

Classic Poetry Series

Jill Jones
- poems -

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Jill Jones(1961 -)

Jill Jones is a poet and writer living in Sydney, Australia.

In 1993 she won the Mary Gilmore Prize for her first book of poetry, *The Mask and the Jagged Star* (Hazard Press). Her third book, *The Book of Possibilities* (Hale & Iremonger), was published in 1997. It was shortlisted for the National Book Council 'Banjo' Awards and the Adelaide Festival Awards. Her fourth book, *Screens, Jets, Heaven: New and Selected Poems*, was published by Salt Publishing in 2002. It won the 2003 Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry (NSW Premier's Literary Awards). Her fifth full-length book, *Broken/Open* was published by Salt Publishing in 2005. It was shortlisted for The Age Poetry Book of the Year 2005 and the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize 2006. She served as a judge for the 1995 NSW Premier's Literary Awards and for the inaugural Broadway Poetry Prize in 2001.

"It Wasn't Anywhere"

It wasn't anywhere I lived
exactly, it was more like time
full of laser dust, celebrity footballers
a zone of affable ravage
of being blinded afterwards.

We were always looking for surfaces
even as small as a credit card
and all this accompanied
by plainsong beaten at angles
through drum machines
and consequences.

Light rose like seraphim
which seems a lazy way
to put it now, at this filthy distance.

The nights preferred their ruck
and maul with averages
in drinks, sex in the broom closet
ancient fairies hot with farragoes
and heels on concrete.

What can a small town do
apart from suffer when we'd turn
inward on our germs and genius
or learn to measure things in parallel.

Let's make sure the terms are clear
at least in a monetary sense.

You can dance down the field
in rigger bugger kit
even now, no-one thinks it queer
unless you kiss.

My tongue was bitter
and the gain did not last.

The fractals on the wall looked great
but they weren't the only
theory you bought me.

Jill Jones

A Taste For Hunger

I have put my hand out to the word.
It's been there for days. Hovering
between the newspaper and the television.

It's been crying. I can tell this pain. The pulling
apart. Pages in telephone books and directories,
their rough skins drag the air.

It's between the kitchen's song — making,
a smell of it. What's left in the corner,
wrapped in old newspaper — And

the song of living rooms, steady humming.
An excuse for silence these days.
And when the crying doesn't stop

the word becomes water bowl,
salty in making. This taste of hunger,
and weakness. I hate it

the weakness and hovering. I push out
my hand, ancient weapon. But too late.
The word's begun to fill with blood.

Jill Jones

Afternoon Grey In

Afternoon grey in afternoon sounding
not like a sign but a sougning
which is white over the night shoulder
bent with market crash not sougning
not sighing and never sign anything
you in the grey afternoon
but let it and let it out and letting go
something with beautiful grey sounding
more beautiful that is going beautiful
in the garden is sometimes red or
sometimes pink and fall leaves all petaline
where more rain predicts more rain and rain
that is lovely letting go of something
that clicks before a storm do not click
do not buy but let go before the night
storm over your shoulder beautiful and
waiting for the moon changes its large
light that is not and not grey nor slim
not an insert not alternative not faux simple
not resounding but the coming moon
that cycles with that enduring the wind
touches and it touches where you grey
impermanent sounding sigh in a lithe
shoulder before you go down into before
you petals leaves and leaves you

Jill Jones

Blue Lines

It's not the birds that are spectres,
they come in afternoon, true,
swing by the air, song-filled passes,
that branches come to ground, falling
with dryness and shadows, remembering
midnights rather than afternoons,
declining drugs rather than passing shots
to make shadows in the lens that swings
the casual reach through spectacle
of shadows on a dance floor and wings
flashing off drags, or you, queer bird,
dropping each sequence twisting in and out
of presence, the dry air that falls like a truism
once you've left the afternoon filling
its own spectre of west light and husks
of autumn that birds let fall, that grounds
fill as fallen, dance for earthed shadows,
the passing sequence husked with
casual twists of a lens through its stops
as if the machinery could drag light back
again, dancing jewels, red and green feathers
flashing a pass, a queer shot the sun's moment
holds, not yet declining.
with dryness and shadows, remembering
midnights rather than afternoons,
declining drugs rather than passing shots
to make shadows in the lens that swings
the casual reach through spectacle
of shadows on a dance floor and wings
flashing off drags, or you, queer bird,
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of presence, the dry air that falls like a truism
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its own spectre of west light and husks
of autumn that birds let fall, that grounds
fill as fallen, dance for earthed shadows,
the passing sequence husked with
casual twists of a lens through its stops
as if the machinery could drag light back

again, dancing jewels, red and green feathers
flashing a pass, a queer shot the sun's moment
holds, not yet declining.

