This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Fifteen stories make up Christos Tsiolkas’s collection, *Merciless Gods*, and each is a different world of unsettling, cruel and profane beauty. Written across a period of 20 years, they vary in intensity, but even the most innocuous of them have a thinly veiled aura of threat, of the terror inherent in every intimate human bond. In ‘The Hair of the Dog’, the narrator’s mother has written a novel which is described as ‘a dark, unsettling fable, pornographic and compelling’. This phrase precisely describes many of these stories. Not one of them could have been written by anyone but Tsiolkas.

The title story, ‘Merciless Gods’, begins, ‘I want to tell you a story about an evening many years ago.’ This innocuous-sounding start leads into a taut account of a celebration dinner, charting the disintegration of a group of friends, the disillusion of unrequited devotion, and the realisation that, after all, ‘we were far more ordinary than we believed ourselves to be’. Many varieties of love are on show, and there seems little doubt that the most merciless of the merciless gods is Eros.

Some of the stories seem almost to be matching pairs – the threat to love brought on by a thoughtless racist remark, in ‘Tourists’ to a newly married couple, and in ‘Sticks, Stones’ to a mother and her teenage son. In both cases the insult is directed towards a third person by the male, and the female’s righteous outrage puts the pair at odds. The difference is that the point of view in one story is with the husband, who makes the remark, and in the other is with the mother, who overhears her son’s comment. The death of a parent and its impact on the relationship between a son and his lover appears in two stories, ‘The Hair of the Dog’ and ‘Saturn Return’, though the parents are each eccentric in remarkably different ways, and belong in one story to the narrator and in the other to the narrator’s lover. In ‘Genetic Material’ the parent is not yet dead, and his son’s love is frustrated by his father’s dementia and failure to recognise him during a hospital visit. So far nothing unusual, but there is a dark and wonderful Tsiolkas twist to this story.

Racism holds a deeper threat in ‘Civil War’, a raw road story which begins, ‘After drugs there is only God’ and introduces the narrator to a spiritual experience in the desert, only to realise it was not intended for him. The non-Aboriginal narrator, confronted to the insistent intolerance of the truck driver, finds the grace to admit that he too had been beset by similar thoughts: ‘I’m ashamed even as I write these words,’ he says, ‘But it would be more shameful to pretend I did not think them.’

Tsiolkas is so good at beginnings. ‘Jessica Lange in *Frances*’, a story about disastrous erotic attraction, begins ‘There’s not much happening outside the window. There is just sound and violence.’ The violence which erupts later in this story is of a different kind to that in ‘Petals’, a story written by Tsiolkas in Greek and translated by him into English, a powerful, Greek-accented English belonging to a prisoner in a hellish Australian gaol.

Then there are the three concluding stories, Porn 1, Porn 2 and Porn 3. A mother confronts but cannot reconcile herself to her dead son’s occupation; a young addict witnesses the degradation of boy he loves on a film set; and, most disquieting of all, a young Muslim sacrifices himself to cleanse the world of the filth he sees in himself and others.

It’s difficult to find anything really new to say about Tsiolkas. All the superlatives have been used and overused already. These stories just confirm his range, his vital, restless imagination, his command of language to capture the beauty and horror of everything that can happen between human beings – obsession, hatred, vindictiveness, shame, and the myriad forms of love.