

# **Ultima Thule**

Draft the fourth

*A literary exercise inspired by V. Nabokov's short story  
"Ultima Thule," not intended for commercial use.*

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**"A sonnet, apparently barring the way, but perhaps, on the contrary, providing a secret link which would explain everything - if only man's mind could withstand the explanation."**

- Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*. Page 212.

*Wide-Angle dolly L->R of the ocean slowly approaching the three "Ellipsis" Islands. Easy pace, letting the lapping waves set any filmic rhythm. Each island comes in until we have the ellipses framed by the shot. Sitting on a small stool in front of the second island (on the beach) is Sineusov. We only see the expanse of his back.*

*Cut to Black. Sounds of waves and gulls still present.*

**"Ultima Thule"**

**(Based on a short story by Vladimir Nabokov)**

*Cut to Black. We hear the sound of a scratching pen on heavy paper (short brisk strokes and then a sinuous long one) breaking the silence. The camera comes in slightly out of focus and then focuses on the right hand of Sineusov slowly drawing what appears to be the islands we just saw. This time, they are covered in gorgeous cross-hatched mountains with just the faintest hints of habitation on them. The drawings are in black ink on heavy manila paper with a look similar to the illustrations of John Tenniel and the landscape looks of Osamu Tezuka. We switch between over the shoulder to slow pans across the picture to shots resting on the paper.*

V.O. (Sinusov)

Do you remembers the day you and I were lunching a couple of years before your death? (at this word some ink spills from the pen and spreads over the page.) Assuming that memory can live without it's headdress. Let us imagine a new handbook of epistolary Samples. (Again to manila illustrations of an "Epistolary handbook" - this one of a girl with no right arm, smiling at a desk of letters.) To a

lady who has lost her right arm: I kiss your ellipses. (A drawing of an empty chair and table with letters and one empty page on the blotter)

To a lady deceased: Respectfully yours.

(Cut to Sineusov's back on his Terrace. The camera is inside slowly dollying forward. The following quick cuts break up the movement forward of this dolly)

But Ah. I remember for you. The memory of you (Quick cut of Sineusov on the beach, with long golden legs lying next to him as he looks outward) can pass for, grammatically speaking, your memory (Same quick cut, but this time no legs are present).

I address you now simply to chat with you of Falter. (A stitch of Falter kissing Mrs.Sineusov's hand - we see only Falter raising the hand to his face) A man who...who, because he survived (Quick cut of Falter screaming in the Hotel, no sound, zoom to his open mouth) the bomb of truth that exploded in him... became a god! (Falter during the conversation, reclined).

(Sineusov turns around reenters his house. He is backlit so we see mostly his silhouette - maybe the briefest hint of his face.)

Do you recall the last time we saw him?

(Again the shot of Falter kissing the missus' hand as the camera pans up to her face smiling at Falter and then a pause or linger on it)

All pregnant with jovial energy and wander lust. In retrospect, that somehow explains how he survived the shock. The original figure was large enough to withstand the subtraction. (Doctor shot?)

(Cut to Sineusov's writing desk with a picture of his wife, obviously pregnant. Smiling but with the air of a forced smile - she should have a somewhat sallow face and pale complexion.)

(Sigh) You were such a darling. And holding on to you from within by a little button, our child went with you.

*(Cut to Sineusov's bedroom - dimly lit with high ceilings. Sineusov in his bed takes up the bottom of the frame and the expanse of his room fills the upper three quarters.)*

Not once since you died have you appeared in my dreams at night, or during the day.

*(Pan across from the promenade to the beach - where, in shorts and an open collared shirt Sineusov sits replete, staring at outward towards the water. No music)*

But it is during the day, when I am fearless, I would challenge you to manifest your responsiveness in any way you wish.

I take to the beach and wait for the waves to arrive, all out of breath, carrying your message. But empty, they only disperse in apologetic salaams. Leaving in their wash, empty objects with no subject, to stir my tide watch vigil.

*(The following should appear in overhead dolly shot along a shelf where each item is carefully labeled with the date/time it was found as if within these numbers is a clue. The camera should linger only as long as the item is spoken of.\*Alternatively, the finding of each object, with a date displayed in text could be substituted.)*

Pebbles like cuckoo eggs.

A piece of tile shaped like a pistol clip.

A fragment of topaz coloured glass.

My tears. *(For this, a small square of sand in a box, with a round water droplet soaked into it.)*

A microscopic bead.

some creatures small bone.

A stone shaped like a Pompeians foot.

A nutshell.

A rusty thingum related to nothing.

And a shard of porcelain.

*(Lingering on the shard of porcelain cut a shot where in slow motion a small gravy boat of similar colour and constitution falls (in slow motion) and shatters (all in frame of the camera. This can be done by enclosing the area in frame with a "fence" of transparency so as to prevent the shards from going off camera.)*

Of which it's companion fragments must inevitably exist somewhere. I imagined myself, hunchbacked and crawling across misty, distant shores in search of it's parts so as to recreate this gravy boat or soup tureen. (Show footage in slightly slowed time of the boat restoring itself and flying upwards off-camera).

*(Again, Sineusov's back on the beach. Cut to a shot from behind the shoulder of Mr.L as he hails to him from the promenade. