

Translated extract from

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Tunguska or The death of nature

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First Conversation

Arrival

FEIERABENT (*wearing an eye patch*). How did you all get here?

TSCHERENKOV (*wearing a Glen Check suit*). I'm wondering that myself. There was a flash of light, then that heat.

BLACKFOOT (*the bald one*). What's this strange fog you have here? Everything's so hazy I can't even see my own feet. It's like they've evaporated. These vapours...

FEIERABENT. That's what it's like here. There's hardly anything left, and what is left is blurred.

BORDMANN (*in a plaid shirt*). Where are we?

FEIERABENT. On a container ship. We're dead.

TSCHERENKOV. It's certainly not as bad as I thought it would be.

BORDMANN. I thought there would just be nothing.

BLACKFOOT. Well, there doesn't seem to be much more than nothing here.

FEIERABENT. At least we can talk.

TSCHERENKOV. I wouldn't have expected to still be able to talk.

BLACKFOOT. Is there something to eat? What's in these containers?

FEIERABENT. It's all just memories, and so is hunger. Everything is just a memory.

BORDMANN. And day and night?

FEIERABENT. No, there's only this half darkness, the fog and the ship's motor.

TSCHERENKOV. How long have you been here?

FEIERABENT. I've no idea. My watch stopped.

TSCHERENKOV (*looks at his watch, taps the glass*). Mine too. Just after eleven. We were having a cup of tea and were just about to discuss something.

BLACKFOOT. That's right. Then there was the flash of light...that heat. And now this cold and fog. How strange.

BORDMANN. Why do we still remember?

FEIERABENT. That's what remains. But memory itself is like a kind of fog. Much vaguer than life. Where were you before?

TSCHERENKOV. It was summer, humid, a room with red chairs and flowery carpets – a hotel lobby? Then the flash of light and this intense heat.

BLACKFOOT. Ganasika.

TSCHERENKOV. Right, of course! Ganasika! The congress...

FEIERABENT. What's your name?

TSCHERENKOV. Tscherenkov. And yours?

FEIERABENT. Paul

BLACKFOOT. I'm Alfred.

BORDMANN. I'm Adolf Bordmann.

FEIERABENT. Nice to meet you.

Bordmann stretches his hand out towards Feierabent. But it vanishes into the swathes of fog.

FEIERABENT. That won't work. Only memories and talking still work. And seeing and hearing, of course.

An albatross flies across the men through the fog. They hear its cry.

BORDMANN. Did you see that? An albatross!

BLACKFOOT and TSCHERENKOV. Yes!

BORDMANN. What's this ship called? Where is it sailing to?

FEIERABENT. No idea.

TSCHERENKOV. Can't we just go below deck and ask the men?

FEIERABENT. No. There are no men. And you can't go either.

BLACKFOOT. What's that supposed to mean: "You can't go?" Are we just staying here forever then?

FEIERABENT. There's nothing here apart from us, the ship and the fog. Sometimes someone disappears. And new ones arrive now and then; out of the fog or from the depths of the container, I'm not entirely sure. The engine knocks. And from time to time there'll be an albatross, or gulls. Other than that, nothing.

TSCHERENKOV. Have you already met others?

FEIERABENT. Like us, you mean? Yes, a few I think. But you don't really remember what happens here on the ship. Only what used to be, back then, in life.

TSCHERENKOV. How did you get here, Paul?

FEIERABENT. A brain tumour. It was pretty unpleasant. So what was it you were about to discuss before you came on board?

TSCHERENKOV (*thinks for a moment*) ...Tunguska. We were just about to talk about Tunguska. I was about to describe what happened. We had met up to exchange and compare our interpretations. Then the flash of light came.

BLACKFOOT. It was probably a bomb.

FEIERABENT. A nuclear bomb. The Northerners bombed Ganasika back when I was twenty-one.

BLACKFOOT. What? You were there when we died? But you were here before *us*.

FEIERABENT. How do you know that?

BLACKFOOT. *You* know your way around the ship here, the fog, *we* don't. If you were twenty-one when we died, then you must have died after us.

FEIERABENT. I wasn't there when you died, I just heard about the bombing. We all heard about it, the Northerners' atomic bombs, the end of the Great War. Haven't you heard of Oshirmia?

BORDMANN. We heard that there was an air attack there, during our conference. But then why did we arrive here after you? How old were you when you died, Paul?

FEIERABENT. How can you be sure you arrived on the ship after me? I had just turned seventy.

