



'Hilarious, scabrous, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued' **Guardian**

---

**MICHAL WITKOWSKI**

# LOVETOWN

## MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI

Translated from the Polish by W. Martin

Portobello  
BOOKS

Fourth floor, I buzz the entryphone and hear what sounds like squealing, oohs and aahs.

This must be it. I boldly step into the filthy lobby.

Patricia and Lucretia are already old men; whatever lives they once enjoyed are long over and done with. Since 1992, to be precise. Patricia: a heavy-set, run-down man with a huge bald patch and animated, bushy eyebrows. Lucretia: wrong side of fifty, smooth-shaven, cynical, just as fat. Black fingernails eaten away by ringworm, little jokes, blasé airs. Stock phrases: 'If they finish school, they're not real men!' Their whole lives they made ends meet working as hostesses, orderlies, cloakroom attendants. It was a way to get by while giving themselves time for the really important things.

I take a rickety lift up to the fourth floor of a gloomy, socialist apartment block, circa 1960. Stinks of piss. Out in the courtyard little kids are screaming their heads off. I look at the buttons scorched here and there by cigarettes, labels peeling. I read the graffiti: football slogans, a threat to send someone to the ovens. I give the bell a quick poke. The door opens immediately; it's Lucretia. Patricia is in

the kitchen, making the tea. They're both excited about the 'reporter man' who's come to visit; they're acting like real celebrities. For now they're living off their pensions, barely scraping by. They don't even have a vegetable patch where they can grow a few cloves of garlic, or share memories of the good old days over the garden fence with the old dear next door. No, their memories aren't things you'd want strangers to hear. Which is exactly why I'm going to hear them today.

Lucretia had once been a German teacher, but he could never keep a job for long; he was always landing himself in trouble by making the moves on his students, until finally he ended up working as a private tutor. In the seventies, he moved from Bydgoszcz to Wrocław. Here, in a park where the queers go, in a dirty public toilet, he met Patricia. Patricia was sprawled out, drunk, his head in a pool of piss, thinking he'd never get back on his feet. But Lucretia helped the little slut out, finding him a job as a cloakroom attendant in a workers' cultural centre. From then on, it was Patricia's job to dispense ping-pong balls to young functionaries who came to play table tennis in the club room. The work was easy, the pay like any other. By day, Patricia drank coffee out of recycled mustard jars and gossiped with the caretaker. Night was when she came alive. Sometimes she stayed out on her shift, as if she were a night porter, until dawn. Then she would fantasise that she was a Baroque lady wearing an enormous crinoline and a tall wig, taking a carriage to see her lover; she imagined she had some completely unpronounceable name and a huge fan to hide her face behind. The roof might be leaking into a bucket, the wind howling outside the window, but Patricia would get up, make coffee or tea with a little heating

coil, add a shot of vodka, then return to her carriage, to Versailles, to skirts so wide you could fit a couple of lovers and a bottle of poison under their pleats. She'd light up a Wiarus and go on her rounds, and by the time she returned she had already worked out her next step. All she needed were earplugs, because the nights were never quiet, and the guard dogs outside were always chasing cats. Morning sobered her up like a splash of cold water. She had to clock off, she had to go back; once again people would be making demands of her, and once again she would be lazy and insubordinate in return.

But that was a long time ago, back when the workers at Hydral and Stolbud still had energy at the end of the working day for things like ballet, back before phrases like 'child molesting' had been invented, and newspapers were only interested in their own problems. Television had yet to come to the night shift, so people had to let their imaginations run at full steam, else they would die of boredom.

Today the rooms in Patricia's cultural centre have all been taken over by different companies. The façade is plastered with signs showing which floor houses the pawn shop, the currency exchange, the pool hall, the candle wholesaler. What was once a studio where workers awkwardly learned to dance now has the romantic moniker 'Everything for Five Zlotys'. Nobody wants to give Patricia a job anymore, everyone's just looking out for number one, and building security is handled by a special firm. The world is a bad place because the poetry recitation contests, the girls' calisthenics, the ballet classes, and the corrective gymnastics have given way to filthy dens where wannabe-mafiosi trade unfashionable second-hand

mobile phones. And as if that wasn't bad enough, you can't buy earplugs at the kiosks anymore. Patricia gave this all some thought and decided, with no regrets, to take her much-deserved pension.

