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## Excerpts from WHAT IS TRIBE

by M. Evelina Galang

*Between the tunnels that connect the land and the peninsula, girls attach their bodies to the underpass like spiders crawling up a wall. The rumble of trucks, the whir of tires spinning fast on asphalt and the wind float down and drown beneath the underpass, bleed into the bay. Fire works pop like shooting guns. In their hands, spray cans omit a fierce red, a cold blue, morning yellow and a white light as the first layer of snow. Each girl works on a section—scales of the fish tail, slope of the hips, brown breasts and nipples dark as chocolate, hair that swims long and black as floating seaweed. Together they tag the underpass in Alibata, in English, in unison—Las Dalagas. Pinay forever. Forever Pinay.*

When the ringing woke Isabel at two in the morning, she knew it was bad. She could tell from the tightness in her belly. She leapt from sleep, her long arm reaching for the phone. She ignored a blue moon swinging just outside her windowsill. All business now. She answered alert, wired, as if waiting. She thought of the night two years ago, waiting for the doctor to return. Her body felt just like this. Numb.

At this moment, she needed to know who and what and how much pain was there going to be. Who did she lose tonight?

"Hello?"

She didn't recognize the voice, though she could tell by the tone, something was really wrong. "Who died?" she wanted to know.

"A child," said the voice. "He was pretty young."

"Who?" She was afraid the night and this new environment were playing tricks on her.

"I don't think you've met."

"Not again," she said, "not another lost child."

"Afraid so."

Who is this, she thought and why do you insist on confirming this

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nightmare? Her body shivered and she pulled the cotton sheets around herself. Outside, the crash of water hitting sand confused her.

“What is the matter with you,” asked the voice. “Why are you hysterical? It’s me, Andrea Calhoun. From school. Are you awake, Isabel? Are you all right?”

Too late. Isabel had slipped back into her nightmare and in less than a minute she was grieving. Tears flowed so fast, she began to hiccup. The hiccups interrupted the beating of her heart. Now she skipped a breath. Now she sighed long and low. No mother should have to live this, she thought, no mom. No single mom, no married mom. No mother should have to outlive her kid—no elderly mom, no middle-aged mom, no teen-mom not ready to be a mom—no Mother of God—not anyone. And before she knew it, Isabel was whispering. Why, why, why, she wanted to know. Why did you do it, God? Why forsake the ones you love? And even though she had not met the child’s mother, and even though she could not distinguish her loss from the mother of the slain child’s loss, she felt the grief come over her like the waves washing her out to sea—lost and wet and completely overwhelmed.



Two years ago Isabel misplaced her baby. Miscarried it so that it skipped certain critical stages of development. The fetus had grown a tiny sleeping face. Its mouth had been set into a grin—as if it were enjoying a dream. And he or she came to grow two long and slender arms flung out in opposite directions crying, “Uppy, Mama. Uppy.” What the baby didn’t grow were legs. The child had a trunk that loomed out into his or her ten digits—toes woven together by a membrane thin as spider webs. He or she, her baby, had grown into a semi-human/semi-tadpole. It’s fin-like leg kicked inside her, begged for two legs, two feet, ten perfect toes. There was nothing she could do. She tried herbs and special teas. She sought out wise women—a

healer and an African (American) high priestess. She implored the Mother Mary to intercede. But nothing. And one night she woke because the kicking stopped. The baby gave up and floated out of Isabel's body.

She still dreamed of the unborn baby. She painted a child lost and confused. Her water baby swam in a maze of large and small intestines. Negotiated its way about the blood vessels, the blue veins, the forest of muscles and tissue woven together like a pretty braid. She saw hands tiny as specks of dust—groping for her uterus—only to find its way to a kidney, a bladder, a chamber of the heart—no place to grow a baby. No place to be certain. So the baby had to choose. And what were the options? You can have a set of hands, two beautiful arms complete with biceps, deltoids, triceps, chest and big fat belly—not to mention a trunk, a leg, a tail and webbed feet. And you can be born to this world a special child, anomaly child, a child of challenge. Or you can try again, come back later come back with legs and arms, a torso, head, shoulders, a perfect set of vertebrae, deep set almond eyes, hair like silk—he works. You could slip into the world like the rest—healthy and unremarkable. What'll it be? Womb or land, spirit child or baby thing, heaven or earth? What kind of choice is that to make for the unborn? For a dream child, for a baby who barely knew its mother?