BORDMANN. How is that possible?

FEIERABENT. Easy, you just turn seventy.

BORDMANN. That's not what I mean! I mean, how is it possible that you lived longer than us, but were here first?

FEIERABENT. Why are you so convinced that I was here before you? It's likely that you've just forgotten how long you've already been here. You keep starting back at the beginning again. I remember a little more, that's all. Before, after,

earlier and later, none of that exists here, apart from the before that is life. Here, there's only a foggy present and memory. Tscherenkov, do you still remember what it is you were about to say before you came on board?

TSCHERENKOV. Yes, .. -- yes, it's all coming back slowly. I remember now.

FEIERABENT. Then tell us! Pick up where you left off when the lightning bolt came and interrupted you!

Tscherenkov tells the story of what happened to his Great Uncle

TSCHERENKOV. Just so you know, Paul, because I don't know how much you know about Tunguska – I didn't experience this myself of course. My Great Uncle Leonid Kulik did, and he told me about it many times when I was a child. My whole life long, I never forgot it, and I even wrote it down. I can't refer back to the text now of course. But I remember everything word for word; or at least it feels like I do.

FEIERABENT. It's possible. Sometimes people have especially clear memories of their lives when they're here. Especially when they've been staring into the fog for a long time.

TSCHERENKOV. My Great Uncle always said that the cock didn't crow that morning, on the day of the occurrence. I should mention that my Great Uncle lived in the countryside, on his own small farm in Vanavara, right next to the Evenki, even though he himself wasn't an Evenki of course, but a Russian. He associated with the Evenki though. The other birds were silent too. That's why, on that day, he only woke up once the sun was shining on his face. The light was unusually blinding, a point he always stressed when telling the story of the occurrence. The birds usually began to sing just before dawn. He usually got up right after they did, but sometimes he would stay lying down and listen to the birdsong. Then, when the hen crowed, he would make a fire in the hearth in the kitchen. But there was no birdsong that day.

Instead, he woke up to an eerie silence, drenched in sweat. As he sat up on the edge of the bed, he noticed that the sun wasn't just dazzling, but already hot too. My Great Uncle said that a glistening silence surrounded him as he filled the kettle in the kitchen and kindled the fire in the stove to make his morning coffee. His dog didn't even come from his cushion to greet him, like he usually did when my Uncle was carrying out the first tasks of the day. Instead, he stared up from his cushion guiltily, his head hanging and ears drooping. Had he pilfered a sausage? When he didn't even get up when my Uncle whispered his name encouragingly and slapped his hand against his right thigh – the sign for a dog to come to heel – it became clear that something wasn't right.

He walked out of the kitchen door into the yard and looked up at the sky. Judging by how light it was, it seemed like it was already nine or ten, and yet it was still as quiet as two in the morning. The clock on the church tower was showing shortly after seven. The light was strangely even. "It was like standing there on a hot night brightly illuminated by spotlights" is how my Great Uncle Kulik always described it. Then he saw the bright, blue-white gleaming threads in the light sky, like tracer rockets, only much, much brighter. Never before had he seen such a bright light. It was like a slow rainfall of stars, a downpour of shooting stars in the light of day, multiplying by the second. He sat down on the bench beneath his kitchen window to devote his attention to the spectacle, not taking his eyes away from the sky for a moment. The sweat ran off his body in streams. He didn't know whether he was sweating because of the heat, or because of his peculiar frame of mind. Perhaps – and my Great Uncle contemplated this every time he told the story, as if the possibility of it was occurring to him for the first time – perhaps his body had already been gripped by an intense fear, a fear which reached his mind only later, and one which was so dreadful that he started sweating profusely,

a bodily cold sweat, so to speak, before he actually felt the fear itself. My Uncle didn't know how long he sat there. He completely forgot about the kettle. All he did was stare incessantly into this shower of stars. Then a droning sound began, and got louder and louder. He said it came from the sky. The dog started to whimper; he could still make that out amidst the droning, the dog whimpering in the kitchen. Moments later, he slunk out, his tail drooping, and crept under the bench. The shower of stars became more and more intense. Then a clattering sound mixed in with the droning, which by now had swollen to an almost thundering rumble, like a deep, rasping cough. At that moment, he thought he saw an immense light dart across the sun, eclipsing it for a moment.

Then, perhaps ten seconds later, the first flash of light came.