Jill Jones

Dream Horses

Where are your eyes?
Nothing has prepared us for this.

What is earth?
There's a pain that remembers bone and horn.

Is the sky above?
Only figures in a landscape.

How fast is the wind?
Even the broken floats in dreamland's waters.

Do you remember when?
You will know when you see us.

Will you take us with you?
Born into the boundless plain.

How long have you been here?
Our names were once Surefoot and Swift.

Do you think we will be happy?
Dream horses do not need your eyes.

— after Clay Horses
by Sidney Nolan

Jill Jones

Facing The Harbour

Skeleton fork fern – Psilotum nudum

Without roots and prefiguring
the shaping of ferns
bronze bright in the sun cleft
along a wet fault line
viewed as if undiscovered
by traffic shouting underneath.
Growing is not clinging
abiding, travelling daylight.

Before our classifications
the transformations of light
catch on stony strata –
plumb, fugitive
lush walls and gullies
dream of a gondwana
holding in rock's pushed layers
a wash and bloom of oxides.

The government of seasons
millennia, displacements
the tributaries and falls, variances
land and sea before time stolen
for power, where words fly up.
Harbour hauls and surface trades
with wind wing and sail out there.
Here the wall, crevice anchorage
after, and now
in this messed up
abiding
daylight still holding.

Jill Jones

Heat In A Room

January soaks the hill with white sky
grass writes into blood and a river of heat sings

Music loads the morning with legends
an afterimage of crowds reaching into a room

Small dried packages of territory remain unturned
there is whispering outside under the redemption of intervals

Just as silence deciphers light
exchange rates cycle gently through conversations

And days draft me, breathing extinction
my skin a chassis of orange

As for the car, it shimmers into the raging sunset
then sort of erupts

(a kind of persistent hope that nobody gets caught)

The night's hangers are loose in the closet
sleep is a projection, part of the weightlessness

It is impending – a delicate sense of the flange
it seems as though the room is small.

Jill Jones

In Deep, Down Past Sleep

The way you turn at night toward me
so I take your breath across my face, then
away. And I breathe you, back bare
as a beautiful open country, pale surface
for my lung's warm wave to draw as my pen
like words that don't dream but stir.
I turn, the roll of sleep and feel you
reach me. And you are deep behind
down past sleep, with the warm wells
of our nights, fluid as blood, rough as water.
And you wash in the sea that boils
under the arch of the bridge which meets
over us, a cry of skin utters
the wordless yes. And you in deep behind
your sleeping arm curls over the spread
of my shoulder. I'm crossed by breath
opened with skin, and firmly rooted
with the strength of your waking arm.
Under my spreading banks, you push
my full tide.
The way you turn at night
deep behind, down past sleep.

Jill Jones

Inside And Outside Houses

To move slowly at the bench
and cupboards of a lit-up kitchen,
to watch a woman do this
and then walk on. To turn
into a narrow street that falls
down the hill to docks, tangled lines
of cranes, carriages, cargo,
night spark of the city
across the bay.

To see the moon from a back window,
netted by branches of bare trees,
to be aware that people notice the moon
looking up from their preparations,
to walk on quicker, to prevent contact
disturbing the slow, soft air,
early brush of winter evening.

To unload shopping from an opened car,
to rub fur and whiskers against a tyre,
a kind of greeting, caress of ownership,
to leave a trace, to move on
leave black cat and bending man
with the weight and light of home.

To feel the moon behind my shoulder now,
steady, clear in a colder region
above the deep routine of evening
inside and outside houses,
quiet movement of this suburb on a planet.
To be glad the next gate is my own.

Jill Jones

Interspersed

Night's sheet
weighs heavy
bearing the safety
of sleep
troubles us less
with quiet.

We love slowly
at the changing surface
of the world.