The rest of the night was lost. She could not find her way to sleep. When she closed her eyes she saw the ghost of a boy who died in a trance of happiness—among his friends, among the boom—boom—pop of his homies' bass, of rapture, of ecstasy and of escape. When she opened her eyes to lose the image of the boy, she heard the child's mother, wailing, dying, shrieking at God and all the angels. Why? So she got up and walked the house, closing windows, and shutting doors that had slipped wide open. That's when she felt her baby's spirit floating next to her, swimming along side of her in the unforgiving blackness of night. That's when she realized this could never end.

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La Familia threw a party down on 56th and the beach. House music blared and everyone closed their eyes, dancing, rapping, hanging with their homeboys. Then kids from Norfolk—maybe one of the rival gangs—cruised their slick cars down Beach Boulevard, circled the house and shot shot shot. The bullet found its way to a window framed in white ruffles, crashed through glass so clean, so clear, so invisible, a bird might’ve flown right through the pane. The bullet darted into a red lit dance floor, careened into music so loud so—UH an UH an UH UH UH—that the sound of this shooting gun, and the grunt of this falling boy—was barely heard over the slow beat of the bass. Shot in the stomach and bleeding, the boy called out and no one heard over the cries of this MC—fly artist of the angry word, repetitive word, the beating word. The boy went down. Died. This was not the first incident.

“Who is it?” Isabel wanted to know. She ran through the faces of the boys she had met. In her half wake state, they were all a part of her dreams. “Who got hit?” Dr. Calhoun couldn’t tell her.

“They’re still looking for his father at sea.”

More than the worrying for the boy who died, she worried for his parents, for the sleepless nights and haunting spirit of the child. For this mother and father it would be worse, because they knew their boy, knew his voice and all the noise that came from him. That mother’s hands have run the course of him, would have memorized the texture of his skin—all that was perfect and all the flaws too. Isabel could only speculate what her unborn child might have been. And Mark never understood that the thing that died was a child, was something between them. Isa knew her child was only a dream baby. This family would have memories. They would have to live in their house and see where he used to leave his shoes (right in the middle of the TV room), where he hung his coat (over the back of a kitchen chair)—what snacks he liked to eat (pepperoni pizza, Mountain Dew and rice). They’d miss the way he’d lose his temper, (snapping at his younger sister when she crowded him on the couch) or how he’d

make the family fried eggs and garlic rice on Sundays. They'd miss the way he nodded his head when they lectured him, when all the time, he had slipped on his headphones and only pretended to listen. They'd miss the very experience of his life, a life Isabel could only imagine. And this is what kept her up and weeping—knowing her own pain and multiplying that infinitely. How would they ever sleep again?



Isabel had no idea what to expect as she entered the hallway and traveled around the maze of students and faculty. She walked amid the banging of metallic lockers, and their voices chirping in and out of laughter.

At the edge of the corridors, a mural illustrated the lives of the youth. Spiked hair was in—the boys on the wall displayed it—white boys, brown boys, black boys. Some of the portraits had round heads, smooth like the surface of a basketball. The girls had curvy bodies—long lashes, bright lips. Fishtails caught her eye, the long strands of mermaid hair sailing across the wall and arms that moved like ribbons wrapped their way around the boys. The letters LD tattooed mermaid fins. Maybe, she thought, they were the high school mascots. Mermaids and sirens. Why not, she reasoned, the Atlantic was just down the street.

Students buzzed at one another, leaning on lockers and pulling at each other as if this day was no different than yesterday. Isabel searched her past, mentally paging through her high school yearbook. One boy died of a car crash. He'd been drinking. Another girl had died of a heart attack. Another one from a ski accident. Not a single one had been shot. Just the thought of someone dead had silenced her school, had fallen like a giant shadow onto their halls. It was different than this, she thought.

