

Escapism

Where there's a will ...

Nick Mamatas

Piotr was in prison for life for a crime he could not help but commit. He was a scientist, and his theories were borne out by the evidence. The Universe is holographic, two dimensions inscribed across the cosmological horizon.

The Politburo thugs, and they were all thugs to a man, could not tolerate the idea of presiding over a Universe where things were not what they seemed — where they could not stand at least a tiny bit taller than the rest. This wasn't what Piotr meant, but that is what the government heard. Piotr could not recant. He would not. A boot on the back of one's neck was not data, threats were not evidence, torture not proof.

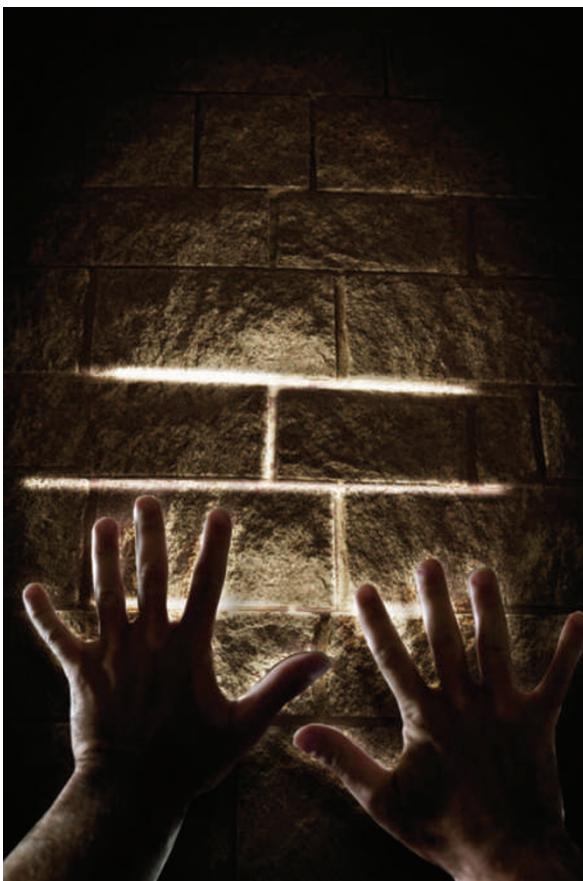
They put Piotr deep underground, in a hole in a honeycomb prison from which no one had ever escaped. His papers were burned, an axe taken to his computers, and his assistant taken away in the night. *Like Galileo*, Piotr thought, but there was no Inquisition for Piotr, no nobles who had taken his side, no eventual reprieve and exile to a far-off villa. For Piotr there was just a black hole and the rest of the world in all directions on the other side of the dark.

Piotr licked the condensation off the walls to live. He ate worms and rats and fought the other rats for those tiny bits of flesh he pulled from their comrades' papery bones. Strong enough to stand for longer than any guard or warden would have imagined, Piotr tried to escape.

He pressed himself up against the hewn stone walls of his cell, which had been built around him, and pushed hard. There was a chance, a small chance. A quantum chance. One in ten quadrillion, but it was there — Piotr could just flow through the wall. His mostly nothing and its mostly nothing, meshing perfectly. *Well no*, Piotr told himself, even as he pushed hard against the dark. *I am just insane. My cosmological horizon stops at my now-blind eyes.* It was those New-Agers with their breathless speeches and ridiculous websites, they're the ones who believe that rot. The Politburo let them run free, those "harmless kooks"

(Piotr snorted as he thought those words), because the silly husbands and foolish wives of the powerful were taken with the pleasing notion of a reality that reorders itself to one's wishes. That attribute of the Universe was even an objective and observable phenomenon as far as the sufficiently wealthy (and sufficiently limited in imagination) were concerned.

The black hole he was in, Piotr reminded himself, was not a black hole. He was not



a particle contained in the fluctuations of an event horizon. This wasn't a cage of maximum entropy, or a divot in the field of space-time. And there wasn't some other particle somewhere else on the other side of the wall to which Piotr was bound by ghostly chains of instantaneous information transmission. Piotr's home was just a hole dug by men so that other men could die in private for the public peace.

However, Piotr had nothing else to do. And he could run his lips and tongue against the wall, sucking up what little water there was. And he could push, alone in the dark, waiting for the cosmos to fall apart around him.

Piotr pushed for days, months. He stopped only to eat and to eliminate. At times he felt a groove in the wall, a groove shaped like his body. It was a trick of the dark — and his desperate mind, he thought at other times. Sometimes he scraped against the cool rock with his fingernails, seeking a seam or even imagining scratching his way to freedom. Perhaps there was only a five in one quadrillion chance of that. *Double my odds*, he thought. But he was tired, his limbs and digits weak from the diet of brackish water and rats that could squeeze through the cracks he never seemed to find in the wall.

One day — or was it night? — Piotr pushed hard against the wall, limbs spread, chest and groin pressed against rock, his own hot breath hanging like a cloud. There was a shift. He was no longer explicate — a thing to be moved about by the deeper reality of political expediency, of dark forces and unseen hands and subtle strings like those bound to the joints of a marionette. Piotr was the implicate, the thing at the dark centre reaching and expanding outwards across the plane of the world. He was the Unmoved Mover of non-locality and all that which could be called locality both, the logarithmic shadow on the horizon of his black hole and that which cast the shadow as well. *Sistemi del mondo!* Piotr didn't think. He was. In and out. Information everywhere, written across the whole of the cosmos.

With a whoosh of cold air, something gave way, and there was a yowl and an impact that shook the cell, warping its walls like a soap bubble. Light! Grey and coruscating like a far of explosion seen from under ocean waves, but light. "I did it!" shouted Piotr's assistant, a man of rags and bones and wide red eyes. "I'm free! I fell right through the floor of my cell and ..." he trailed off and squinted up at Piotr. "Oh."

Piotr offered his congratulations, colleague to colleague.

Nick Mamatas is the author of two novels and the short story collection *You Might Sleep...* His website is cleverly located at www.nick-mamatas.com, as if by design. Join the discussion of *Futures* in *Nature* at go.nature.com/QMAM2a