You carry me
through ground level
hands scoop up
the fall the air
of my doubt.

Walls break their habit
crumbling
as we talk
through them.

Still
something delicate
we negotiate
softer than
a thigh's width
on the sheet.

The wind is black
a cold surge
night's plan
over-runs the balcony
rain is clean

steel on the roof.

Jill Jones

Marrickville Sonnet

<i>Per mezz'i boschi inhospiti et selvaggi
onde vanno a gran rischio uomini at arme </i>
Sonnet No. 176, Petrarch

But to learn all there is in a street.
To treat the suburb's noise as another lesson.
The amazement of traffic. Or celebrate
small terrors that balloon from locks and veins.
O industry, garden, railway, brothel!
grafted on sandstone hill and bushland.
Where, once, a clean slow winding river.
A sacred kingfisher rests in my backyard.

Main street clogs, a continual bloodline.
Shopping hearts work with speed, decay.
Young sultans repair wheels at pools of oil.
Stabs of music hurl across the street
infuse my lines with deep bass notes.
As if heaven lies about us. Or love is brief.

Jill Jones

Mother I Am Waiting Now To Tell You

Mother about the letters i never wrote
the sirens outside batter my heart
and the fact i don't eat enough food
reminding me i am hungry
all that heavy seductive stuff
in the nights of new traffic in dreams
and i do not understand your eyes
where there is so much blindness
the glare of your tenacity almost breathing
i am struck down at the window
i have prayed to be that strong — resisting also
the death squads are squealing in the backyards
but there is too much noise — two languages now
spray painting their names like manifestoes
like what you wanted me to be — like this
i don't like the sound my fear makes
and like someone else who has my voice
i talk to myself — begging that someone
who has my arms but speaks a different love
will remember the answer to the enigma
which you have lost the words for
i am waiting for them to tell me
i am waiting now to tell you

Jill Jones

My Ruined Lyrics

“You forget whole years, and not necessarily the least important ones.”

— Javier Marías, *The Dark Back of Time*

1. Hold On

The song isn't as loud
as you think it should be

It accompanies the road
nonetheless

You hear it in the rain

Hang on, even a cicada has got
its dream rhythm

That walks with you
through the door

After you've crossed the river
look back, it's passed you

The notes trail

Its attributes are lies and truth
the clash of pasts

2. I'm Coming

I can't give you any more
although the weir overflows

And here in my pockets
another flow

Of cellophane, an old musket
a slide rule, seed catalogues, powers

The river rises
in the hundred year flood

There's something planetary
in the moan of levees

I lay my hands on
evidence changing gears

My logbook is full of
sneaky miles

The lie is of the tongue

And I would kiss you with it
when I come

3. Fields of Wheat

The hour is a vast frontier
moving into day.
In it I spent a year
and then a decade
moving you all around.

It was all down to
bad timing at a desk
the design of borders
a lack of motivation and petrol
and now the Russians have come
with gold lame g-strings
and a kind of unattractive
comedy
that beats queuing.

I know these are dreams of salvage
and dawn the rescue hour
climbing stairs into duties.
But the orders are confused
and nothing seems to grow.

I ask the Russians for true grain
and a giant sleigh
but it's become too warm
and foghorns tumble.

It is each according to need
and the sun strikes up the band.

4. Bird on the Run

Somewhere the war
is outside my window
showing on a graph
heart-shaped
and inevitable.

But I do not roar in pain
yet.

I am waiting for the birds
then I'll know.
They are not a chorus.
They do not know
how to come home.
They no longer bear
the message.

Which is why

I jump the sill
I jump the rocket launcher.

I jump the map

and it bears me.

Hear my wings!

5. Flesh and Spark

And when I came
to you
it was raining

We had to be covered
in something other
than ink-black night

The guitars had all drifted
in their boats
animals were nervous

If we don't get access
there's still
recall, its open moment

Along the curled map
of seeds
and their prices

Among the shot
the falling lead
and winged cartography

There, let us have
our doubts
we grave them secret skins

Though covered
they tell flesh
and spark

6. Unusual

The air fills with
petrichor
after rain on sandstone.

It's unusual, and we must
speak it

this drought, this daring.

It will be fire.

It will be cord and rope.

We'll sing it long.

The war wasn't a lie.