Poland's Third Republic never got a foot in her door.



They refer to each other as *she* and *her*, call each other *sister* or *girl*, and it wasn't all that long ago that they were still picking up men – in the park, behind the opera house, and at the train station. Who knows how much is true, how much is legend, and how much is simply taking the piss. But one thing is sure: they're just two of the innumerable legion of sex addicts. Connoisseurs of cock! Even today, pot-bellied pensioners, they have a few tricks up their sleeves. Neither has ever heard of plastic surgery or sex-change operations. They get by with a flourish or two of their plain black satchels, which they call 'handbags'. They make do with what they've got – the quintessence of communist-era mediocrity. All they have to do is hold their cigarettes a little differently, shave every day, and put their words, their language, to use. For their power lies in their words. They have nothing; whatever they do have they've had to make up, lie up, sing up. Today you can buy anything you want: your sex, your eye colour, your hair – there's no place left for the imagination. Which is why they would rather be poor and 'have a bit of fun'.

'Oh *stop*, darling!' Patricia gets 'dramatic' and pours tea into a chipped cup; old and grimy though it may be, it still comes on a saucer and with a serviette. Form, form is all that matters. And words.

'Oh stop! My glory days are long over, my arse is even sagging. O where o where are the snows of yesteryear? Christ, what a fruity-pie! What a crazy dame! Do you mind? Old Villon said it best: it's better to choose boys. And boy could we choose 'em!'

Being 'dramatic', 'camping it up', and 'being swish' mean acting like a woman, whatever they understand by that. Apparently it means flapping their hands and squealing, saying things like 'Oh *stop*!' and 'Christ, Christina!', or going up to a cute lad, holding their bent wrists in his face, and saying, 'Sit up straight, puppy dog, when you're talking to me!'

They don't want to be women at all; they want to be swishy men. That's how they like it, how they've been their whole lives: pretend femmes. To actually be a woman would be beside the point. What's exciting is the pretending; to actually satisfy their imagination would be... but satisfaction isn't a word in their language. The only words they know are 'hunger', 'frustration', 'cold night', 'wind', and 'come with me.' A permanent stopover in the upper regions of the depths, between the railway station, where the pickings were slimmest, their miserable jobs and the park, where the public toilet was. The arsehole of the world.

And as it happens, someone had lined this arsehole with sawdust and rags especially for them. All comfy and cosy.

No one ever went hungry with that tinned soup, with those potatoes, the subsidies of socialism. There was always enough to eat and a roof over your head; a lady doesn't need much to get by. Now they're building a great big shopping mall in that park of theirs; they're burying their entire history. Patricia insists she will protest. But she's only kidding. More bitterly and sadly every time.



'What can a bag lady like me do? Lay into Big Capital with my walking stick? Hit it over the head with my handbag? What should I tell them, that it's an historic site? Oh, go and get the ashtray, Lucretia, the gentleman has nowhere to put his (ha! ha!) *aaaassshh!*'

Patricia realises she's called herself a 'bag lady', and she's delighted at her new joke. Somewhere deep down it contains a trickle of indignity, and Patricia is already planning to drink it, to lick it up like a drop of eggnog from the bottom of a glass. Tonight.

'So there I am on my way to the park. First I stop at the kiosk and buy some cigarettes, like I've done for years. They're fine; they're not at all seriously harmful to my health. Then I see this guy I knew way back, made a name for himself, a businessman. And he cuts me this look like I'm a prostitute or something, like I'm a streetwalker down by the station. Well, I suppose I *am* walking the street. But I'm nobody's streetwalker... So I listen to what he says, but none of it has anything to do with me, something about the credit. Can you believe it? He's got the credit, but he's losing his job. And I'm thinking, darling, if all I needed was credit to make me happy... So I'm having all these deep philosophical thoughts, see, and Lucia La Douche, who I share them with, completely agrees. That we're living in the highest regions of the depths, like in paradise. Nothing can threaten us, and...' – Lucretia lazily stretches her entire body – 'life actually has meaning!' She licks herself indecently.

