

All proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the Jobs Australia Foundation that aims to achieve positive social change by providing direct assistance and support to the country's most marginalised people and communities. The Foundation's current focus is Indigenous youth leadership development.



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Jobs Australia Limited
ABN 17 007 263 916

708 Elizabeth Street Melbourne Victoria 3000
PO Box 299 Carlton South Victoria 3053
Telephone 03 9349 3699
Facsimile 03 9349 3655
ja@ja.com.au
www.ja.com.au

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WHAT BODY PART DO I NEED TO SELL?

Poetic Re-Presentations of Experiences of
Poverty and Fear from Low-Income Australians
Receiving Welfare Benefits.

KATE CONNELLY

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IF OUR WORK PROVIDES
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR
THE MAKER AND THE
BEHOLDER TO REFLECT
UPON HIS OR HER LIFE
AND ON WHAT IT MEANS
TO BE IN THE WORLD, IT
CAN BE TRANSFORMATIVE.

GLESNE, 1997

Glesne, C. (1997). That rare feeling: re-presenting research through poetic transcription. (poetic transcription as a research tool). Qualitative Inquiry, 3 (2), 202-223.

FOREWORD

The poems and prose in this book show why Jobs Australia is so important and why those involved in its work, helpers and helped, share in the nobility of humanity.

Poetry of the conventional or more modern type has a strange capacity to enter our heads; to stimulate our feelings; to challenge us to think new thoughts; to share arresting ideas; to appreciate nobility; to experience suffering; and to reject old stereotypes.

This book shows us in its vivid way the power of rhythm, rhyme, cadence and structure to shock the reader into a reflection on unknown human journeys. Better than a learned thesis or a lifeless annual report. This is breathing humanity speaking to us. Their words demand our attention and action.

But are we brave enough to listen? And to respond?

The Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG

Between 2007 and 2009, Jobs Australia was involved as an industry partner in an Australian Research Council funded project titled '150 Low-Income Australians' with universities from Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The purpose of this project was to raise the voices of some of the most marginalised people in Australia. In particular, the researchers wanted to get a more intimate and immediate understanding about what life is like for people who are unemployed and living in poverty.

We spoke to 150 people in three states of Australia. These included single mothers, disability pensioners, young people receiving Youth Allowance, carers and unemployed people receiving Newstart. They were asked to share their stories of negotiating the welfare and employment sectors while managing on a low income. While many demonstrated surprising resilience, were good financial managers and remained involved in their communities, it was clear that this group of people struggled daily to make ends meet, and held real fears about theirs and their children's future.

The stories we captured highlighted the deprivation and depth of despair some people felt that is all too often forgotten in the public stories of living on welfare benefits. So powerful were some of these accounts that I began to wonder how I could portray them most effectively to capture the intimacy and urgency of the stories. How could I get others to read these accounts, be moved by them, and incite a call to action?

I decided upon poetry, and thus emerged the poems that appear in this book. Here I have used the words of the participants in the study to craft a series of poems that I hope portray the essence of the experience of living on the margins. The words do not belong to me, but the crafting and structuring of the poems are mine alone. Throughout the writing, I have tried to remain as true as possible to the original stories.

I am deeply grateful to the people in this study who honestly told me their stories in often very difficult circumstances, and for showing me what it means to be unemployed and living in poverty in Australia today.

Kate Connelly, Jobs Australia 2010



GROWING OLD POOR

It's become an obsession with me and
that's something I'm trying to lose...

'Cause I think what's the...
it doesn't matter,
we'll all be dead in 20 years,
so yeah.

It'll all be over anyway,
so why worry?

I think I've always been scared of growing old –
not having any support.

Because that's how we work in society...

If you haven't got it, you don't get it,

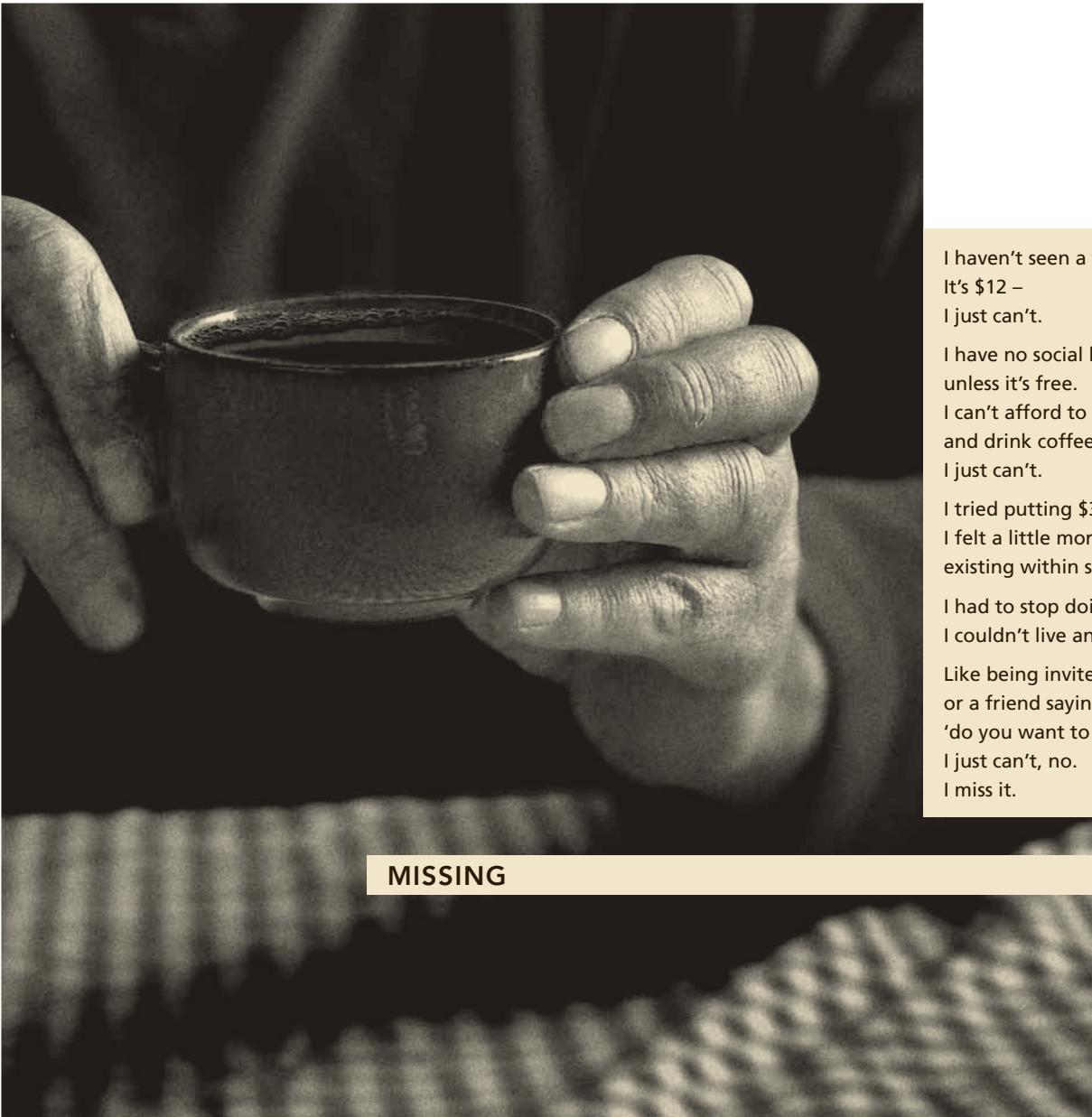
so...

I've worked in aged care

I don't want to end up like some of the people
I've worked with.

'Cause it can be very undignified.

Rodney



MISSING

I haven't seen a film for 8-9 years.
It's \$12 –
I just can't.

I have no social life
unless it's free.
I can't afford to go to a café
and drink coffee –
I just can't.

I tried putting \$3 a day into my budget.
I felt a little more human,
existing within society...

I had to stop doing it,
I couldn't live anymore.

Like being invited out to dinner
or a friend saying,
'do you want to catch up for a meal?'
I just can't, no.
I miss it.

Tracey

ON CENTRELINK¹

They gave me
nothing at all...
not even a private room.
I'm in tears,
highly stressed,
sounding angry...
In full public view
emotionally breaking down...
they were just giving me nothing.
I was being treated like shit.
What do I do?
'Ring some churches or something.'
Well thank you very much.

Tracey

1. Centrelink is an Australian Government statutory agency that delivers a range of Commonwealth services to the Australian community, including welfare support. It is additionally the gateway to employment services, although is not a provider itself.