The bombs dropped ... so.

And near where you told me.

Trace it on the sheet

and this once

dream it on the beach.

Then outside awakened

again we walk in the depth

of field.

Jill Jones

Saturday Morning In Ashfield

Fifteen minutes at the autobank, waiting for money,
and the nations stroll by with their children
and the new languages.
So many words for Saturday and shopping,
but only one word for money,
inscribed on plastic and the machine intones.
Your name's numeric, pretending it's the universal language,
but the footpaths show out the differences,
such as clothes and their colour, the number of children,
(oh, and eyes, hair and skin).
It's a weekly celebration despite government green papers,
talkback radio and letters to the editor.
It's inevitable like the violence,
and the bearing and raising of all these children
who are not getting back on any boats
because they were born just round the corner.
And it's nobody else's business
on a free winter's day cut with sun,
crowned with the beautiful hard antipodean blue.
But it doesn't seem so hard today
to love all that ordinary, forgotten suburban ritual
that could make this Saturday exciting.

Jill Jones

Sorry I'M Late

The snow was in the sun
There was a prick in garden
A truck jack-knifed the particulars
There was a smell of old gas
The crows lost
As did the roses and all that juice we spilled for love
That prick in the garden

Photographers were lighting bombs
The olive tree fell just as we were getting started
We forgot to fill out the form
Celebrity drug disasters were drifting in our channel
My watch shows tomorrow's date
The disk shattered
There's that smell again
It's a form of expediency, or is it complexity?

I tried to inform the authorities

If I could find my name and my reason
If the birds would stop drifting like that
If someone would lend a hand at the entrance
I'd be less nervous saying this
My throat would work with my head and hands

Jill Jones

The Beautiful Anxiety

The paths are full of iron and stars.
Who does not welcome all this
black, burning with misplaced rain?
If it's reported that islands have gone
missing, remember how seas love us
and trail in our blood.
If there's too much of a ghost now
upon the clouds, a wing, a roar
none of that will open
the dead to this world again.

There's nothing purely accidental
in your edgy condition.
Damage seems almost a necessity.
If there's beauty in patina, it's here
not just waiting for the cracks
in the permanent. It's subcutaneous
like a language that entered you
without stamps of approval.

You step out with your necessity
because nothing will grow within
houses for too long.
Your sandals and heels, your capped toes
they are some kind of assurance
along with the belated rain, whose water
slaps the ridges of your song.

Each tree that wasn't there before
each element or fibre, the occasional feather
or slip of whitened excrement
the glassy tips of plastic that flutter
as you pass, they are places.
Hands have admitted them
and their appearances
have depended on each isobar and swell
of time zones.

You must be going elsewhere

see how it skews the horizon and adds
something green to the temperature.
There are instruments for this
kind of knowing, along with bright machines
moving tonnage along temporary roads.

But if you can still turn your hand around
the rain and touch skin's rearranging
of its walking —

figures
atoms
curves
droplets

and distinguish the cold of it, dropt on
sun shadows within the petrochemical hum
it's erotic scent, a ghost of ash
passing stars, and a kind of subliminal speech
among legends of flowers and birds, roses
of the place where the phoenix plays
that useless search within the art of speech
to fly amongst lost things again
the long road from the north
hard sails built out of trawl.

There's never time to know
yourself. That's the beautiful anxiety
of moving, as each gutter, each wing
each clip, or semiconductor
the air dripping through your skeleton
your fur that scares easily, as it all
seems to be crashing.

The air moves history into history.
You look where leaves hold the light
skin holds the light
edges hold the light.

Nothing holds on
the light.

Jill Jones

The Desert

These settings of slow landscape change are characterised by the survival of forms inherited from the past.

J.A. Mabutt in *Australia: A Geography* (D.N. Jeans, ed.)

She's learning about the desert
where things are not as flat as they seem.
She needs the plain, the wind, scrub,
no longer believes mirages
on straight, never-ending roads,
wants nothing to do with rain,
not even a sudden flash flood.
But climbing dunes reworked by wind
she finds traces of running water,
fresh scouring of ground, rilled surfaces,
ephemeral stream channels.

She wants to learn to live
without comfort or knowledge
of the future, each day its own,
stretched out like any other.
There's only a long horizon,
she wants that secret to stay there.