I'm sitting at the wobbly table in the kitchen of their dilapidated flat. Nothing has changed here since the days of communism. All around me are Taiwanese gold watches from the market, barometers from the market, glittery figurines from the market, all of it from Russia. Even their speech is full of Russianisms:

'Not much by him in the trousers...'

Grinding poverty. Their laundry dries on a line hung over the stove. Men's underwear, all of it black, and the cheapest brand; darned socks, black too. First, because black is weird, and second, because mourning is the rule in this household, and has been for over a decade.

Lucretia poses like a dowager countess deprived of her fortune by the vicissitudes of war. She crosses her legs (a pale calf, tattooed with a web of veins, appears between her sock and the cuff of her brown trousers), lights a cigarette, holds the smoke in for a moment, then releases it with a deep sigh, a lady lost in reverie. They put on their favourite Anna German record. The disc spins round on the turntable:

*In the café on the corner there's a concert every night  
Stay there in the doorway, you dancing Eurydices,  
Before the walls are streaked with the day's first light  
May your drunken Orpheuses  
Hold you in their arms...*

They offer me a cup of sweet, lukewarm tea. Their flat is furnished like the waiting room of a clinic. You can tell how little people need in life when they 'live' by other means, when their flat is nothing more than a waiting room, somewhere to spend the time between nocturnal forays. It's seedy, as the homes of (sex) addicts usually are. The bottom halves of the walls are painted with a yellow, oil-based paint; the top halves are grimy. The windowsills are lined with white plastic pots of grasses and a recently deceased money tree. I wait for

the two ladies (gentlemen?) to finally sit down for their tea and cigarettes, to stop running around. But the moment one takes a seat, the other suddenly realises she needs to spray her armpits with deodorant, or brush her hair in front of the cracked mirror. Something is cooking in the kitchen, too, and Lucretia gets up to water the plants from a communist-era milk bottle. Who knows where that came from? They preen and primp themselves the whole time. Guests make rare appearances in this house of mourning.

'Let's begin. First, perhaps you could tell me something about life for homosexuals in Wrocław back then?' I set the Dictaphone on the table, but their loud squeals of laughter make me pause.

'Look who's asking! Patricia, *save me!* Get this little slut away from me! So the Holy Virgin doesn't know? Patricia, what was it they called our reporter man here back at the Fairy and around the opera house? Wasn't it "Snowflake"? Snowflake – because she was always covered with flakes of... Ha! Snow! It's OK, you can edit that part out, you don't have to transcribe everything... Anyway, the park was our cruising ground, you see. But we called it the "picket line" or the "cruising ground". And cruising we called "picketing", or sometimes "pricketing"! You could pick up a trick and do him right there. Service him, you know. Which means sucking him off. There've been parks for as long as I've been blowing whistles, which is since before the war. Time was when the picket line stretched all the way from one end of town to the other, and that's how you should start your novel about us actually. "The Countess left the house at half past nine in the evening" and went to the park, because ten was always the best time for a bit of cock. Do you remember the Countess, Patricia? They killed her in '88,

I think, poor thing. Now, what was it she did for a living?'

'Don't be stupid! It was Cora they killed in '88. She was always taking grunt home, and she finally got what was coming to her. Some rough grunt killed her with her own kitchen knife. Knifed her for one of those stupid Narev radios – she had nothing else for him to steal. Half the Wrocław picket line was in her funeral procession, even a few, umm... priests (can I... can I say that? This isn't for a Catholic paper, is it?). Anyway, priests. You know what I shouted at them? I said, "Have you girls even said your breviary today?! And now you're out cruising?" But they just started walking faster.'

'Do they believe in God?'

