

INTRODUCTION

Natalie Harkin's poetry is deeply felt and profoundly moving. Emerging from the clearest wellsprings of life to bear witness to the richness, complexity and anguish of the human condition, her work is a clarion call to our conscience and hope.

At first glance, *Dirty Words* is an index to the harrowing ledger of colonisation, its ruinous legacy and the echoes of despair and desolation that reverberate through to the present. *Dirty Words* is also a codex of the fabric of filial memory and cultural law, traces of stories on the wind and tide, the songs and sacred knowledge of Elders and Aunties and Nannas and Sisters that weave through that ruin to reconnect, re-sprout and re-live. At their heart, the poems in this collection are songs to love and to the eloquence and strength of resilience.

Natalie Harkin joins a great chain of voices that for generations have stirred and risen and cried out against tyranny, shaking their shackles to the earth like blood that blooms in seeds of power.

If language is a virus, *Dirty Words* is an inoculation, the alphabet jabbed by a 'sing-chant-rage' that liberates the breath and restores the heart and mind. Justice is better, not bitter, but cuts the tongue to tell it like it is. Country might be cleared and carved and consumed but Harkin's poetry restores the beautiful strong 'blood-memory-land' to its sovereign well-being, free from 'industry's radiation-health.'

Above all, even in its anger and sting, Harkin's is a poetry of ardent sympathy and compassion. This is where its true power lies, in the solicitude that swells eternally from quiet and determined dominion, in the invitation to community and treaty, to wisdom. *Dirty Words* unravels the knots of history and makes us feel all there is to be felt in the years and years of living and being Aboriginal.

Always was. Always will be. It will not be quiet here, each letter sent sincerely, respectfully and with the finest aim. The challenge is ours to read Harkin's *Dirty Words*, let them fall across our skin and seep into our creases and folds like fine red dust. Then the air we move through will speak with their colour, our dreams and memories will germinate and join the song, our flowering heads held high and proud.

—Peter Minter, March 2015