In “The Photo,” the concluding poem in Eighth Habitation, the traveller-poet who has journeyed from the safe and familiar precincts of Sydney to the ravaged landscape of Cambodian history, poses a question: “To forget or not to, / to write or not to – therefore live – / to forgive the monster/ is this impossible question.” In parodying Hamlet, Aitken does not merely revisit the Theodor Adorno proposition about poetry being an impossibility after Auschwitz, but also broaches the role of remembering that Milan Kundera has framed so memorably: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” Eighth Habitation is a project in remembering; it revisits a personal and familial past, and then turns to the barbaric years of the Cambodian killing fields. The collection confronts the unspeakable without the false portentous gravitas that many bring to the subject; it does its work of remembering and witness with sensitivity, grace, humility and honesty, offering compelling records of the atrocities and sufferings in one of the most horrific nightmares of recent history.

But to suggest that Aitken’s cogent, rich and varied collection is merely an addition to what
Carolyn Forché calls the poetry of witness is to miss its many other resonances, its arresting range of subjects and tone. Doubtless the core of the collection revolves around Atiken’s Cambodian sojourn and is shadowed by the country’s violent history, but there are other vital thematic veins to the work, not least of which is the story of Atiken’s father. In fact, Atiken’s father’s Asian adventures in the first part of the collection prefigure and frame his son’s Asian sojourn. The book begins at home; the first of the triptych, aptly called “Broken/ Unbroken,” puts together a family portrait, albeit fragmented, mythologising a father whose exploits echo the colonial figures Atiken examines in the Cambodian section. The father poems recall “the salt ghost” who left home when Atiken was thirteen, retracing his career in the army, and his travels through Asia in the 1950s. “The Fire Watchers: A Memoir” address the poet’s brother but tells of the family’s disintegration, and his mother burning all his father’s books. Out of the ruins of the family, Aitken has salvaged photographs, and “the narratives refine themselves with each passing year.” He follows his father as he “bargained with a waif at Changi/ for 13 postcards” and recreates his antics as he “danced, quite pissed, in women’s lace/ then swapped the Major’s lucky digger hat/ for a set of Dutch clogs.”

In “Archive” Aitken reconstructs his father’s Asian travels in the form of a travel journal. The son takes on the father’s voice here, giving a shorthand account of his encounters. Here Aitken senior is portrayed something of a ladies’ man; the poem is strewn with allusions to dalliances with local women, like Eleanor Kwong, “a commercial artist at Cathay Ltd,” Noël Bulke, the Anglo-Indian daughter of the Pakistani Ambassador, Edith Atkinson, “daughter of a Thai-Malaysian and Dutch mother,” a host of taxi dancers and “Singapore models.” Charming, irresistible, Aitken’s father seems interested in the East only as a site for sexual fantasy/adventure, and cares little for Asian culture and politics. But this Orientalist exterior belies a complex mind and history, the flamboyant representations ironically hinting at a father whose contradictions the son is trying to apprehend without judgement.

Aitken senior’s adventures pave the way for his son’s Asian journey in the next two sections, his imperialistic/colonial attitude contrasting with his son’s more sensitive explorations. Also, the hybrids that Aitken senior flirted with reflect his son’s complex make-up. Aitken, like Edith Atkinson, is a hyphenated person, the product of an Anglo-Australian father and Thai mother; a diasporic childhood lived in London, Bangkok and Malaysia has resulted in multi-locale attachments and a shifting and complex sense of belonging. It is perhaps a need to articulate and affirm his transnational identity, to connect the Asian, and Anglo-Australian strands that impels the journeys in the collection. To this end the poems in the transitional section “Crossing to Lake Toba,” located in Cairns, Malaysian Indonesia, can be seen as metaphorically and geographically negotiating the liminal spaces between Australia and Asia. “Kuta Diary” reverberates with the Bali bombing and
“For Effendy, Emperor of Icecream” is a tongue-in-cheek look at Wallace Stevens, globalisation, tourism, and the interaction between tourist and native: “And home we went to ‘Saving Private Ryan’ on your new DVD.” Beguiling, observant, these poems reveal Aitken’s attentive eye for details and the nuances of cross-cultural interaction, his natural warmth and empathy, his aliveness to the Other, and a quiet humour that offers a light counterpoint to the heavier themes. “Cairns,” the last poem in this section, provides an engaging portrait of Aitken’s mother, giving her a voice as she recounts her migrant story. Aply her Thai origin steers the collection to the ravaged landscape of Indochina in the next section.