'Who, homos? How can they not believe in God? Many gods even. Any minute, out on the street, young gods are coming round every corner...'

'But what was it I wanted to say...? Right, so the Countess was killed long before that, in '79. She was a grandfather, and she worked as a toilet lady – so I guess that makes her a grandmother! She worked in the bogs in the underpass, so she never had far to go. And she lived in a basement flat right off the park. All the queens lived near the park. They made it a point to rent flats there so they could go strolling in the summer, and now they wish they hadn't because the cranes are right outside their windows.'

'What exactly is a grunt...?' My question is drowned out by wild squeals.

'What is a grunt? What is a grunt...? Christ, *Christina!* What exactly is a grunt? Fine, let's pretend you don't know. Grunt is what gives our lives meaning. A grunt is a bull, a drunken bull of a man, a macho lowlife, a con man, a top, sometimes a guy walking home

through the park, or passed out in a ditch or on a bench at the station or somewhere else completely unexpected. Our drunken Orpheuses! A queen doesn't have to go lezzing around with other queens after all! We need straight meat! Grunt can be homosexual, too, as long as he's simple as an oak and uneducated – because if he finishes school he's not a real man any more, he's just some intellectual. Grunt can't be someone who puts on airs. He has to have a mug like a thigh – a box covered with hide, the last place where anything can be expressed, least of all feelings! Tell me where you'd find that in those queer bars. There are dozens of stories of straight grunt willingly going off with some queen, playing the homosexual in bed, and only afterwards turning violent, stealing, murdering, making off with the goods... Sometimes even before you get back through the door, they go home. You call out, ask them something, and they turn around and punch you in the face. As if they were furious with themselves.

'But a queen won't let that scare her off. Not real queens like us. Maybe one of those falsies from the bars. They all dream of copping off with some drunken Orpheus – the whole time he's having sex he has no idea it's not a woman he's doing. They dream of looking at his face, watching him thinking he's with a woman. But then he'd have to be completely off his face, or... Well, the best grunt is straight, and to pick that up you either have to get him completely shit-faced or...'

'Or what?'

'Anyway, as I was saying about the Countess...' Patricia dodges my question. 'So get this: there I am, it's eleven at night – this was back before those cranes dug everything up, the little hills and ruins,

our trees with all those names and messages notched into the bark. So there I am in the middle of the night, having a nostalgic moment, because it's All Saints' Day, and Forefathers' Eve is coming up. So I'm walking along and all of a sudden what do I see but some grunt. That, I say to myself, looks just like a drunken piece of grunt walking by. So I head off after him, and presto, he disappears. You'll observe I'm talking in the present tense so write it down that way. I'm talking like this on purpose, so it feels like the reader was there. Anyway, half the streetlamps are burned out, so you can't see. But my eyes are used to the darkness, after all these years, so I can tell he's gone off to the ruins on the other side of the hill. I know all those ditches and nooks and crannies pretty well myself. I go over to have a look. I see him flash past before he vanishes again. Now I know he must have gone into that bomb crater, the one with all the bushes around it, you know, where we did Gigantophallus that one time, remember?'

'Oh, right! Right!' Lucretia knows exactly who she's talking about.

'Anyway, the grunt slips through the fence, the one with the sign on it about there being an excavation in progress. I pull up my slip and *voilà!* Of course I know where that loose board in the fence is. I keep walking, I'm already pinching my nipples under my camisole. I'm all mouth. I go down, down into the crater, and just like I thought, there's my grunt standing in that dark, bombed-out pit. Slowly he turns and...'

'What? And what?'

'I look at him, and... It's the *Countess!*'

'Her *ghost?*'

'The ghostly, ghostly slag herself. There's a white light glowing



"Pachisha?" (It wasn't "Patricia" she said, but something weird like "Pachisha" or "Chisha", as if her mouth were full of potatoes, but maybe that's what it's like when you're dead.) So I said, "Huh!" Then she muttered something, more garbled words, and went off to carry on cruising on the hill. Without so much as a goodbye, she took off, vanished without a trace, even though we hadn't seen each other for a good ten years and she probably had lots of stories to tell. Anyway, there was this old slapper there, Patricia snorts with laughter, winking at Lucretia, 'You know the one: Owl. When she saw the Countess coming out of the ruins, she followed her right up the hill. Was she ever in for a surprise. And then there was something else I'd noticed earlier: a group of what looked like skinheads coming up from the river on the other side of the hill – they didn't look too friendly. I thought about warning her, but then I thought, what can they do to her if she's a ghost? It was all I could do to contain my own fear. For one thing, I had a ghost on my hands, and then there were the screams I heard coming from the top of the hill, as if someone were getting beaten to death. But I wasn't so frightened that I couldn't... I mean, that Zbigniew-with-the-moustache turned up right then. The one who's always on a bike.'

Lucretia knows. She stands up and smoothes the grey residue of her hair. She turns the record over. She tugs her cheap jumper with its naff pattern down over her protruding belly. She's ugly. Even though she's practically bald, she has dandruff. Now her lips curl up in a malicious smile, and she says smugly, through clenched teeth: 'Well, the Countess was highly strung even when she was alive, so I'm sure her own death must have come as an enormous shock to

her. Do you remember that time we went with her to visit the Russians at the barracks?'

The two old men become animated. Patricia goes over to the drinks cabinet ('high gloss finish') and reverently pulls something out of it. A second later, she sets down on the table a number of sealed plastic bags with brown things inside them. I start to open one, but they both lunge towards me.

'The fragrance! You'll let the fragrance out! For God's sake don't open it! We only open them on *anniversaries*...' They'd stashed their sorry relics in the bags for safekeeping: army belts, knives, foot wrappings, a few sepia or black-and-white photos torn from identity cards and stamped with the purple half-moons of large and long-invalid official seals – mugshots of twenty-something Russian musclemen with potato noses and mouths, faces wholesome, salt of the earth. Or else ugly and crooked, their fringes like triangles pasted over their foreheads. Dedications in Cyrillic on the reverse. Over the kitchen door, where you might expect to see a picture of the Holy Virgin, they have a tangle of rusty barbed wire hanging from a nail. They'd cut it down recently; it came away easily enough, all they had to do was twist it round a bit, right, left, done. They filled their pockets with the barbed wire, so they'd have some for Uterina and the others, for later on, when there was nothing left.

They show me pictures of the ruined barracks, the graffiti on the wall around the windows, carved, scratched, scrawled in hard-to-reach places. For example:

Бранск 100

I don't get it.

‘The number 100,’ Patricia explains matter-of-factly, ‘means they had a hundred days left until their discharge.’

‘Discharge!’ sighs Lucretia.

‘And Bransk, of course,’ Patricia continues, ‘is where they were returning after those hundred days. Why a hundred? Because they had to shave their heads down to zero every day for a hundred days before they left so they wouldn’t take their lice with them. Then the party could begin. Their graffiti is still there on the walls today. Only today the walls are conspicuous, right on the street, while back then they were further away, back behind another wall, impossible to get to.’

‘But not for us! Look,’ Lucretia shows me another photo. ‘Here’s the private road (though it’s not so private now), here’s where the bushes were, and here’s where Patricia would get down on all fours. Those barracks on Barracks Street, we used to call them “head-quarters”. I’d always say, “Come on Patricia, let’s go to *headquarters*.” There were other barracks in town, of course...’

