eyes bore into me. She takes a drag on her cigarette and blows the smoke out the side of her mouth. I grab the cigarette from her and take a drag.

Why else did we dress like this?

Jameelah cracks a smile.

Fine, she says, you wouldn't have it any other way.

Give me a break, you sound like our teacher.

I hand the cigarette back to her.

But today, Jameelah says, I get to put the condom on, the red one.

We hop down the stairs of the subway station together, two steps at a time, down to Kurfürstenstrasse.

There's a lot happening on the street. There always is. People are racing from one shop to the next. It seems like everyone on Kurfürstenstrasse has a bit of tuna salad or ketchup stuck to the corner of their mouth. That's because every third storefront is a place to get cheap food. I counted one time. Department store, bakery, optician; clothing store, office supplies, sandwich shop; more clothes, bed linens, fish and chips. On and on. The further down the street you go, the cheaper the places get. Mobile phone shops, nail salons, Turkish wedding shops. Just beyond the discount baby store is where you start to see the women standing around.

I'm hungry. You have any money?

No, really, none.

With our last few cents we buy a packet of Yum Yum ramen noodles at a ninety-nine-cent shop and then stroll on down the street all slick and cool, crunching away on the dry noodles like potato chips. Farther down there's nothing but peep shows, porn theaters, and kebab shops. There are lots of women standing around down here, but none of them are wearing striped stockings. They're in shiny leggings or leather skirts that lace up the side.

Tasty. That's what Jameelah said last time. The laces look just like strands of black licorice. I'm not so sure I think that's funny.

Sometimes there are girls the same age as us standing here. Today one of them looks familiar to me, but I can't place her. She's wearing one of the skirts with the licorice laces, striped tights, and a tank-top with spaghetti straps. She's holding a leash that's dangling in the gutter, soaking up water from a puddle. On the other end of the leash is a huge black dog. The dog has on a red handkerchief instead of a collar and its mouth is hanging open. I'm pretty sure that if it could talk it would hit us up for spare change. The girl is sitting on the curb rummaging through her army backpack, and she looks up at us suspiciously. She has dark makeup around her eyes and her dyed-black

hair is parted in the middle. Her arms are covered with scabs. I'm letting the last few Yum Yum noodle crumbs dissolve in my mouth when Jameelah grabs me by the t-shirt. A car comes around the corner and the girl with black hair quickly jumps up and pulls her dog out of the street. The driver leans out the window and grins at us. His face is all red. Jameelah gives him the finger, but the girl runs after the car and together with her dog jumps into the backseat.

Shit, I think. I look at the ground. The sidewalk is dotted with old pieces of gum.
Give me the tobacco.

Jameelah reaches into her jacket pocket. She walks over and leans against the wall of the nearby building, tucks one knee up, and props her foot against the wall behind her. I crack a smile. Now we really do look just like all the other girls around here. Jameelah winks at me and nods at a guy across the street. He's leaning against a signpost and looking across at us. He's tall and thin, wearing skinny jeans and a pair of those idiotic-looking horn-rim glasses. He looks kind of sweet, and I can't imagine he could possibly be waiting across the street because of us.

I shake my head at Jameelah.

I'll bet you, says Jameelah. I'll bet you he comes over here.

She waves at him and I see his eyebrows arch. He hesitates for a second and then crosses the street with an awkward grin on his face.

Him? I ask.

Jameelah nods without taking her eyes off the guy.

Watch this, she whispers.

As the guy gets closer I start to feel a little strange. But that's normal. You always feel a little strange at first. It happens every time, it's just part of the whole thing. Jameelah takes my hand and we saunter toward him.

Hey, says Jameelah.

The guy looks us up and down and grins.

What are you staring at, says Jameelah.

I'm not staring, he says.

He's already pretty old. He must be thirty. He looked younger from far away. Because of his clothes. He's barely got any hair left, with just a bit of fluff above each ear.

Our last two classes of the day were cancelled, says Jameelah.

Aha, he says, so what are you up then?

I'm Stella Stardust, says Jameelah, and this is my friend Sophia Saturn. I'll bet you have one of those apartments with wooden floors and stucco molding and all that stuff, right? And tons of old vinyl? You definitely look like the type of person who collects records.

No vinyl, but a lot of CDs, the guy answers, shoving his hand into his pants pocket. Do you know what CDs are?

Nah, we're walking talking MP3 players. At night we plug a giant thumb drive into our ports, kind of like in the Matrix, you know? We keep it on our night stand right next to our kiddie cassettes. Music is downloaded onto our internal hard drives along with everything else, our homework assignments, telephone numbers, French vocabulary lists, everything.