NO RESPECT

They put me into a role –
I don't work,
I live in Housing Commission²,
I must be uneducated,
a piss head,
superficial,
'You're a fucking beggar'.
Totally no respect.

Tracey

2. Public or low cost housing built by the Victorian State Government, Australia, and offered to eligible low-income earners or welfare recipients who are unable to afford market rentals.



FINANCIAL FEARS

Not having super³.
There's very little;
it's so lean.
There's very little options sideways,
a lot of things cost a lot more money now.
You can't really say you're going to save.
You need to prioritise.
Values.
What's more important?
You can do so little,
you can't plan for things,
you just can't...
There's very little.

Samara



BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL

Centrelink is less than the minimum wage.

I'm raising a child,
supporting two people –
how can that possibly be enough?

Permanently below the poverty level.
What sort of logic...?

I'm expected to do this for
16 years.

I live on very little.

My food budget has disappeared,
my son's health is affected.

Cheap food,
carbohydrates,
you get fat.

No vegetables in nearly
3 weeks.

No haircut in
6 months.

A haircut means
no money for food.

Next month...

I might have enough
to buy decent amounts of food.

I don't know...

I live on very little.

Louise

CARER'S ALLOWANCE

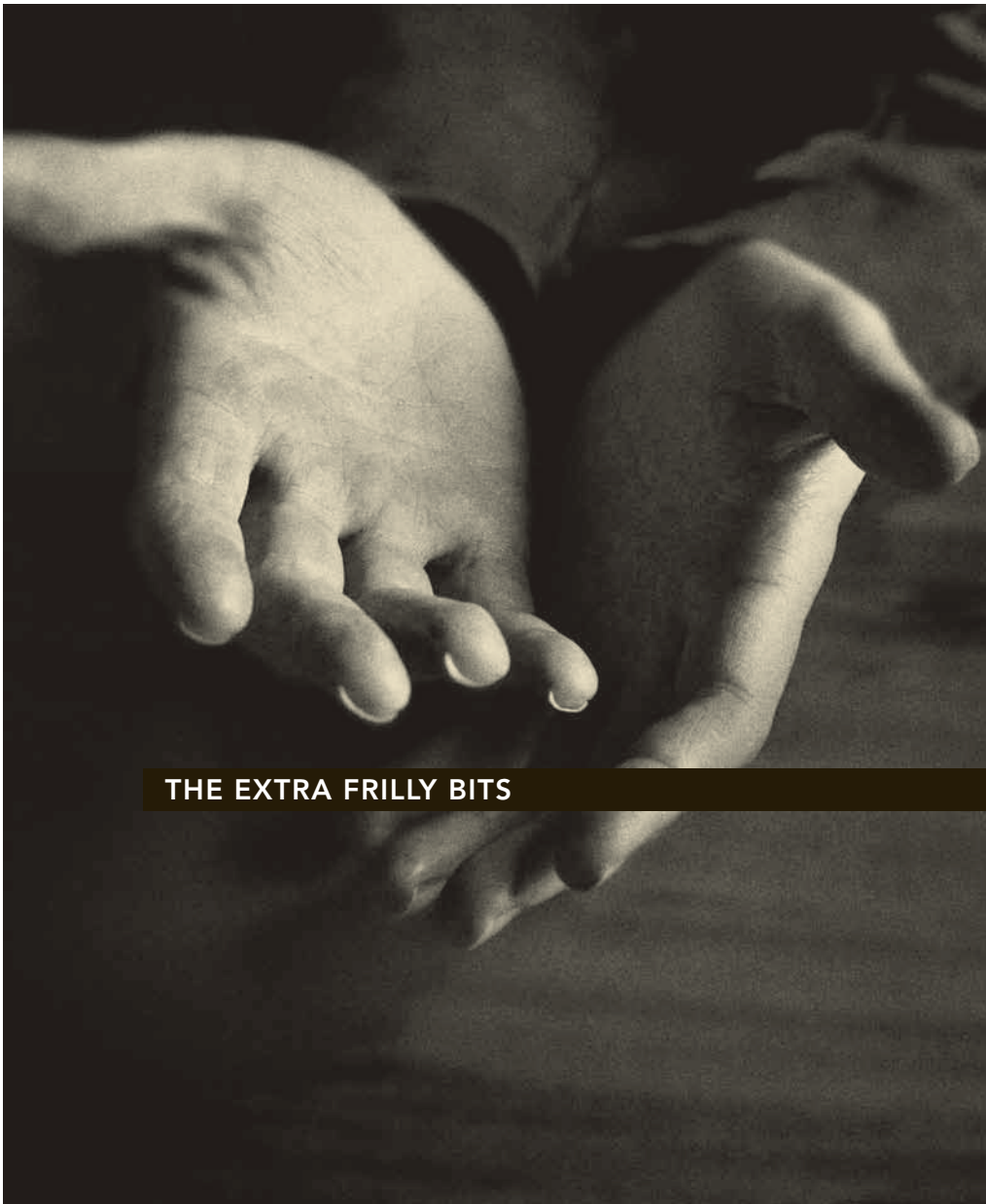
Raising my son...
it's not valued.
I'm being told my job counts for nothing.
\$45 a week.
That's it.
That's the carer's allowance.
Anything else
I'm funding on the pension.
I'm picking up the pieces
of a system that doesn't exist.

