

R U P T U R E

Praise for Susan Varga

The directness and simplicity of these poems, beautifully arranged as stages in a recovery, carry the urgency, honesty and celebration of a life reclaimed.

JOAN LONDON

Susan Varga writes that until recently she thought of herself as a prose writer. Her first collection of poetry suggests that the poet she very clearly is was forming quietly but determinedly over a lifetime. The poems that comprise *Rupture* are lucid, deft, unapologetic, forthright. There are images and lines that are literally breath-taking, stanzas that punch with wisdom, and whole poems that linger long after the book is finished. The rupture of the title was caused by a severe stroke experienced by the writer and her subsequent remaking and embrace of a changed life. The stroke poems form part of this collection, but as well there are poems that draw on nature, ageing, friendship, home and enduring love, all laid bare with an insight and lyricism that makes *Rupture* a rewarding and powerful collection.

ANDREA GOLDSMITH

About the Author

Susan Varga has worked in film and video and briefly as a lawyer. Her first book, *Heddy and Me* won the Christina Stead Award for non-fiction. It was followed by the award-winning novel *Happy Families*, then *Broometime* (2001), co-authored by Anne Coombs. Her most recent novel was *Headlong* (UWAP, 2009), which was short-listed for the Barbara Jefferis Award. *Rupture* is her first book of poetry.

RUPTURE

POEMS (2012–2015)

BY

SUSAN

VARGA



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I

MASTERSTROKE

Spaceship

The room floats on humming air.
The nurse's station suspended
in a greenish light,
beams invisible signals.
Our beds gently circle it,
as if tethered.
Benign murmuring of machines.
Far-away sounds of the street below.

Spaceship ICU.
Bathed in green amniotic fluid,
sandpaper mouth, swelling tongue,
body afloat
in another dimension.
Never have I felt so safe.

Different Strokes

1.

A stroke of luck.
Someone was there
to help.

Where are my legs?

In Emergency they stroke
my right arm –
a prickly thing.

Not mine.

Where are words?
If they are gone for good
who am I?

2.

In the Stroke Unit they feed
me pap in case I choke.
They prod me for words.
Name, day, month, year.

Wedge between flowers
and euphoria I laugh often,
an unfamiliar gurgling laugh.
I watch light fall on a picture

In Rehab, mostly stroke patients.
They prod our dangling
strangers' limbs.
'Ten times! Twenty times!'

After four weeks
they take the wheelchair away
and give me a stick.

3.

Winter now. Other hospital
closer to home.
Bare branches, cold air.
Long linoleum corridors
all shiny.
A room of my own!

I stroke weakly through
tepid water in the Rehab pool.
My dead mother swam
a strong smooth stroke.
Will she help me
on this journey back?

4.

On weekend leave
I stroke the dogs.
My right hand can't
feel their fine fur.
But they lean against me
as of old.

Back in hospital I write
this for the therapist:

'Home!!
Dogs – Sasah, Boidie, Gi—gr
See new house – galde
Luche
A day big'

The Ward Quartet

The Bed Opposite

She enters the ward,
hair dressed, make-up perfected,
china-blues eyes.
Pretty as a picture -
she's always known it.

She changes into a quilted
china-blue dressing gown.
Jaunty, refreshing her lipstick.
'I've had three little stokes,
y'know'.

The boyfriend, pushing eighty,
is old school. A war hero.
Late love.
They hold hands, talk of modifying
stairs and kitchen
for when she comes home.

In the bleak dining room
she holds court, blonded hair,
blue dressing-gown refulgent
among the broken-down blokes
waiting for the midday meal.

One morning she starts
to ramble, jumbles her words.

Her legs won't walk her
to the dining room
anymore.

The boyfriend arrives.
Her make-up is askew.
Another little stroke?
He holds her hand,
silent.

The third week
she can't get off the toilet.
Her voice cracked, panicked –
'Nurse, Nurse!'

Relatives come from Tassie.
Whispered conferences in corridors.
His visits are briefer.

Fright in the whites
of her china eyes.
The dressing gown grows grubby.

The nurses struggle to dress her.

After six weeks, when I leave the ward,
she has stopped speaking. She lies there
waiting to be disposed of.

The Bed near the Window

'My son is a pilot' she says.

'He rang me yesterday
from America.'

She talks about him a lot.

Never about her daughter,
a nervous harried woman
who comes most days.

The son visits once.

She's well over eighty. Broke her leg

'pushing the Hoover into corners.'