The guy looks at Jameelah and laughs out loud.

What's so funny about that, says Jameelah, barely able to keep from laughing herself.

Shaking his head, he stares at her like he's watching the climactic scene of the most interesting movie ever. For a second I think he might actually believe Jameelah's bullshit. Belief is nothing more than wanting something to be true that you know can't really be true. And this guy is one of those people, the type of guy who wants to believe everything because he spends all day taking care of boring shit, emailing and crunching numbers and sucking up to clients, yeah, he probably has to meet with clients constantly, and once in a while when he's running back and forth to the copier he stops and asks himself why he bothers with it all. He'd much rather lose himself in our lies.

What do I have to do to see this port, he says, folding his arms across his chest.

It'll cost a hundred euros, I say.

Jameelah winks at me and her eyes guide my gaze to her left hand. She forms a circle with her pointer finger and thumb.

I actually never do this kind of thing, he says as we climb into the backseat of his car, which is parked at a nearby garage.

We never do this kind of thing either, Jameelah says, giggling. She picks up a pile of glossy magazines on the seat and tosses them into my lap.

Are you rich, I ask.

He laughs.

No, not really, he says, adjusting his rearview window so he can see us.

There's no such thing as not really. Are you rich or not?

I don't talk about money, he says, trying to sound all slick and cool.

Jameelah looks at me and rolls her eyes.

What an idiot, she whispers.

The apartment is sick, exactly the way we imagined it would be, gigantic, full of beautiful furniture, kind of like what you see at Ikea except more expensive. There's not a speck of dust anywhere. He must have a cleaning lady, I say to myself.

Do you guys want ice cream, he asks.

I don't like ice cream, I say, though it's a lie.

Right, we don't like ice cream, says Jameelah, opening her backpack. Where's the kitchen anyway, she asks, do you have any milk?

There's a tall CD rack next to the bed. The guy really does still buy CDs. From the far corner of the place I hear the sound of utensils clanging. Jameelah and the guy are in the kitchen. Then Jameelah slides across the wood floor in her stockings and stops in front of me.

Hey, she whispers, Sophia Saturn.

She smiles, nods at the silk scarves hanging from the rungs of the cast iron bedframe, and looks at me inquisitively. I nod and push play on the CD player. The music is decent so I turn up the volume. Jameelah slides back toward the kitchen, balancing herself like a newborn foal taking its first steps across the pasture. I have to laugh. All of a sudden the apartment goes dark. A disco ball hanging from the ceiling starts to spin and tiny flecks of light dance around the walls. The guy must have taken off his t-shirt in the

kitchen. His upper body is naked when he reappears. The tiny points of light spin across his skin. The lights remind me of Friday nights at the ice skating rink. There's no hair on his chest. I bet he shaves it. He holds out a glass for me and smiles. Somehow he looks like a nice guy, but that just makes me feel sorry for him.

Jameelah takes off her top, hops onto the bed, and starts jumping up and down on the mattress. I toss my t-shirt on top of Jameelah's things and join her. Our heads bob up and down as we jump. The guy stands in front of us and takes cautious sips from his glass of tiger milk.

Come on up, Jameelah shouts. The air's much nicer up here.

He gingerly tests the mattress with his big feet. I notice as he does that his second toe is longer than his big toe. He says something but the music is so loud that I can't understand it. I grab his hand so he doesn't fall over and as I do I ask myself whether the length of your second toe plays a role in keeping your balance. Mama had said something once about people with long second toes, I can't remember what it was, but it was something bad, something like people with long second toes die young. That wasn't it, but it was something like that. Mama says things pretty often that felt wrong. Mama says that back when Papa took off he took her engagement ring, the one with the green gemstone in the middle. It was real, she says, it belonged to his mother. She says that every time she starts going on about the ring. It was real, she says, and Papa took it to give to his new girlfriend. Then she starts to cry and says that you just don't do that, and the way she says it makes it sound as if the fact that the ring is gone, that Papa took it with him, is much worse than anything else about Papa leaving.

We jump around on the bed to the deafening music. The guy pulls me close.

You have such beautiful hair, so blonde, he shouts in my ear so loud that it hurts.

He tries to grab my hair as it flies around, and I kiss him, and he grabs my ass.