She's like plants at ground level
surviving as seeds through dry periods —
tough outside while inside
she'll grow the grassland of dreams,
a wild place of her own,
until rain memory tracks her waking.
She stumbles out by the highway,
into a new mirage, oasis —
that road where past and future meet
only at the horizon
and there's all that walking in between.

Jill Jones

The Dress Sonnet

I have taken off my little dress, there's no scope
for me within it, there are things
that fall down the body, like breath and the texture
of the flap. This is a button I can't do.
I don't want to argue on the easy side. "Don't expect
an audience or a reveal." O, the little dress
shimmers in the near breeze as I'm falling down
my body and, at last with my ear to the ground

it's too late in the season to please as wind removes
my feathers and shaves my bones with that first whip
of change, and each winter, if it comes along, do I
need its great coat, will I have done with cumbered sleeves?
Sometimes I could do with the humour of a petticoat.
O, let me part the clouds, let me in.

Jill Jones

The Kitchen Light

If the past is correct, it was here she couldn't move.
They agreed on shadows, let dust slope across the light
buried watches under the bricks where the damp rose.

Let it be sung! About gravities that pull you down, the sinister
curve of minutes tangling any recall of the point of an argument.
Even the spirits of place had gone, leaving their bottles.

The sounds of doves, more gentle than bruises
pattered the iron, the rust. The path's slippery green
led from the light of the day past cold blue hydrangeas.

When it got beyond even the curiously patterned logic
of their life, all he could swear at was her name.
Though it was not all he hit her with, as she stood.

At this time she could not turn, either this shabby fortune
or the other key, for the new highway. There was no cure
for a pattern of knuckles and fear blooming through skin.

This was their city. It escaped the high beam of summer
but found among winter's musty shawls, exacting formations
of the cold. She'd trace them in afternoon on grimy glass.

Between battles all her reasons lined up, ready to go.
Breathing a smell of waves, and a mother wrapping up the night
in a kitchen where the big light lived, her room of light.

Jill Jones

The New Aesthetic

You've heard this story before –
becoming unravelled in Europe
or assaulted in some roadhouse
but bold as nipples and booted.
Recovering with bourbon and red wine
in a soft room with a German
dissolving somehow at right angles
and falling off the frequent flyers list.

Or being born in a blood thrust
from shadows into that crazy moment
as a rocket strafes the moon
ghosting your hour of the dog.
It's a kind of domino effect
taken out of context
while babies murmur in the lagoon –
another supple peepshow.

Jill Jones

The Night Before Your Return

The night is kind tonight,
the sky is purple,
clouds are orange,
and planes fly away
to the south.
I need no fan, a cricket sings.

And you are under heat in Brisbane.

The Turks do not sing,
one phone over the road softly rings,
and I have drunk pale green tea
from an old cup.
I have not done
what I ought to have done.
The window is open
as the mind at midnight,
cars fade away,
carriages rattle through timetables.

You are asleep and out of range.

Spiders work, their lines
arrange like poetry,
another train embraces
the lone traveller,
and there are always the dogs.
I am clean, naked and cool.

You are covered in distance
that you unwrap tomorrow,
driving down
over rivers, across valleys,
through hot towns, dry acres,
into the wet south of my dreams.

Jill Jones

The Phantom Division

They're restructuring reality again
but you have to sit and wait your turn
the transfers have been coming down for weeks
and another truckload of files
is settling into the archives
there is a floating field of rumour
closer to the truth than all the press releases
sounds of a makeshift power struggle
flood out into corridors
with eviction notices for the defeated
you lose your harbour views and your identity
you consider a career in espionage, lunch or motherhood
you are now dependent on radar
as unit after unit cuts out
you dream of limbo, you dream of voodoo
and pray they will take you at dawn instead
and shoot you full of silence
falling under the noise
of statutes, photocopiers and ministerial privilege
you want to believe fervently
that it has nothing to do with you
but you begin to learn the spell-cast anyway
how to reconstruct phantoms
you send away for the magic ring
you begin to use the telephone
you start to get in touch.

Jill Jones

The Slide

Sometimes they put you in seas
or rivers without telling you.
The river is dark, let's say
and trees are low over you.
In the branches are owls
making noises like a machine
breathing.