Everything was aglow. Nothing was visible but the light. This white light stood around him – he always said 'stood around' – for several seconds, then the rumbling drone and clatter united, condensed somehow to become a clap, followed by a light bang. As he heard the bang, the light died down. Then a rumble went through the earth and the dog howled again and again, getting increasingly loud and fearful. After that, he was able to decipher objects again for a few seconds; the fence around his house, the tower of the wooden church opposite. But then the droning built up again, and again came the still flash of light for a few seconds, then the clap, this time a hiss too, the light bang and the quaking of the earth. It carried on like that for several minutes. Over and over again: flash of light, clap, quake, hiss, flash of light, clap, quake, hiss...

For the first time ever, Feierabend has doubts

FEIERABENT.

Just a moment, Tscherenkov! What is it you're telling us about here, exactly? Are you talking about the flash of light that brought you three here? Is it you getting confused, or me?

TSCHERENKOV. No, no, of course not *our* flash of light from before. Are you going mad, Paul? The story I've been telling took place at seven fifteen on the 30th of June 1908.

FEIERABENT. But that was a flash of light too?

TSCHERENKOV. Not just one flash of light, many. The Tunguska incident wasn't recent, but many decades ago, when I was still a little child.

FEIERABENT. Recently or many decades ago, it makes no difference here. How do you know it wasn't the same flash of light?

TSCHERENKOV. How could it be the same flash of light if one happened *just now* and the other one back when I was a child? A flash of light only occurs once. I died as a grown man, not as a child. You're talking nonsense, Paul.

FEIERABENT. Right. So you know how long you've been here? How is it that you came after me, as you believe you did, even though you died before me?

TSCHERENKOV. I don't know either. But I've only been dead a short while, that much is clear.

FEIERABENT. "A short while", what's that supposed to mean? Do you know which year it is here, or whether there is even 'a year' here?

TSCHERENKOV. No, but what I *do* know is that I was only four on the 30th of June 1908.

FEIERABENT. That's certainly possible, but how old are you now? And how do you intend to measure time here? After all, your watch has stopped, there's no sun, no night, only fog. You may have already been here for decades, as far as it's possible to even say such a thing, that we're here, and have been here for such and such a time. But it doesn't matter anyway. What is interesting is this: You sit down for tea in a hotel lobby with your congress colleagues, in order to tell a story about flashes of light...

TSCHERENKOV. ...in order discuss a report about an actual event which was proven to have taken place -- that's completely different, Paul.

FEIERABENT. If you say so. So, you sat down to talk about actual, real-life flashes of light, and suddenly there's an actual flash of light, and you're actually dead. That's strange, don't you think?

TSCHERENKOV. A coincidence, that's all.

FEIERABENT. Aha.

TSCHERENKOV. Can I carry on now?

FEIERABENT. By all means!

Leonid Kulik's Panic

TSCHERENKOV

My uncle said he wasn't able to count the flashes of light. He wasn't able to count at all for that matter; so dreadful was his panic that he couldn't even master the simple and sometimes soothing mental task of progressing

from one number to the next. At first he feared he was losing his eyesight. Even though he closed his eyes and threw himself to the ground after the second flash of light, the light still found him – he always said ‘found’ – and practically beat its way into his brain. He thought the world was coming to an end, and was seized by a dreadful panic. Not mortal agony. He had already experienced that while mountain climbing, and on a hunt when he had stumbled across a mother bear with her cub, who refused to be frightened off and had risen up on her haunches and roared at him threateningly. Back then, he had thought it was all over. Amidst the light, though, that thought didn’t even enter his head. In actual fact, nothing entered his head but the light. All his limbs turned to jelly and he was sweating profusely. His heart was racing, and his chest constricted so much he could hardly breathe. He felt the light travelling through his skull into his brain – he always said ‘through the skull into the brain’ – as if his fontanel had been re-opened, as if a third eye had appeared in the middle of his head, directed up at the heavens, one which he was unable to close and which was then blinded. That’s how my Uncle told the story.

FEIERABENT. And you believed him?

TSCHERENKOV. Stop it, Paul! The occurrence was reported all over the world. In London, it was so light on the 30th June 1908 that you could still read the paper at midnight. There’s no doubt that it took place. There were even huge expanses of fallen trees. They were almost concentric; spreading out in the shape of a butterfly from the epicentre in Vanavara: the roots pointing towards the centre, where the flash of light was

likely to have been, and the treetops facing out in the opposite direction. The Evenki who survived told similar stories to that of my Great Uncle. Not all of them were identical, but there's no doubt that it happened.

