

The Smoking Room

Postscript / by Bonita Mason

THE STORY OF JANET BEETSON'S death while serving a nine-month jail term for stealing appeared in the March/April 1997 issue [No. 51] of *HQ*. The story documented the last week of her life, and the bureaucratic indifference that contributed to her death. But has anything changed since?

APOTENT SYMBOL of reconciliation, smoking ceremonies are becoming part of our cultural landscape, one of the rituals surrounding death and healing. Central to the nation's farewell to Nugget Coombs was an Aboriginal ceremony — in a Catholic cathedral — which included smoke.

About a month before Coombs' mid-November funeral last year, Mulawa women's prison was the site of another indigenous smoking ceremony, for Janet Beetson.

A 30-year-old Aboriginal woman, Janet Beetson died in the prison in mid-1994 from a fatal combination of ill-health and neglect.

People who die in custody, especially those whose deaths are unnecessary and avoidable, can take a long time to be "laid to rest". The closed off, inaccessible world of the prison also makes it harder to accept. You can't visit the site of the death, as you can when a close friend is killed in a car accident. So the healing is held back, the spirit not released.

But on Tuesday, October 16, 1997, Mulawa took a small step towards its own version of reconciliation.

JANET BEETSON'S PARENTS-in-law, Dawn and Billy Delaney, and one of their sons, Jeff, and I are met at

the Mulawa gates at IOam by prison governor Stewart Campbell.

Also there to meet us are Pat Maurer, a regional Aboriginal project officer, and a woman we are introduced to as Aunty Elly (Elly Golding), an Aboriginal elder and spiritual adviser.

As next of kin, Dawn Delaney is exercising her right (available as a result of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal

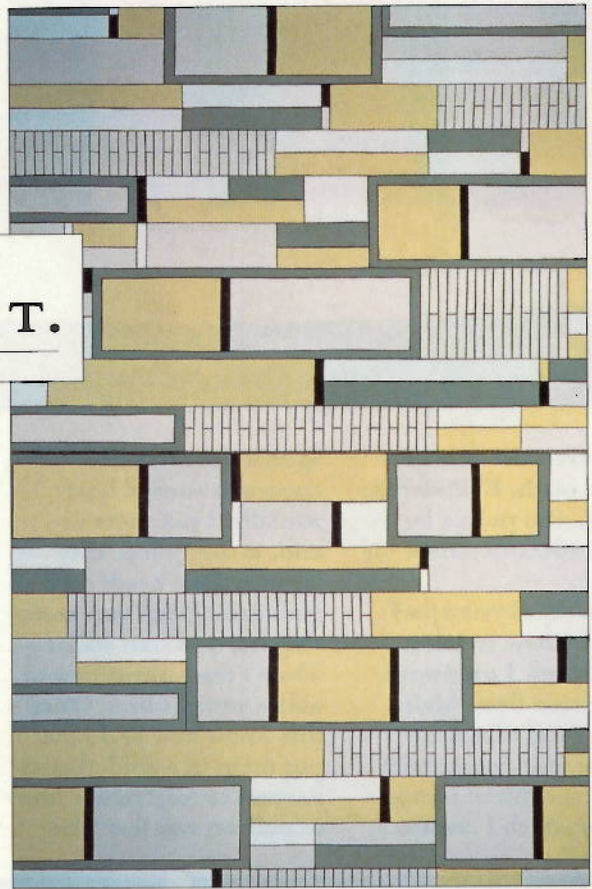
Deaths in Custody) to see the cell where Janet Beetson died. Stewart Campbell is solicitous towards us. He seems keen that we appreciate the changes in the prison since Beetson's death, and since he came to the prison in late 1994. He points out grass and gardens where before there was hardened bare earth, spaces within the prison boundaries where there had been razor wire.

Then he points out Conlon, the prison wing where Janet Beetson spent much of her final days. A prison wing so awful, most of it has been relegated to history and regret. A prison officer unlocks a gate to let us through. There is a large, glass-walled observation office looking

into an open area, now empty except for a few stray objects, one of them a TV

set resting on a bench in a corner. We pass through this area, hearing about how this side of the prison, including a segregation wing, has been closed, and proceed to Janet Beetson's cell. Here, in the early afternoon about 36 hours before she died, Beetson had a fit, was looked at by medical staff and then locked in, on her own, for three hours before being >

FRONT.