Jameelah drops to her knees and pulls the guy down with her and opens his belt and pulls down his jeans. He's wearing boxers and they get pulled partway down with the jeans, but it looks kind of nice, even the bulge where his hard-on is sticking out. Jameelah takes a big swig of tiger milk and lets it drip out all over his torso. She leans over him and starts to slurp up the milk all over his upper body. He wraps his long legs around her and I take two of the silk scarves and tie his hands to the bed frame. We take turns kissing him and

undress until we're naked except for our stockings. Jameelah ties his feet to the other end of the bed. Her stockings are rolled most of the way down, I don't know why, and I want to pull them up for her. But she does the opposite and takes them all the way off. She's hidden the condom somewhere inside, and when she finds it she rips open the package. The condom's bright red. I wonder what flavor it is, must taste like something red, I think, maybe strawberry or cherry, but then Jameelah puts it in her mouth tip first and things get serious. We take the big white sheet that's crumpled at the bottom of the bed and lay it around the guy so that only his cock is showing, like during surgery, when everything is covered with that green fabric except the spot where they are going to operate, which is all red. The guy lays there completely still, as if we've given him anesthesia.

Jameelah says you can learn something from these guys, just like when you study medicine. First you cut up a frog, then corpses, and only at the end do you get to work on real, living people. That's how you learn something. We need to practice, for later on, for real life, at some point we'll need to know how it all works. We need to know everything so nobody can ever mess with us.

It's still the middle of the day, meaning it's a little too early to go to the Planet. But going home at this point would be stupid, so we head toward Wilmersdorfer Strasse U-bahn station and wander through the pedestrian zone, into the mall, and then downstairs to the supermarket. We grab all kinds of stuff—Yum Yum noodles, marble cake, pixy stix, tubes of sweet Milchmädchen condensed milk, and butter rum flavor Riesen, which Nico likes so much. We pay with Jameelah's fifty euro bill and then walk over to the planet.

The planet is a big, ugly concrete ball right next to the mall at Wilmersdorfer station. There are a bunch of smaller planets around the big one, all of them made out of concrete, too. In summer, when it's hot, foamy yellow water sometimes shoots out of the small planets, but most of the time the whole thing is dry. I have no idea who decided to put it there. I guess it's supposed to be art, but it looks like shit. I think they wanted mothers to sit around the planet with their kids and eat ice cream and splash around in the

fountain or whatever. But you never see mothers and children at the planet, only alcoholics and crazy people. And us.

Nico says the city didn't build it for mothers at all. He says it's for us, so that after school and on weekends we have a place to meet. There's a phone booth next the planet. It's an old yellow dinosaur—I've never seen anyone go in to use it except for Nico when he's smoking up. But it's actually in the perfect spot. It's covered from top to bottom with writing. We leave each other messages on it—when we're going to meet, where a party or concert is. It may be old fashioned but it's cheaper than calling or texting everyone. Everyone who comes to the planet checks the phone booth for messages anyway. And luckily for us, the city cleans it as soon as every inch is covered with ink.

Kathi and Laura are sitting at the planet. Kathi is fussing around with Laura's bangs with a razorblade, just like earlier today at school. During the twenty minute morning break, when we were down in the basement in the bike storage area, where we always smoke, she was working on Laura's hair, too. She wants her bangs to be straight, perfectly straight, but to run at an angle from left to right. And it's not so easy to cut them at an angle and make the line perfectly straight.

So what's going on today besides hair cutting, asks Jameelah.

S-bahn party, I think, says Kathi. Nico was just here and said something about it.

Where is he anyway, I ask.

Under the railway bridge. You guys have anything to drink?

Jameelah pulls the bottle of tiger milk and the bag of butter rum Riesen out of her backpack. Viovic are next to the phone booth. Viovic are always in the same outfit, all in black, with the same hair, dyed black and cropped at the chin, and when it rains they have the same black umbrellas. That's why we just call them Viovic, like it's just a single entity, even though there are two of them. They're twins. The only time you can tell them apart is when they are on stage. Viktoria plays bass and Violetta plays guitar. Their band is called Viovic and they're crap, everyone says so, not just me. I don't understand why they are so bad—they have a rehearsal space in their parents basement, with egg cartons on the wall and everything, and they practice almost every day. They also have their own practice room at the private school they go to, but maybe they don't practice as much as they say they do.

Nini, Viktoria calls, do you have a sharpie?

I shake my head.

I do, says Kathi and tosses it over to Viktoria.

Violetta scrawls something on the phone booth.

You guys coming to the S-bahn party?

Viktoria and Violetta shake their heads.

We're going to Rotor, they say.

I wonder to myself whether they practice saying everything simultaneously like that. It's almost creepy.

Here comes Nadja, says Laura with her mouth full. She points toward the S-bahn tracks.

She looks awful, whispers Kathi.

She was already looking bad at school earlier, says Jameelah.

Hey, have you guys seen Tobi, asks Nadja as she walks up.