The Cambodian poems grapple with wreckage left by years of war. “A Map of Cambodia” gives a synoptic survey of the country’s traumatised history and scarred landscape: “Magenta for bombed areas, / beaches named after hotels/ islands sold off to foreigners.” In quick effective strokes, Aitken captures the tide of changes sweeping across Phnom Penh, the signs of the nouveau riches, the gap between them and those still in the grip of poverty and the aftermath of war. He captures the precarious balance between destruction and recovery tellingly; while the capitalist developments, the multinational takeover of Cambodia betoken healing and movement forward, in reality they constitute a neo-colonialism that is partitioning and destroying the country in ways not different from the plunder of French colonialism. A new Cambodia is rising from the ashes of the past, eager to forget the past and embrace its capitalist future: “Under one map there’s another/ rising on the tide/ as the pain recedes.”

Aitken possesses a photographic eye alert to the telling instants and details. “Ruins” gives revealing snapshot:

In Phnom Penh a mountain of junked bicycles
is a monument to Welcome!
but Siem Reap’s giant preying mantis
toting an AK-47
at the Foreign Correspondents Club
counts as art.

Casual, understated, the observations get to the heart of the matter with arresting vividness: “Here, cows know more about road safety/ than townsfolk selling photocopied/ books on genocide.” Even clichéd images of the Vietnam War can attain cinematic clarity:

A woman sheltering under a rattan mat
from a thunderous downdraft of Hueys
by the banks of the Mekong
her last recollection of home.
In “S21” Aitken gives a virtual tour of the genocide museum where the Khmer Rouge exterminated 20,000 men, women and children. Unflinchingly the poem delivers the images in all their stark brutality:

    Blood and rust melded together  
in the springs of an old French style bed base.  
    An old cartridge case shit can.  
    Samplers of jumbled DNA,  
in a room of ragged cast-offs.

The fragmentary images address headlong twentieth-century life in extremis; the connection between the two holocausts is inserted subtly: “Someone who’d been to Belsen/ had written ‘Justice’ in the visitor’s book.” Aitken lets the artefacts stand as evidence for what happened, avoiding the pathos and sentimental catharsis that popular representations of Holocausts like Schindler’s List peddles.

In perhaps the most powerful of Cambodian poem, “The Wearer of Amulets,” the poet meets “an old boy soldier” who reveals the secret of how he survived with the help of an amulet: “a desiccated human foetus/ cut from the uterus of a woman/ pregnant three months.” Here again Aitken reveals an ability to weave splintered lyric narrative and social observation. There is an engaging sense of kinship and empathy with the survivors, a respect for what the poet can perceive but not understand. Other memorable poems in this section include “Dear Henri,” which offers a critique of French colonialism in Indochina, “Pol Pot in Paris,” which suggests again the tenuous line between culture and barbarism, and the memorable “The Photo” that this review began with.

_Eighth Habitation_, as the title suggests, is a sojourn in purgatory, a journey through liminal zones where questions of self, the past, pain and suffering find expression in poems of lyric grace and compassion. If there is any flaw at all, it is its generosity in offering so much; one feels that there are a few poems that could have been omitted to make a more compact and coherent collection. But the reader shouldn’t complain; it is a rich collection that yields many pleasures and insights upon re-reading. The poems conduct their quest, ask the necessary questions in an honest, unpretentious, intelligent, self-effacing way; they inhabit and explore difficult thematic territories and have much to communicate to us of the complexities of travel and cross-cultural communication, of a fascinating family history, and of the ineffable experiences of loss, death, and healing.