Louise

NOTHING IN RESERVE

My future is what's giving me sleepless nights.
\$5000 on a new car...
\$1000 on a new fence...
That's it.
I have no savings left.
I have nothing in reserve –
never have I had nothing in reserve.
I don't know...
My financial future is scary,
really scary.
I just don't know...

Louise



THE EXTRA FRILLY BITS

I have rethought what's important
(since losing my job)
and what's not.

There's so much I can't do...
I haven't dyed my hair,
I ran out of make-up,
I haven't bought new clothes for ages
and
ages...

Holidays are an impossibility.

Had a phone call from a friend...
'Come over for dinner'.

Well,

I haven't really got any petrol to drive there.

Buying presents for people,
I would do something different now instead.

I don't know.

Just not having –
not buying books.

I was a great buyer of lots of books!

So just all of the extra frilly bits that you don't have.

Leila

FINDING HOME

I really
hugely
want my own place.

Also I want somewhere for my daughter –
she hasn't actually got a home.

Her father has gone,
there's no space at his house.

I would like to have my own place
to provide somewhere for her
to come and live with me.

So I am worried that the rent...
availability of rental properties,
plus having the income to be able to do that...

Yes.

I do worry about that.

Leila

...MY SENSE IS THAT THE
BEST POETIC INQUIRY...
WILL CARRY WITHIN IT
THE POWER TO MOVE ITS
AUDIENCE EFFECTIVELY AS
WELL AS INTELLECTUALLY
AND WILL DEAL WITH THE
KINDS OF TOPICS THAT
LEAD INTO THE AFFECTIVE
EXPERIENTIAL DOMAIN.

PRENDERGAST, 2009, P.546

Prendergast, M. (2009). "Poem is what?" Poetic inquiry in qualitative social science research. International Review of Qualitative Research, 1 (4), 541-568.

ZERO MONEY

Well

you can pay the rent
and that's about it.

Pay the rent and eat stuff.

Good jumpers and a bed base...
you can't buy those big things,
you can't save up for them either.

Like if you want a cupboard or a bed base
and things like that...

...you can't.

Even going to the movies
is a bit much and
buying new shoes is

a
nightmare.

I just don't have any money so
I just don't spend any.

I always share houses,
ride my bike everywhere.

You can get by with zero money
but it's stressful,
in case something comes up.

You'd be going down to Vinnie's
getting a food box with
something bad.

Alicia

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Well...

What am I going to do about money?
I see my mum who worked all her life
but she has no money.
So yeah,
it's pretty bad
when you work all your life and your only income
is the pension.

If I did have children...
I don't have any savings or a stable job;
it would be really stressful I think.
And not being able to do anything.
And if you get sick you're a bit stuffed too.

So...

yeah.

Alicia



DOLE BLUDGER

I'm desperate for money.
If there were any jobs...
...I'd be started at 9 o'clock this morning.

I have to tell everyone I'm a dole bludger and
I don't have any money.
Nobody wants to know a
dole bludger.

My family thinks I'm still working.
I got sacked four years ago.
I didn't tell them I'm a dole bludger.
Mum would get upset,
she wants my future to be secure.

To be able to tell my family that I've got a job...
a proper job...

Nobody wants to know a
dole bludger.

Bettina



A FRUGAL EXISTENCE

Now look...

When you move onto a low income
you have to reappraise your life.

A lower set of expectations.

Even about my appearance,
my physical self.

For a long time there,
I couldn't afford hairdressers
so I grew my hair long;
put it up in a clip.
I can't afford that sort of thing –
fashionable things.