She walked into the gym. Took a long drink of water. Breathe,

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she told herself, breathe. She exhaled slowly and examined a dozen teenagers on metal folding chairs, their arms crossed and their voices hissing into the air like steam. Derek, Lourdes, Marilena, Mercedes, and Miguel sat among the students in the gym. Isabel smiled at Derek, mouthed hello, but he looked past her, his face set, locked in a heroic pose. She felt pain rifling through her bones. Miguel sat forward on his folding stool, nodding his head to some internal rhythm. He locked his thick lips tight as airmail. She wanted to leave the room, never return. Instead she called, "Miguel?"

Miguel raised his eyebrows, nodded. "Sup, Ms. Manalo."

"What'd we do now?" A girl, heavy set and sad crooned.

"Dis gonna to take all hour?"

Lourdes and Mercedes bowed their heads, whispered hot S's into the gym's atmosphere. A few of the boys had shaved their heads, wore dark shades to cover their faces, faces hard and scored like marble gods. The girls slumped down in their seats, tough as their brown brothers, with the exception of lips lined in brown pencil, stained boysenberry, sienna and chocolate. Some of the girls had dyed their hair blond, red and cherry.

"How are you," she asked, balancing her books and tapes. She ran her hands through her hair, made sure it was fluffy, not stuck to her scalp.

Silence. Old heaters spat. Long tubes of fluorescent lights hummed. Outside a cop siren howled like a cat being torn in two. They stared at one another. It's me versus them, she thought.

"So why we here?" said Lourdes. She stretched her thin legs out in front of her. Her arm reached up high and exposed a silver belly ring. She shifted her shoulders, cracked a bubble with her chewing gum.

"You not going to try talkin' to us bout Arturo," said a boy in wire rim glasses. "Cuz ain't nothing you can tell us we don't already know."

Arturo, she thought. Not the boy with the tattoo.

“Yeah,” said Lourdes, picking at peeling nail polish. “An nothing we can tell you either. We don’t know what happened, who did it, why it happened. We don’t feel nothing.”

“What do you mean you don’t feel anything,” Isabel asked. She remembered, how he mixed pansit at the table, how he joked as he carried her TV into the house. She could see the curve of the black letter etched into his auburn skin. Alibata for Pinoy. Black ink on brown skin. She had asked him to explain it. How could that be?

They stared at her like she wasn’t there. She saw a force field—an invisible dome—hanging over them, keeping them from her. “You don’t have to talk about it,” she told them.

“Thas right,” Derek answered, “We don’t.”

Their arms rested against their chests, teenage armor. Their eyes were open, but nothing registered—no light from the window, no book slamming to the ground, no hand in their faces. Unflinching. Isabel felt hot, felt her clothing sticking to her skin. Her heart beat wild—pintig, pintig, pintig. It’s all she heard. What did they mean they felt nothing. They had to feel something.

“That’s the difference between us,” said a girl named Maya Antaran. Her face was red, swollen.

“You can’t tell us what we feel,” Miguel shouted. He stood up from his chair and pointing said, “Who you to tell us what we feel?”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Isabel said. “I’m not—”

And then it seemed they were all standing, circling her like a swarm of bees, irritated and ready to sting. She swung her arms at their words, swatting them out of her way, but they persisted. She tried to speak to them, to tell them that she was there for them, but they were shooting—Who are you anyway they wanted to know, and why should we listen to you? You don’t know us and you want us to tell you how we feel? Sup wit dat shit? She felt claustrophobic, their brown arms swirling fast like electric fans, like blades slicing through air, through her. They wouldn’t let her near them. She turned away and looked up at the window, breathing deeply. She



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fought a tumult of tears. Reaching for her blue bottled water she talked to herself. Don't you dare, she said. When she turned to face them, she realized that they had been sitting silently all this time. Silent. Silent. Nothing. Still as a portrait, they leaned on one another, their faces vacant as Barbie dolls. They sat like that for the rest of the hour. No one spoke. No one moved. Just Isabel facing the youth. Like that. For an hour.

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