Is everything okay with you, asks Kathi.

Got my period. Where's Tobi?

He's with the others under the railway bridge.

I look in the butter rum bag. Only one left.

This one's for Nico.

We run past the entrance of the U-bahn station and cross Stuttgarter Platz toward the raised S-bahn tracks. Apollo and Aslagon are squatting next to the underpass. It looks like Apollo is drawing something on the ground with his wooden sword. His Viking helmet is tossed to the side, lying in the dirt. Apollo thinks he's a Viking and Aslagon believes humans are divided between bird people and the lizard people, just like the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Apollo and Aslagon only hang out with us at the planet during the summer. They spend winters in the Auguste Viktoria mental hospital.

What's that supposed to be, asks Jameelah.

It's Naglfar, says Apollo, the ship that has to be built out of human fingernails before the end of the world can finally come.

And that's why you two can't pass, says Aslagon, peering at us with his kohl-smearred eyes.

Why not?

Anyone who wishes to pass beneath the railway bridge must have their nails cut by Apollo, he says, so we can build the ship and bring on the apocalypse.

Why would you even want to bring on the apocalypse, asks Jameelah.

Yeah, says Nadja, maybe we don't want the world to end.

God's earth is rotten, says Apollo as he gestures at us with a rusty set of nail clippers.

Nadja rolls her eyes.

Fuck it, she says, taking the clippers and snipping one nail from each us.

The walls of the underpass are covered with spray paint from floor to ceiling. The crap graffiti is Tobi's. Tobi tags his stuff *animaux*, which means animals in French. But for a graffiti tag *animaux* is too long—Nico explained it to me. It's the last two letters that make it too long, he said, you need to spray quickly and then get out the hell out of there. Maybe that's why Tobi gets caught all the time and maybe that's why you see the tag *anima* all over the city.

The good stuff is Nico's. *Sad* is his tag, written in English. Sometimes he writes *Sadist*. His letters look like clouds, soft and funny looking. It's comforting when I'm riding the bus around town and see a *Sad* I know Nico's tagged on a random wall. It's like the sensation I get when I have a pebble in my shoe. For a moment I'm not alone.

At the far end of the railway underpass, Tobi and Nico are standing around smoking. Nico's leaning against the wall. He's big. Everything about him is big, actually, his hands, his blue eyes, his mouth, and his feet, which are always in the same pair of sneakers. He throws those sneakers into the laundry machine as often as he washes his clothing and hangs them to dry along with the clothes. Even his shaved head is big. The only small thing about him is the kiddie lunchbox he always carries around. It's plastic, with bright stripes and, on the side of it, a clock that doesn't work because it's out of batteries. I used to have one just like it from when Nico and I were just kids. We were at the carnival one day and the lunchboxes were on display on the top shelf of a raffle ticket booth. Nico and I wanted them so bad, one for each of us, but both of our mothers just

wanted to keep moving. We began to cry and Nico's father started buying raffle tickets. Nico's mother cursed at him and the man at the booth laughed as he handed Nico's father one ticket after the next, pulling them out of the clear wrappers like meal worms and shoving them at Nico's father until he had enough points for two of the lunchboxes.

So that's how we're going to spend our money, Nico's mother had said to his father, pointing to the slips of colored paper littering the ground. She was just in a bad mood because Nico's father was drunk and so were my mama and papa but she couldn't drink because she was pregnant with Pepi then.

I don't think it's right either, my mama had said to my papa. Say something, she said. But papa just rolled his eyes.

Nico has carried that thing around with him ever since. He used to carry his matchbox cars back and forth to the playground in it but these days he keeps his pot in it and uses the smooth plastic face of the clock to blend the pot with tobacco. He even takes the lunchbox to Schulze-Sievert, where he's doing his apprenticeship. Everybody jokes about Nico and his lunchbox, but he doesn't care. He laughs right along with them. His lunchbox is his lunchbox. Mine got destroyed the same summer I got it. Dragan threw it against the wall of a car park after I told him the clock on it was shockproof.

Hey, says Nico. So did you let Aslagon cut your nails?

I nod.

Poor guy, says Jameelah as she reaches for the joint.

What do you mean?

Oh, come on, she says, *God's earth is rotten* has got to be the saddest sentence I've heard in ages.

Nico spits on the ground.

Yeah, maybe it is sad, he says, looking up at the sky. Sad but true.

All of a sudden there's a commotion at the planet. A bunch of skaters are riding around the fountain, shouting and clapping as they fall down and hop back up and their boards smack loudly against the concrete. It looks like the diagram Herr Wittner shows us in physics class, with the planet as the nucleus of an atom and the skaters whizzing around

the nucleus like electrons. Everything is made out of atoms, says Herr Wittner, the whole universe.

