LONDON READER

Contemporary Voices in Creative Writing



Lana Hechtman Ayers, BH Birtwhistle, Maroula Blades, Matt Bryden d'Ores&Deja, Arthur M Doweyko, Jess Flarity, Robert L Kaspar III Veronique Kootstra, Sarah Law, Artem Mirolevich, Emilie Oblivion Guy Prevost, AB Quinn, Graeme K Talboys, Daniel Scott Tysdal

By Guy Prevost

The London Reader's Foreword: The historian Alan Bullock observed one of those odd confluences of the past: "Stalin spent a month in Vienna in 1913; Hitler was still there, and Stalin may have rubbed shoulders with him in the crowd..." It was this sentence that inspired Guy Prevost's trans-dimensional thriller "The Intervention". Could a visitor from beyond time prevent some of the greatest tragedies of human history?

About the Author: Guy Prevost is a writer living in Los Angeles. He spreads his time between screenwriting and narrative fiction. He has also worked as a story editor in Hollywood and as a college teacher. His stories have appeared in the North Atlantic Review, Quantum Realities, and the Nonbinary Review. His latest screen credit is Dinoshark on the SyFy Channel.

The Intervention By Guy Prevost

It was a shock. To be squeezed down from 1129 dimensions to 3—claustrophobic to say the least. I awoke on a park bench. It was morning. The necessary orientation data had been downloaded, and I was, at least in part, a protoplast, in fact one Gunther Menzl. I had papers in my black frock coat to that effect, and I had stored all the dull and uninteresting bits of Gunther's life in my data bank, though it was most probable that I wouldn't need access. It was a security precaution.

The actual Gunther Menzl, a government clerk, kept what they called a low profile, and that's why his identification and blueprint had been used. Research had revealed that he had few friends and this day he was ill, at home, nursing a cold, and would remain that way for the entire day.

After the initial vertigo, I felt something that I had never before experienced. I now had five senses instead of 530, and it was as if all the energy contained in our 1129 dimensions was channelled into just three. Everything had a polished intensity. The light struck the green leaves in such a way as to make them brilliant; the luminosity was almost too much. The clopping of the horses' hooves were like loud galactic explosions, but it was not unpleasant. And there was an orchestra playing in the park, in a gazebo. A synthesis of sounds that overwhelmed me with its beauty. I had not anticipated this. Senses. In univ 5732 we have diluted our sensations. We have so many ways of experiencing our surroundings that they all seem to become insubstantial.

I felt in my coat pocket for the instrument of my mission. It was a pistol of polished steel. Cold to the touch, a cruder mechanism you couldn't imagine. But the protoplasts had invented it only over the past several generations, and it had become a vehicle of world-end for them. You couldn't underestimate how much world-end it had caused.

Especially when you're from our univ, where world-end almost never happens to anyone.

A policeman came by and looked at me suspiciously. Of course, he thought I had slept in the park, as my first target specimen, the Artist, had been known to do several years earlier. I smiled politely, and the policeman seemed disarmed by my humour and quickly nodded before carrying on.

I sat up, stretching my appendages, trying to get used to my new skin. I stood up, shuffling my feet, getting used to the sensations.

I began to walk in the park. I knew both target specimen #1 (the Artist) and #2 (the Revolutionary) habitually strolled here, and it is this afternoon that the much celebrated Viscount von Hofstadter would be coming by the boulevard on his way back from his country estate. There will be a big crowd to watch the procession, his magnificent carriage drawn by eight white horses, and this might be a good place to take care of at least one of my responsibilities.

A rich sound came from behind the trees, a wild synthesis of waveforms so simple yet so enchanting that I had to get a closer look. A woman walked by with a baby carriage, her young protoplast smiling and singing in the morning sun. I tipped my hat. And even before I identified the source of the sound, I had become aware of my nose, a new feature for which there is no corollary in our world. There was a delicious aroma emanating from some kind of white fractal-like thing: "flower," my language program quickly informed me. Well, I smelled the flower, and it was an experience I will never forget, of such a powerfully pleasant sensation. I plucked it from the bush and put it in my buttonhole as I saw others had done.

I suddenly remembered that my business here was not research, but action: to save this quaint species from the future devastation caused by these two single individuals: the Artist and the Revolutionary.

That was the dispensation of the Committee, rarely granted. I made a note to come back, when my work was done, because there was a lot to learn from the protoplasts after all.