BLACKFOOT. That's right. There are recordings from the expeditions which went in search of the site, even years afterwards. There are photographs of the fallen and partially burnt out forests. Didn't you hear about it, Paul? Haven't you seen Tarkowski's 'Stalker' or read 'Picnic by the Wayside' by the Strugatzkis?'

How is fact differentiated from fiction?

FEIERABENT. No. I've heard of Tarkowski, but I haven't seen 'Stalker'. They're clearly fictional stories too – 'Picnic by the Wayside', I mean, come on! But more importantly: How did *you* hear of them and read them? I mean, you died much earlier. How could you know about the seventies?

BLACKFOOT. That's right. I must have heard about them some other way, but I've forgotten how. I distinctly remember 'Stalker' though, how strange...

FEIERABENT. You forget things over and over here. It's likely that you've been here a long time already, and it's simply slipped your mind how and from whom you heard of Tarkowski and Strugatzki. Maybe you even met them yourself. After all, they're all milling around here somewhere. You've probably told your own story many times too, but forgotten it, and you've remembered the stories that this Tarkowski and these

Strugatzkis told you, without remembering that they were told to you by Tarkowski and the Strugatzkis. You probably just remember some seaman's yarn from the ship here and mix it up with your life without realising.

BLACKFOOT. You mean that we've been taking here for decades, but keep forgetting? How could that be possible?

FEIERABENT. As I already said: What do 'decades' mean here? Almost everything that happens here -- in so far as one can even speak of things *happening* here -- gets forgotten. Perhaps you need a body in order to remember, and it seems we don't have those anymore. On the other hand, we can hold onto the memories of our previous lives. So it seems the body is only necessary for the act of committing something new to memory. In spite of that, you still take in some aspects of the world of the living. We change a little here too, but only very little, it seems to me. You're told a great deal, and you tell a great deal, but very little of that seems to leave any trace, heaven knows why. It's like this ship. It seems to be sailing, you see, it's creating backwash, but at the next moment it seems like it's not sailing, because there's always just fog, the sea is always calm. On a real ship, the weather has to change now and again, or the colour of the sea changes, or you might pass an island! Here, there's nothing of the kind. The only things that make a distinction now and then are the albatrosses and gulls.

BORDMANN. Unbelievable, how do you know all that? How could you know that it's like that, Paul? I don't understand. If we're supposed to forget everything and

have been here for years and are sailing or walking on the spot or whatever I'm supposed to describe it as, and don't even have a clue as to where we are, then how do you know how things work? Maybe there have been changes, but you've just forgotten them all.

FEIERABENT. I'm an expert, so to speak. I thought about this place, if not about this very ship, for decades when I was still alive. Even before, I knew how vague things are here. To be honest: I was already here before I died, like Odysseus. And that comes in useful for me now. Maybe I'll tell you about it later on.

TSCHERENKOV. Don't talk nonsense, Paul, the living visiting the realm of the dead! And you, of all people, claim that the event in Tunguska never took place, that we heard the story here and that we're just having some vague memories of a seaman's yarn! So what do you call the stories of Odysseus?

FEIERABENT. I'm not talking nonsense; I'll explain it later, perhaps.

TSCHERENKOV. If you don't forget.

FEIERABENT. If I don't forget.

TSCHERENKOV. I just can't believe it. You're claiming that we've been wandering around here for decades and keep forgetting it, and at the same time you doubt Tunguska?

FEIERABENT. I didn't say anything about decades. I wouldn't even say that we *are* on a ship here. I don't know whether it's possible to say here that there *is* something here. To be somewhere, you have to have a present,

which differentiates itself from a future and a past. It seems to me as though our past has frozen. It isn't growing anymore; unlike with a living person for whom it gets bigger and bigger the longer they live. And as long as a person is alive, they're anticipating something too, they have a future. There's nothing ahead of us here. And behind us is nothing but the life we've lived, except that it can't change anymore, because we've lived it, it has ceased to be. But Tscherenkov, you yourself said that you didn't experience this Tunguska incident personally. You only have the memories of your Great Uncle and the stories by those authors.

BLACKFOOT. Yes, but stories which are based on an actual event.

FEIERABENT. So you know about Tarkowski and Strugatzki too?

BLACKFOOT. Yes.

FEIERABENT. And you also believe that their stories are based on something that actually happened?

BLACKFOOT. I *know* it for a fact. I know of Tunguska itself.