Lucretia starts to bawl. Patricia’s voice cracks. Lucretia recounts her initiation. A moving tale replete with the poetic motif of lost gloves:

The first cock I ever laid lips on belonged to a Russian soldier behind the railway station. That was a thing of beauty! It was just before Christmas, I rang up Patricia, deepest communism. It’s hard for me to say now what year it was. It was before Christmas, and there wasn’t any snow, but it was certainly cold. And I had a pair of new gloves. Really good ones too, which I left in his car, and had to go back later to collect. I had a porn movie, I had this one porno, you see, and I knocked on the window, my heart pounding wildly,

because I’d seen how Guard Lady did it! How Guard Lady gave blowjobs. At first the cars all parked in front of the station, later on they’d be behind. And they would sit there in those military lorries, one in each – behind the wheel, often all day long, freezing outside. Later on, after the fall of the system, they’d be parked behind the station, so people wouldn’t notice them. So I mustered up the courage and went with that porno, because I’d seen how courageously Guard Lady would approach them. And I went up to this soldier (a boy, eighteen), and the soldier says to me:

‘*Chto ty hot’yel?*’\*

And I say: ‘Umm... *Pogovorit’ s taboi...*’\*\*

‘Ehh... *Ya vizhu, chto ty po ruski govorish, no zahodi...*’\*\*\* I started talking politics, and he told me he was from Rostov-on-Don, how they have Kazakh traditions there. By now I was totally turned on, my cock hard, my heart banging, and I’m thinking ‘I’m gonna explode!’ So I say:

‘*U menya yest taka pornucha, hotyel’ ty uvidyet?*’\*\*\*\* And he says:

‘*Nu davai, davai...*’† So he watches it, and then he says: ‘*A chor-nuyu ty uzhe yebal?*’†† ‘No,’ I say. ‘*Nyet, ya yeshcho nikogda babyi nye yebal...*’††† He’s visibly pissed off:

‘*Ty nye yebal babyi? Ty navyerno pyedik, da?*’†††† And I say:

\* Russian: What do you want?

\*\* Russian: To talk with you.

\*\*\* Russian: I see you speak Russian, come over here.

\*\*\*\* Russian: I have some porn. You want to watch it?

† Russian: OK, show me, show me.

†† Russian: You ever fucked a black [woman]?

††† Russian: No, I’ve never even fucked a woman...

†††† Russian: You’ve never fucked a woman? You really are a homo then, yes?

'Da! Da!' The Russians used the phrase *Pyedik Gamburskii* – Hamburg Homo. You know how Slavs usually associate anything pervy with Germany... And he says:

'No, ya tym nye zanimayus...'\* And I reply:

'A nraivitsya tyebye, chui tyebya stayit? Nraivitsya tyebye?\*\*\* He says:

'No nraivitsya, no ya... u myenya dyenyeg nyet. Skolka hochesh?\*\*\*\* And I say:

'Ya nichevo nye hochu, ya tyebye yeshcho dyengi dam, hochu vrot!\*\*\*\*\* And fuck if he didn't look around nervously to see if anyone was passing, then unbutton his fly. And right there, fuck, the palm tree loomed, and Lucretia didn't have even the slightest gag reflex! One two three, and the lad shot his load down my throat... I immediately spat it out into a tissue, and when it was over I asked him:

'Do you want to set a date for moving in?' And he says:

'Never! Bye.' Huh. I continue walking, and fuck if I haven't lost my gloves! So I walk back to him and tell him I left my gloves there, and he gives them back to me and everything, but with such a screwed-up look on his face, he wasn't at all happy, he probably wanted to chuck those gloves away. In my euphoria I rang up Patricia and said:

'Patricia, I had cock in my mouth!' He was a really clean-cut bloke, I have to admit. But I say, 'God, what am I going to do to stop

\* Russian: Well, I don't understand that.

\*\* Russian: But are you into me? Is your dick getting hard? Are you into me?

\*\*\* Russian: Yeah, I'm into you, it's just I... I don't have any money. How much you want?

\*\*\*\* Russian: I don't want anything. I'll even give you money, but I want something in return!

myself catching the clap in my mouth?' And Patricia says:

'Cretia, go to the late-night chemist and get a bottle of Sebidin, all you need is Sebidin, take it and gargle, that's the positive gamma, the negative gamma kills everything. And don't worry if you deepthroated that brute either, I'll set you up with some Doxycycline, I have some at home and all you have to do is take it. So now you've done it, now you see what I've been talking about. Now you've done it, just like you said, so now you see. Right? You'll have to reinvent yourself, you'll have to start making the rounds.' There was no going back.