The Revolutionary

Sosa, as he was called, held out his two fists, one containing a delicious nougat candy wrapped in rice paper and enclosed in a tiny cardboard box. Galina, the eight-year-old girl with the red curly locks hanging down to her white frock, smiled in delight and anticipation.

"That one!" she said.

Sosa opened his fingers to reveal an empty hand. Galina's face fell, but Sosa opened the other hand, unable to bear her suffering.

"You may have it anyway!"

"Thank you," she squealed, seizing the treat with her right hand. She examined the box, elaborately decorated with a flattering portrait of the Viscount von Hofstadter, and ran off. Olga, the nanny, watched with a wry smile.

"You'll spoil her," she said with mock scowl. "Not what I'd expect from a true enemy of the state."

"Somebody needs to be spoiled." And Sosa wished that Olga had shown more interest in him as a guest than his friend Bukarin, who had visited the night before. Sosa smiled nevertheless and went back to his writing.

"But," he said, unable to regain his concentration. "That was my last one. I must get more."

He rose from the pecan wood desk, put down his quill and walked to the window. The wide boulevard of S_____strasse stretched out below him. Horse-drawn carriages and broughams, handsomely appointed, swept by. Galina had skipped out the front door, across the street, and into the park where he knew he would later walk with his host and hostess, as he did every night after dinner. Certainly this was the first time Sosa had ever encountered such opulence, and though it represented the exploitative wealth that he wished to overthrow, he couldn't help but be charmed by it. This spacious apartment of the Troyanovskys, in the centre of bourgeois Europe was quite a change after three years in Siberia.

Galina was eating her candy now; he could see her by an oak tree

sprawling on its roots near the footway. Just then he noticed a figure on the other side of the street, behind a lamppost, looking up, it seemed, at him. The face was in shadow, but it was a man, dressed as a government clerk, nothing fancy, with a common gardenia in his lapel.

Sosa wondered at this. He had the vague feeling earlier that morning when he had gone out to buy the papers that he was being followed. It was a sixth sense that he believed he was born with, but cultivated in Siberia in the Tsar's prison camps. The man, seeming to guess he'd been noticed, retreated into the park. Perhaps the Tsarist secret police had actually followed him to Vienna. He hadn't survived his thirty-five years without this ability to sense imminent danger.

Time for a walk anyway, he thought. To get some more nougat for his lovely Galina, and he needed a break from his treatise. How to preserve the autonomy of different ethnic groups within a larger movement of international solidarity. It was a question of the minorities working side by side within the party. Lenin was waiting for his analysis, and he wanted Lenin to be pleased.

Sosa nodded graciously to Olga and went to his room to get his coat. He decided, thinking of the stranger by the lamppost, that he would take his knife, which he placed in the sheath sewn into his boot.

The Artist

In the study room of the Home for Men, not far from the park bordered by M_____strasse, the Artist, a short man of 23 years, sat poised over a watercolour splayed out across the broad oak table. With a fine tipped brush, he touched up various little portions of the project, which depicted, quite realistically, the monumental structure of the Austrian Parliament Building. The Artist moved the brush delicately along the columns, smoothing out the places where he had strayed. This would be, he thought, his last work in Vienna. He was planning to move to Munich in the ensuing months, after he had earned enough money. It was about time to make a change.

Vienna had been in some ways very disappointing. He had been rejected by the Art Institute *twice* and this was no doubt because the faculty was corrupted by an influx of Slavic professors. The Art Institute in Munich would certainly appreciate his talents, he thought. After all, he was a professional—various shopkeepers and tourists bought his watercolours, and this is more than could be said of some of the Institute's graduates.

The Artist looked up at the rogue's gallery of fellow residents at the table. One man was sleeping and snoring. The Artist frowned. Two others were reading yesterday's newspaper and only one seemed to be doing any useful work. As the Artist was a senior member here—he'd been a resident for three years—people showed him more respect. But still he felt he was destined for other things. This would all come, he was sure. He thought of his mother, who had died two years before. He had loved her deeply and only wished she could be alive to see what he would become. He wasn't sure himself what that would be, but he felt it would be something bigger.

He sat up and observed his watercolours. Indeed they had told him at the Institute that his skills were more suited to architecture, and he did enjoy painting these grand buildings. Finally he rolled up the thick textured paper into a scroll and extracted several others from his trunk—his latest output.

He was in a long narrow dormitory with twenty beds. Carefully locking the trunk he withdrew his overcoat from the steel armoire. It was a cashmere coat given to him by his mother. The collar was now frayed, and his cravat was also a bit soiled. Two bunks away, a Moravian man, a new member, an interloper, was coughing incessantly. The Artist thought that in Munich, across the border, perhaps there would be fewer of these undesirables.

Outside in the bright sunshine, the young Artist walked purposefully along the S_____ strasse. He carried the three scrolled watercolours under his arm and used an ivory tipped black umbrella to pace his steps. He was, after all, an aristocrat, and must be perceived as one, and this heirloom from his father, with the exquisite carving on the

handle, demonstrated his lineage. He passed the Opera House, where had seen Lohengrin just two nights before, and thought that this above all would be the thing he would miss most about Vienna. The opera and promenading in the park near Viscount von Hofstadter's palace, which he saved as a pleasure for himself later that day.

He was headed for the gift shop on F_____strasse. The proprietor there liked his watercolours and would usually buy them unframed, so the Artist wouldn't have to bother with this tedious and expensive task. On N____strasse he passed a candy shop, then waited for a procession of broughams before crossing the street. One was approaching very quickly and the Artist pulled back, noticing a puddle from the previous night's storm. When he retreated he bumped into another man walking down the pavement as the brougham passed, kicking up a curtain of water. The man dropped a parcel, a box of nougat candy, and the Artist's first reaction was to reprimand him for his clumsiness, but then he realized the fault was his. Carefully putting his umbrella parallel to the watercolours under one arm, the Artist reached down with the other, picked up the parcel, and handed it to the man, who was wiping some drops of water from his stylish coat.

The man was short of stature, as he was, but broad shouldered. He had a full moustache, sallow cheeks, and unusual eyes which were almost yellow. He would have fit right in at the Home for Men, except he was far too well dressed.

"Excuse me, sir," said the Artist.

The man said nothing for a moment, taking the package and looking back at him with a chilly stare—almost of recognition, but they had never met before, the Artist was certain.

"These drivers don't look where they're going sometimes," said the man, suddenly smiling. Then, with the wariness of a cat, the man seemed to be distracted by something or someone across the street and quickly moved away.

* * *

Even the modelling protocols had not foretold this particular event, that the Artist and the Revolutionary would be standing next to each other on the F____strasse the very day that I was there to eliminate them. I was, at that moment, across the street, having followed the Revolutionary from his house, waiting for an opportunity. I looked around, checking for bystanders and witnesses. Surreptitiously I withdrew the pistol, hiding it within the folds of my coat. I pulled back the hammer and aimed. It was a clear shot; I might even get them both with one bullet. What good fortune! In the blink of a cosmic eye my job would be done. One muzzle flash and war, catastrophe, genocide, nuclear-fallout, and the world-end of 18 million protoplasts *might* be averted. The species could thrive, this horrible shadow lifted from its era. As I was about to fire, a trolley hurtled in front of me, blocking my shot. When it passed, the Artist had started off down the sidewalk, and the Revolutionary was proceeding past bystanders across the street.

I decided at once to follow the Artist. This hadn't been my plan, but I also had to think about my escape, back to the room of Gunther Menzl, where the only access to my own universe was through the mirror above his dresser. If I were to be suddenly apprehended by the authorities, or anyone else... well, I loved the protoplasts but not enough to sacrifice my own existence.

I kept the Artist within view as he strode across the boulevard, hurrying his pace, and turned left down B_____strasse. I knew from my forecasts that he was most likely headed to the gift shop of Johannes Schmidt where he often sold his latest paintings. The shop was in a narrow side street off T_____ Garden, in a quiet section of town.

The Artist went through the banking district, near the Bourse, very crowded at this time of day. I could almost hear the nervous tap tap of his umbrella, like a blind man's cane, as he strode through the sea of clerks and office workers. It was nearing lunchtime, and some people were having sandwiches on the steps of the museum. He paused in front of this building then walked on.

I lost sight of him. I couldn't believe my bad luck, and only wished for the complete overview I would have had from my multi-dimensional faculties, but their use was forbidden by the committee. This was to be a soft intervention, so as not to disturb the causality of the protoplasts' basic dimensional world. I pushed forward as fast as I could. Maybe the Artist knew he was being followed and slipped into the train station to avoid me. Trying to spot the umbrella or the Artist's coat in the crowd, I stood helpless at a corner where a man was selling newspapers. Each coat seemed almost identical. And then I was possessed by an odd feeling. A feeling that someone may have been following *me*.