[ART]

Pretty As a Picture

"182 (Modern)" by ELIZABETH PULIE. Pulie is a Sydney-based artist who uses decorative motifs in her work. This painting, acrylic on canvas, is based on a curtain design by Frank Lloyd Wright and was first exhibited in the group show *Ornamentalism*, which toured Queensland last year.

taken to the medical wing.

The cell has the raw and desolate feel of bare concrete and bricks. It is so narrow that if you don't turn sideways between the end of the double-bunk bed on your right and some cupboards on your left you'll be in danger of banging your hips as you walk into it. Dawn Delaney wants to know which bed Beetson was on, and then realises with a small jolt that she would have been too weak to be on the top bunk. She sits hunched on the bottom, on the bare black mesh that used to hold a mattress, looks around in an angry, bewildered and helpless way then cries, Auntie Elly holding her and talking softly. Billy stands on painful, ageing legs, his eyes watery — the rest of us in various states of sadness and shame.

Time passes and we move on. As we walk the 50 metres or so to the medical wing where Beetson died, Dawn starts asking some of the questions that weren't answered at the inquest. Why was she prescribed an anticonvulsant drug over the phone by a doctor who hadn't seen her? Why was she left in the cell on her own after having a fit? Why wasn't a stethoscope used on her until after she died? All the new governor has to go on is the file. He doesn't know, can't answer.

At the medical wing,

another officer unlocks the heavy metal grille that is the doorway to the wing. We go inside to the waiting area. Dawn's anger rises as we approach the site of her daughter-in-law's death. Beetson was brought to the wing at 5pm but not admitted until 8.15pm. That means she waited somewhere for three and a

here; Cell 4, at the end, was Beetson's cell. It has been refitted since she died. They all have. Light blue walls and housing-commission lino on the floor. Clean wash basin, a toilet and single bed.

I stand just outside the cell in the hallway with Auntie Elly, the spiritual counsellor. She can feel

the smoke past us, over the building. Auntie Elly finishes speaking and the ritual is completed with a hug for each of us.

STEWART CAMPBELL TAKES us into his office and shows us photographs of prisoners working, putting in gardens and painting buildings, and painting murals on those buildings and onto concrete walls. He shows us the commendations for excellence received in October 1995 and again in 1996 for improvements at the prison, and a 1994 flyer from Justice Action, a community criminal justice organisation, headlined "Madness in Mulawa", which calls for a public

meeting to discuss the crisis in the prison. He keeps it to remind himself of the problems at the time — high levels of self-mutilation among prisoners, inadequate medical services, three deaths in prison within 12 months, of which Janet Beetson's was the second.

But institutions and bureaucracies can have bad memories. Despite claims about the implementation of recommendations by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, deaths in custody continue — indigenous and non-indigenous — many of them due to ill-health.

For example, although no deaths occurred at Mulawa between July 1996 and June 1997, there were 97 deaths reported nationally in either police or prison custody during that year — the highest number since 1980 when figures were first collected. Seventeen of those who died were indigenous people. o



ABOVE: Bonita Mason's Walkley Award-winning story about a death in custody in 1994.

quarter hours. Where? Is the officer in the station qualified to judge if someone in the cell needs medical attention? No, he's a prison officer, medical staff are somewhere else.

Then it's into the hallway on the left. Three small cells to our right: Cell 6, which housed a woman who had overdosed on stolen methadone on the night Janet died, has a mattress on the floor, lying at an odd angle; Cell 5, Cathy Bell, a suspected overdose, was in

Janet's spirit. It's agitated and angry, not at rest. But then it soothes a little when Billy enters the cell. He spent many hours talking with Janet about spirituality when she was younger.

It is time for the cell to be smoked. We move outside to the grass in front of the clinic. This way the smoke can blow over the building.

A can is found, a little paper, some leaves and sticks. The fire is small but good and strong. It is time. We join hands and stand in a circle around the fire and Auntie Elly begins to speak — of Beetson, of Mum and Dad as she calls Dawn and Billy, of family and friends, of pain, healing and forgiveness, of life and death, of the spirit's journey to release. The day is comfortably warm and a breeze carries

THE FRONT IS EDITED BY AMRUTA SLEE / CONTRIBUTORS: Dead Painters Society, Alison McClymont; Please Explain, Fiona Giles; United They Stand...?, Peter McCarthy; Kathy Temin, Sue Cramer; The Smoking Room, Bonita Mason; Pretty As a Picture, Sue Cramer.