

## Watching Penitents on Good Friday, 1997<sup>1</sup>

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Like the furious beating of a snare drum,  
Knotted rope scratches bare skin,  
Bleeding like a rubber tree oozing shiny sap.

Penance, an alien concept on the trading floor,  
Elicits hisses and howls from white-collar types,  
Their skin smooth and spa-kneaded.

The penitent lies prone on television,  
A boy whipping his bloodied back:  
A primitive faith crying for purification.

Dealers and bankers on a lunch break flinch,  
Faces crumpled in disgust, with pungent thoughts about  
That foreign government not arresting such fools.

Pampanga<sup>2</sup> is a world away from Shenton Way  
But the bloody spectacle is broadcast live, in close-up,  
Differences framed larger than life.

The penitent may return to old, debauched ways,  
Dealers and bankers may yet be converted,  
They all make it to the news: the penitent crucified,  
His clip aired between two on banking fraud.

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1 The year of the Asian financial crisis.

2 A northern Philippines province where ritual flagellation and crucifixion take place every Good Friday.