"Gunther." It was a woman's voice. I turned and saw a young woman nearby. She had green eyes and a friendly smile. She was dressed in the style of the many administration assistants who worked in the area.

I nodded politely. This was Marthe. The information was coming from the download. A woman from Gunther's office.

"We heard you were sick today, taking the day off."

I smiled sheepishly.

"Well, I won't tell anybody."

"In fact, I am sick," I said. "But I needed to get to the apothecary for some medicine."

"Of course." She smiled.

I was overwhelmed with another impulse. Her eyes were kind and full of warmth. "You look beautiful today," I heard myself say, without effort.

"So sweet of you. When you're better, perhaps we can have some tea together."

I remembered my mission and had to tamp down the wonderful new feeling flooding my chest.

"Yes. See you tomorrow," I said. I had begun to sweat, another new sensation, along with a feeling of guilt, having to lie, having to compromise poor Gunther Menzl. Well there were more important matters at hand.

I shuttled down three blocks toward the Schmidt gift shop. I could only hope that my predictions were correct about the Artist's destination. The wide boulevards narrowed to the cobblestone alleys. Finally, I was on a quiet street lined with elm trees, their leaves shimmering in the sunlight. I paused and spotted the sign Herr Schmidt: Art, Notions, & Gifts at the end of the block. I proceeded, crossed to the other side of the street, and ducked into a recessed doorway. This was near the corner. Across the way, I could see the shop, and I could see the Artist arguing with someone inside, gesturing with great ferocity. I gripped the pistol in my pocket.

I had to remind myself the intervention had been granted because the quantum variables at play argued the benefit outweighed the risk. Risk to the experiment, to be sure, but also to myself. Here I was on this street, in this R4 world, with no certain exit back.

* * *

Sosa was almost certain he was being followed when he bumped into the young man with the scrolls, evidently a painter. He had momentarily lost sight of his pursuer who seemed to be trailing him from the opposite side of the street by the park. He had the appearance of an innocuous clerk, a predictable disguise for an agent of the Tsarist police. The gardenia was a nice touch, common to many Viennese gentlemen that day, so he blended in.

But before Sosa could make sure of his suspicions, there was this collision, a momentary distraction caused by a painter, who picked up his fallen nougat box and returned it to him with a manic fussiness. Sosa was suddenly struck by this fellow's vacant expression—polite, yet disturbing, and familiar. He had the strange premonition that he and this man would cross paths again. But how, and why? Sosa had been polite, muttering something, just as he saw the "clerk" or agent on the other side of the street removing what might have been a weapon from his pocket. Before he could react a trolley passed between them. Afterwards the clerk had vanished

into the crowd.

Having extricated himself from the painter, Sosa was anxious to return to the apartment of the Troyanovskys and also to Galina, whom he knew would be ecstatic with the nougats, but he was now resolved to deal with this potential threat. He had learned from his experience of street battles in Baku never to leave loose ends. It was quite probable the Tsarist police had sent an agent to eliminate him.

He crossed the street to the park. There was no sign of the clerk, but on instinct Sosa headed downtown with the flow of other pedestrians. And sure enough, after several blocks, he spotted the man conversing with a woman in front of the train station. He unbuckled his ankle sheath.

* * *

The Artist came out of the gift shop carrying only his umbrella. Herr Schmidt had been ungenerous, but with 4000 kronen in his pocket now, the Artist felt he had enough money to make the move to Munich. He was done with this petty life, he thought to himself. It was to be a new beginning in a way. With all the disappointments of Vienna, there had been lessons learned.

Striding, unburdened of his watercolours, which he never really liked when they were finished, the Artist proceeded apace playfully click-clacking the umbrella on the cobblestones. He could go to the park, perhaps have a sherbet, and then later take in the opera. Three women emerged from a nearby tearoom, talking no doubt, thought the Artist, of the most unimportant things. He watched them, staring ahead, but he assured himself that now was not the time for romance. After he had made his mark, then things would fall into place.