It starts to drizzle. We sit down next to the fountain. Just for a laugh, Kathi and Laura start asking people for spare change. The nearly empty bottle of tiger milk sits between me and Jameelah. I wrap my arms around my knees as the summer rain falls around us and soaks into the parched concrete, giving off that unique smell.

I'm pretty wasted, I whisper.

Jameelah nods.

Me too, she says, I was already completely wasted at that guy's place. She reaches into her shoe, pulls out my fifty euro note, and hands it to me.

It was a good fucking laugh today, eh?

Yeah, I say, stashing the money. It was fucking crazy, too.

I look up at the sky. It presses down on us with that eerie yellow color it gets before a big storm, like it's trying to scare us.

Look, I say. It really looks like the apocalypse is coming.

The ship must be finished, says Jameelah.

If they have, it won't be long now.

Yeah, I guess not. Maybe God's world really is rotten. Maybe there really is a God and maybe his world really is rotten. I'd believe it.

Wait, why? I thought you said it was the saddest thing you'd ever heard?

Yeah, but sad things are usually true, says Jameelah. Nico's right.

She closes her eyes, opens her mouth, and catches the raindrops on her tongue. Beyond the S-bahn tracks there's a flash of lightning, then we hear the thunder. A few seconds later the rain starts to pour down as hard as in a rainforest. Laura and Kathi come running over and grab their backpacks, which are on the ground next to ours.

Fucking global warming, shouts Laura. We all hold hands and run for cover shrieking. But by the time we reach an awning, we're all soaking wet. Jameelah puts her hand on my shoulder and braces herself as she pulls down the wet stockings sticking to her legs. Her hand is warm and I close my eyes and listen to the rain, the way it falls out of the sky, the way it plunks into the gathering puddles, the way it drips from the awning and soaks into my shoe and joins the pebble. I'm tired and drunk, I think, and I still have

to go shopping—bread, leberwurst, noodles, ketchup. Then Jameelah’s long nails dig into my shoulder. I open my eyes and am about to complain when I see him. He’s coming toward us. His dark hair is all wet and drops of rain hang from his long eyelashes—and beneath them his dark Bambi eyes and pale face, so pale it looks like he’s suffering from some elegant disease. It’s Lukas. In his right hand he has a bottle of wine and a tattered book is sticking out of his jacket pocket—which is just one of the million things Jameelah loves about him. I can’t understand why anyone would read so much, I don’t see what’s so great about it. I don’t think it’s normal.

Hello, he says, staring at Jameelah as she stands there barefoot with her wet stockings in her hand. I crack a smile and think to myself, either he thinks she’s incredible or he thinks she’s disgusting. But that’s how it always is with Jameelah. As if in slow motion she stuffs the stockings into her backpack, gently, purposefully, every movement carefully considered, like a hunter trying to position herself without scaring off a wild animal. She slips back into her red Chucks and smiles.

I have to tell you something, she says, looking at Lukas. I dreamed about you, I dreamt that you captured some kind of mythical beast, it was see-through with two heads. It was like a cross between a dragon and a kangaroo but it lived in the water and could purr like a cat.

Lukas laughs.

You should write that down, he says, it’s really poetic imagery.

I already did, says Jameelah.

He is really good looking somehow, at least when he’s listening to Jameelah tell him something. But maybe we all look nice when she is telling us something. Lukas wants to say something but two hands come from behind him and cover his Bambi eyes. The hands belong to Anna-Lena, Anna-Lena whose hair is always freshly washed—only freshly washed hair flies around like Anna-Lena’s.

There you are, she says and kisses Lukas on the cheek. Anna-Lena who always smells like flowery perfume and writes *Love you, my angel* on everybody’s backpack but doesn’t really mean it. You can’t say I love you if you don’t actually mean it. That’s against the rules.

Behind her come Nico, Nadja, and Tobi.

S-bahn party, shouts Nico. He throws his hands up and starts running across the plaza toward the station. I can hear the beer bottles clinking against each other in his backpack. We run after him toward the S-bahn. As Lukas plays around with Anna-Lena a few steps ahead of us, Jameelah stares at him as if she's in a trance.

She loves him, Jameelah whispers.

Yeah, I whisper back. But he's her cousin.

So? says Jameelah. It's not illegal.

Still, you just don't do that, I say.

I take her hand. It's ice cold.

The creature in my dream, says Jameelah, he captured it for me, he showed it to me...and then he kissed me. He captured it for me. Not for her.

I know, I say.

- End of sample -