I have one pair of shoes.
Presents for Christmas –
I ask for practical things
so I don't have to buy them myself.

A jumper...
...or something like that.

I don't go to malls and shop,
I don't even window shop.
I don't go on outings,
I don't drink or smoke.

I live a very frugal existence.
I'm not part of consumerist society...
I've had to withdraw from that.

I don't have a budget for entertainment.
I'll rent a DVD or something like that.

As I said...
it's a very frugal existence.

Charmaine

THE IDEAL FUTURE

It is a concern.

If I don't get a job soon,
its likely I'll never have a full-time job
ever again.

And that means a lot of things.

One,
it means the house I've bought
will deteriorate.

Plus, obviously things are going to go...

...wrong with me as I get older.

I think that's probably pretty likely.

It means appliances will break down,
the TV will break down –
where am I going to find the money?

Having a son,
it means that when he wants money at some stage,
might want to borrow money ...

...I don't know where I'm going to get that from.

The ideal future is getting a full-time job...

Jimmy

WHAT BODY PART

DO I NEED TO SELL?

Like for instance right now,
I'm trying to work out how...

I haven't got a stove.
I haven't got a washing machine,
and they cost too much money.

You've got to
beg
or plead
or somehow get those appliances.

I have to educate my son
to pay some of his school...

...things he needs for school.

My income doesn't allow you to think about...
for instance,
going to the cinema,
going out drinking,
going out to a restaurant...
things some people consider is fairly normal life.

They're not maybe essential,
but,
a gas cooker
a washing machine...
they're pretty much necessities.

I've never thought about getting a car –
you don't ever think about a holiday.

You never think about that.

Continued over page

You never think about buying...
everything.
You have to think
'Where am I going to get the money from?'

Sometimes,
I have, sometimes,
well
you know.....
if you go without a meal,
save yourself ten bucks
or something like that,
it's the only way...

...it's a serious proposition,
because it's the only way you can save money.

There are no,
there's no pot of gold you can dig up in the backyard.
There's no oil well you can sink in your backyard.
The only way you can save is by
cutting something out of your life.
Food.
Gas.
Electricity.
Water,
or not paying bills.

My son needs braces,
over two thousand bucks.
I'm sort of going,
'What body part do I need to sell?'

I'd really love a job.
I'd be able to cope
with these emergencies.

I'd be able to say to myself,
'Well, I'll go out and find an orthodontist.'
And
I'd be able to solve those problems.

But I can't.
I can't.

I haven't got the job,
it's a stark reality.
And because of that,
you also feel depressed,
you feel miserable,
you feel,
'Oh, what am I going to do?
Should I get out of bed?'

I think most unemployed people,
(and given the amount of bottle shops I've seen in my area)
would probably sit down,
have a couple of beers,
and drink themselves into oblivion.

And I can understand that.

Jimmy



THE BOARDING HOUSE

Well...

The boarding house,
living in pubs...

They all sit around and gas bag and
drink alcohol.

I'm not making any friends in the process.

There's a sort of a kitchen,
a microwave...

I don't have a fridge.

Having some money would be helpful.

Billy



SICK OF SAYING 'NO'

Just being able to take my daughter out.
You know
her friends have the best toys
well she doesn't –
she gets told,
'We don't have the money'.

That's the hardest for me.
She knows she's different,
she knows you can't afford it.

At the supermarket yesterday
ice-cream was \$2 cheaper the day before.
Walked out with nothing because
it's today,
not yesterday.

They're the kind of things that upset me.
That we can't give her what other kids have.

She can't have the best clothes,
the best toys.
We can't say
'Ok, let's go on a holiday'.
We just don't have that option.

So you know
I'm sick of saying no the whole time
because it wears you out.

Not having to say no once...
that's the ideal future.

Eliza

AFTERWORD

Jobs Australia is publishing these poems to bring home the meaning of poverty experienced by many Australians. A lack of money – as we have seen – inspires not just shame, anxiety, and occasionally stoic resignation, but also a powerful sense that things could be different.

The basic decencies of respectful encounters with institutions, which can cost nothing, matter a lot. And it is plain to see that people living in poverty have immense reserves of energy and drive to make a decent living for themselves, and a future for their children, if only they are given the right chances.

It is not them or us, they *are* us.

David Thompson AM, CEO Jobs Australia Ltd.