He smiled and tipped his hat as they walked by, and then heard the sound of footsteps behind him. He turned and saw no one, but maybe... the shadow of someone behind a doorway. He felt uncomfortable, a sense of dread in fact. There was the Slav at the Home who wished him harm. He knew about these unwashed people. How they would slit someone's throat without a moment's thought. He had insulted the man the other day, well deserved as the man was disgusting and filthy in his habits, and the man had shouted rudely at him. At the time the Artist had shrugged off this ignorant and pathetic peasant, probably a Jew, one of the many from Galicia who had come to Vienna looking for work. But now the Artist thought the man may be stalking him.

The Artist quickened his pace. The sun was high in the sky now and he could hear the footsteps behind him again. He was afraid to look over his shoulder. He was afraid of what he might see, but he forced himself to look. The glare of the sun in the window of a candle shop blinded him. He could only see the dark figure of a man approaching, only the outline, only a shadow. He looked away and started to run. The street was completely deserted. He was like a hunted animal trapped in the open. He ran as fast as he could, crossing a narrow street into the deep shadow of a tall cathedral.

He found himself in a picturesque square, the Gothic spires of the cathedral looming. There were sounds of celebration and the church doors swung open. A triumphant march was being played by the musicians inside, and a wedding party was just emerging, the bride and groom were showered with rice as mobs of well wishers burst into the street.

Surely, no one would harm him now, here, in broad daylight, in the midst of religious festivities. He stopped to catch his breath. The celebrants descended the steps and surrounded him as they followed the bride and groom approaching a carriage waiting to sweep them away to a new life, as he himself was about to be swept to Munich. How foolish of him to be worried he thought. How completely stupid. He breathed deeply and even picked up a handful of rice and threw it wistfully at the newlyweds.

As he turned back, he saw another man, who looked like a clerk, standing behind him, removing something hidden just inside the fold of his coat. The Artist could see it was a pistol aimed at his heart.

* * *

I was in wonder as the quantum effects of chance and probability had helped my cause, and with no prompting from me. I had not foreseen the wedding party. In this crowd I could do it and disappear amidst the chaos. I stared into the Artist's face. He was no more than four feet from me. I could see the beads of sweat dropping from his brow, the look of utter fear and surprise. Such contorted visual impressions were completely new to me. I had to pause to take them in as I remembered all the world-end, suffering, and destruction this one individual would cause, the unspeakable violence, how I should be satisfied in removing him, as I was about to do.

But all I could feel at the moment was again something new: pity. These protoplasts, even the worst of them, had a capacity for pain that I had never imagined. Suffering, a concept foreign to us. Something I could see now before me. I studied the man's face. I hesitated.

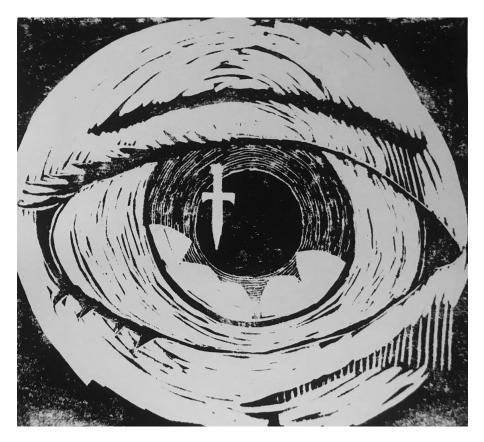
Before I could close my finger around the trigger, I felt a sharp sensation in my back followed by numbness. My grip loosened, the pistol fell from my hand, and the first thing I saw was blood, my own blood, that of the duplicate of Gunther Menzl, spilling on my shoes. All strength and purpose drained out of me. I stumbled backwards, whirled, fell to my knees as the Artist was stunned and bewildered. I peered up at his counterpart behind me, the bloody knife in his hand.

"My compliments to the Tsar," he whispered, wiping the blood from the blade with a handkerchief and returning it to the ankle sheaf. He sprinted off as the Artist, shaken and confused, hurried away in another direction. I desperately reached out to stop them, but couldn't move, and now they were but faces in a crowd, destined for their place in history. My vision blurred as I stared up at the concerned onlookers and the church steeple. My body shuddered as memory traces of my past senses surged and vanished. More intense

was the memory of Marthe, and she was the last impression I ever had.

The Committee would never hear from me, and the protoplasts would be an unfinished entry in the record, almost surely to be forgotten.

LQ



Staring Daggers, lino print, by Emilie Oblivion