From the street there's 15 steps

to her front door. 'But, no,

I'm not moving!'

Every day we exchange

encouragement, smiles.

But it doesn't do to talk much –

she doesn't like refugees, votes Liberal,

likes men more than women.

Idolises her dead father, dead husband.

The Son.

She reminds me of women of the Fifties
when I was growing up. Their innocence,
easy prejudice, wry bravery.

Women who served Kraft cheese
on Saos, slice of tomato,
a spring of parsley on top.

They had secret dreams –
if only to be a man.

Despite myself, I like her.
Sparky. Strong.
Despite herself, she is kind,
even, occasionally,
to her daughter

The Third Bed

She has the worst bed in the ward,
jammed against the only toilet.
So we lie closer together,
behind the curtains, she and I.

She is magnificent,
dark eyes black with suffering.
A hoarse whisper
produced with effort.

Showy flowers from friends
crowd her small space.
She is too sick to see visitors.

We hardly talk. No need.

She doesn't complain,
even when her handsome daughters
bicker across her inert body.
But her shame sears the thin
curtain between us.

In the evenings her husband
comes to brush her teeth.
He does it gently, taking care.

In that moment
I feel their contentment –
as if this is the best thing
he has ever done for her.

Suddenly she's worse.
Doctors, nurses, ward men,
wheel her in and out.

She endures, silent.
Yet behind the curtain
I almost touch her pain,
her fear.

Months later I see her in Outpatients.
We smile deeply into each others eyes.
Bonded in life, she and I.

The Fourth Bed

While in life simple sentences
elude me,
the novel in my head
flies along.

Each day provides a chapter –
a new visitor, a twist.
I lie absorbed, pretending
I'm not listening.

On the fourth bed
I lie stalled,
a long, long distance
from myself.

The terrifying future
ticks.

Going Home

Home, so familiar.
So strange.
Home hasn't changed.
I have.

Different selves –
one relieved
the other afraid.

Same landscape,
different universe.
How to find
new weapons?

Afterstroke

1.

What *is* the alphabet?

'a- b- c . . .'

Then nothing.

My stroke – own it –

blasted a hole in my brain.

Sounds, words, sentences

disappear like tumbleweed.

Numbers, modifiers,

prepositions

multi-syli-babble words –

once friends,

now baleful enemies.

Tiny connections making sense

of the world, and myself,

gone.

Hob-goblins prance and gabble

in the vacant space.

With a stroke of the pen

my writer's life erased.

2.

The pain comes later
It doesn't go away.

That's when, why,
I come undone.

3.

The goblins twist words
into skeins of gibberish.
A gaunt old woman drags
my right leg behind her

Inside a furious child,
red with rage,
fists gouging eyes,
trails after Mummy.
It hurts! Pick me up!

All potential mothers flee
in the face of this monster.

I don't write, save exercises:
Shopping Lists. Days of the Week.
Months of the Year. Post Code.
Vital Phone Numbers.

I recite: 'B-P, P-B. B-P
Shoo-Coo, Coo-Shoo'
A fountain of self-pity
sprays ceaselessly.

Rupture

Inasmuch as anyone
knows anyone
I thought I knew you –
my love
partner
true friend.

Not this she-devil
spitting hate.
Murderous contempt
in your turning back.

I can't help
what I've become,
a ruined woman
turned ruinous.
Can't you see that?

Underneath this rubble,
it's still me calling.
Can't you hear that?

But maybe *I'm*
the spitting devil
furious beyond fury.
I see it in your
frightened
mirroring eyes.

Moving

I want to be a tortoise with
my house on my back.

This house, my beloved carapace,
has grafted itself onto my skin,
mixed with my bloodstream.

Sensible reasons to leave –
uneven ground, steep hills.
Necessary change.

But not now!
I need you, house,
to burrow down,
hide. Heal.

I need your delights
to soothe me.
The morning frosts,
small cobwebs lacing every fencepost
draping each bush in gossamer.
The way the sun settles to sleep
at the front gate each evening.

The first time I saw you
you fitted into my body.

It was the clump of late
winter daffodils that did it.

And the crooked turn in the corridor,
the ugly fire-place, the gun-cupboard
to turn into bookshelves.

Wintersweet outside the kitchen window.
Worn cast-iron in surprising places.
On the pond, the runic sundial,
slightly askew.

The mad jumble of your daily beauties.

I will leach you from my bones,
scrub you from my skin.
But take pity on me, beloved home.
Give me back a corner of my heart
so I can bear to leave you.