After you come away from this
you have a scar and a jar
where you swim.
It is chemical, archaeological
and violent.

So you wash it all away.
It's too early for things to be
broken or twisted
but even when you run, you fall.

All your life, if you could fly
all your life slides from under you
and you do not have to swallow
water or hear it.

You do not have to but you must
as the clouds fall without telling you.

Jill Jones

To Sleep Inside Rain

A hazy field
rain cast plummeting
plunge of stone hallways
to our bed's name
something
like daisies in place
if not sweet
there is daring.

Rolling into excess
thighs out of tight labels
above nerves
worm among
creases, access
rolling out alive
bloomed sunflowers
crossing light with surface
inside rain.

The effulgence: screen, expanse
the slightest intent
violet flower promises
beneath dark.

That death as good as earth
a little, like sun oblivion
then lie still.

Jill Jones

Wave

The traffic begins its wave,
the sky is threaded with exhaust,
the blind man has a ticket, your bag
is heavy today, the traffic is beautiful
going somewhere, the sky does not move
though it seems to, the hours begin
to waver, you begin to think of effort
and time, the endless hatcheries
of capital, the blind man knows the way,
the traffic is heavy with somewhere,
the sky is beautiful though
it doesn't seem so, the hours thread
with tickets or numbers.
The numbers are beautiful,
rolling along like waves.
And in afternoon the blind man
waits with you, the sky is endless
but it is not, the traffic is threaded
with numbers, each ticket is beautiful
within its own exhaust.

Jill Jones

When Planets Softly Collide

This is not a poem about dust,
there have been too many of those,
but may be about wind, who knows,
the remaking of deserts, endlessly,
when sand becomes a definition
of scale or boundaries or change
like weather squeezing out lines of heat
that drives from solid midnight freeze
up into the sweat pressure of midday.
These conditions are inescapable, no relief —
still there are flowers, stubborn and pink.

Yesterday, strangely, began with showers,
laying the heat demons down and out
for a moment and the air, wet
with the ghost of something old.
Whispers like clouds of aimless particles
which one day could form something solid,
whispers and the slight reverberation
of planets softly colliding,
showering each other with dust,
which they have been trying to avoid,
hoping for a poem about something greener.

As if rock didn't survive,
and dust didn't dance on air.

Jill Jones

Whispers And Courses

Air urges through my waking cells.
Day breathes thicker, houses exhale us.
We people the streets with our week time
dance, impatient with the tinnitus of hours.

But wind gives the day its wings, invisible
from this window. And makes space
for light more clear than freshest water,
more bright than silvered glass.

The course of leaves and sound becomes
a float, a feather-delicate scrape. Each tree
hands on whispers. They translate through
lane corridors into a constant hushing —

catch on squatting walls, arrow-headed fences.
Like our concepts tracking what we think
should be in or outside — domains
of rocky edges, worlds of grass.

All suburban geometry, all below the bed
of sky: pacific today, sometimes stormy.
However each day wakes, how it rides.
And how far we bend to catch its sound.

My horizon is a measure of this present.
Continues its hours while I seek others.
And crisp yellow light squares some time
on paving, dry as summer rain.

A jet's hard silver and withdrawing roar
says something nearly loud as absolute
of a further world, its borders, hungers, war.
And the trees reply by standing ground.

And what of a moon I leave stranded there
out with the sun, dreaming other dreams?
Of places perhaps without sleep, grounds
of fire without hope, or even an hour's rest.

Far-off blizzards, lava, a planet language
of ancient hollows, old sockets in stone.
Alive alongside deliriums of power,
and nights filled with missiles and eternity.

We've no big weather here, forget blood's
course can be wild as the crush of cyclones
on coasts. For weeks this hill may live
with indolent light; night storms can please us.

And even here hurts whisper over fences,
life lingers unnecessarily in a bed, mouths fight
and the smallest of deaths go to ground:
a bubble of yolk, the not-yet lived body.

When wind moves, ground receives,
breaks open life in scattered half-shells,
a dove's lost egg. I find with work's end
a colder, fuller moon, winter's promise.

While birds call the dark, the smell of rain
drifts across the greying fence. Sun leaves
the sky its brief evening pink to night
and the relief of our half-blind hours.

Jill Jones