\*\*\*

I can't bear it any more. I excuse myself, put my cigarette in the ash-tray (a large glass brick meant to look like cut glass but obviously dislodged from a wall), and go to the toilet.

This is horrible. Horrible and fascinating both at once. There's no way I can publish this. How can I? What can I possibly do with it? An investigative piece for *Polityka*? A special segment on *Eye-witness*? Impossible. Highway prostitutes, thieves, murderers, smugglers, kidnappers, spies – anything but this. Even though there's nothing criminal going on at all. There just isn't a language for this. Unless it's *arse*, *cock*, *blowjob* or *grunt*. Unless I could repeat those words over and over for so long they neutralised the taint of the barracks. Like the word *vagina* in *The Vagina Monologues*. I'm not surprised reporters have shied away from this topic!

My thoughts meander along in this manner while I pee and have a look round their bathroom... First of all, right in front of my eyes,

## Virgin

Virgin worked for the city, in a branch of local government. All through communism she'd set up queens with jobs and, when things got bad and they had no money, free meals.

'Those girls would wolf down chops like there was no tomorrow.'

She was a good woman, but fairly mercenary when it came to things like that. Often she would pull her strings pro bono, but just as often she'd want sex in exchange. And that's how her friendships with Desirée and Radwanicka worked during the communist era; she was always arranging something for one or the other of them. For example, she got Radwanicka a job with the Gypsy folk orchestra (Radwanicka: 'I sucked off each and every one of those Gypsies, but they never wash! I mean, *really!*').

Virgin was killed by grunt in her own flat. Seventy-seven knife wounds, tied to a chair. Half the picket line was at her funeral (a whole busload drove by the town hall), everyone sobbing, because she was such a good person and all, but when they started singing 'O noble and blessed Virgin...' and 'immaaaaaculate Virgin,' the queens lost it and totally cracked up. Some immaculate virgin!

## Radwanicka

I'll tell you about Radwanicka, Michał. But if she finds out I was talking trash about her, just promise you'll pay to get my teeth done! Tell me you'll pay for my new teeth when that whore beats the shit out of me, let me go to Germany and get new porcelain ones!

In *The Great Atlas of Polish Queens*, on the page dedicated to Radwanicka, there in the lower right-hand corner, is a grinning skull. A deadly poisonous toadstool that might seduce you with its amiable, appetising looks, the looks of a smiling, spruced-up old gentleman – but that will lay you out on your bed a month later! A truly villainous queen, worse than Doctor Mengele! As a little girl, she used to heat the water in the fish tank with a heating coil, and she enjoyed it so much she boiled the fish and even ate them too, for all I know.

She strolls through the park in her white coat and hat, and everyone thinks: what a high-class dame. Then an hour later you see her queuing up at the soup kitchen, waiting for a cheap meal.

God help you if she latches on to you while you're walking through the park on the arm of some young grunt. First she'll come on sugary as a communist-era sweet; then she sends you off



## The Deaf Hag's Complaints

Knock knock! Who's there? The Deaf Hag.

'Ooh, Mr Witkowski, how lovely of you to come and stay with us, to rent a room. But you do know, don't you, that we only ever have lonely, single gentlemen staying here, renting rooms from me, from May to October?'

'Like who?'

'What?'

'Like who!!!'

'I beg your pardon?'

'WHO, FOR INSTANCE?!'

'Well, for instance, that man from Bydgoszcz, the one that famous artist always comes to see...'

'Which artist?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Which artist?'

'Which what?'

'Who?!'

'You know, you're all tarred with the same brush, you all go to

that nudist beach of yours... You think I don't know... Artists, the lot of you...'

'Excuse me, madam, but I really am an artist, you know.'

'I know, that's what I'm saying, you're all *artists*...'

'No, I actually write *books*.'

'What?'

'I'm an artist because I write books!'

'Oh, this sort of book, right?' And here the Deaf Hag gesticulates with her hand as if she's jerking off!

Exactly, this sort of book....