FEIERABENT. And what are we here? Real or fictional?

BORDMANN. What are you trying to say, Paul?

FEIERABENT. You seem to be clear about what fact and fiction is, otherwise you wouldn't be able to say that the Strugatzkis' novel and Tarkowski's film are fictional, but that the Tunguska incident wasn't. Your own existence here, however – or perhaps we should say your *non-existence* – seems to be neither one nor the other, neither real nor fictional.

BORDMANN. You may be right, Paul, in saying that our condition here is a strange one. Perhaps you're even right in saying that you can't describe it as being either real or fictional, that it's as though we exist here as our own memories, memories which have gotten entangled with one another all of a sudden. Even memories have a fictitious element, but not all fictions are memories.

FEIERABENT. In their component parts they are. After all, you can't make something up that you haven't already experienced in part -- that is, what you remember at the moment of constructing the fiction.

BLACKFOOT. And what point are you trying to make with *that*, Paul?

FEIERABENT. That I don't know what I should make of Tscherenkov's story about his Great Uncle's account, and I especially don't know what I should make of it *here*.

TSCHERENKOV. I don't know where you're going with this, Paul. You were the one who suggested earlier that we should continue the conversation we were about to have in the hotel when we were interrupted by the flash of light. And now you're interrupting us, or rather, you're not even allowing us to start our conversation, because you doubt its very foundation, the Tunguska incident.

FEIERABENT. Well, I didn't know *what* you wanted to talk about, did I? If I'd have known, then of course I wouldn't have made my suggestion....you were transported to the other side by a flash of light, and you were just about to talk about flashes of light at the time

when it happened. Are you sure your tea party didn't take place in a psychiatric hospital?

TSCHERENKOV. Come off it! We're completely normal people, with all our wits about us...

FEIERABENT. Well, perhaps not *all*, anymore.

TSCHERENKOV. I'm a physicist, Paul, a Nobel Prize winning physicist, to be precise. Alfred is a respected mathematician and philosopher, and Adolf is a biologist and primatologist. We're no lunatics!

FEIERABENT. You say that as though mathematicians, physicists, philosophers and primatologists aren't capable of losing their minds! Maybe you're just all a figment of my imagination. Maybe you're all nothing but one of my old memories! After all, I've read your books.

TSCHERENKOV. I can't remember ever having written a book.

FEIERABENT. No, not yours, Tscherenkov, but those by Bordmann and Alfred. I've read Alfred's 'Process and Duality'. A curious book. And Bordmann's 'Biology and Soul' – a rather audacious collection of essays, very Goethean somehow.

BORDMANN. I just don't understand this.

FEIERABENT. Perhaps we can go through it again later. In any case, I'm not sure what you are; a fiction, like your Tunguska story, or one of my memories. Or perhaps all of us put together, myself included, are someone else's fiction or memory, someone who none of us know...

BORDMANN. I suggest, dear Paul, dear Tscherenkov, that we don't delve into this anymore right now. Fact or fiction, insanity or sanity, it's all quite out of touch with reality, of Cartesian complexity. Whether we exist only in Paul's imagination, or in reality, or somewhere between reality and fiction ... I think we should put this debate off until later. After all, we were planning to talk about Tunguska, and I think that Paul's earlier suggestion to put this plan into action here and now...

FEIERABENT. I never said 'here and now'. I don't know if you should say that here.

TSCHERENKOV. You're here, and you just said 'here': You said you don't know if one should say 'here' here.

BORDMANN. ...so, as I was saying, I think that Paul's suggestion to talk about it was a good one, regardless of whether it really did take place...

TSCHERENKOV. Of course it really took place! Don't let yourself be bullied by Paul, Bordmann!

BORDMANN. So, to reiterate: I think Paul's idea was a good one, whether Paul and we are in our right minds or not. How are we supposed to answer these questions about fiction and reality, sanity and insanity here in this fog? It seems impossible to me. So we have no other option than to put all these differences aside and carry on, otherwise we'll only end up entangling ourselves in a futile dispute about dreams, reality, fiction and memory.

TSCHERENKOV. I agree. Let's carry on and do what we couldn't do before our death.

FEIERABENT. You've probably done it a thousand times already. Since you all died, you've probably done nothing but tell each other this story.

BLACKFOOT. But we don't know the story, Paul.

FEIERABENT. That's exactly my point.

BLACKFOOT. So, Tscherenkov. What do you think happened on the 30th of June 1908?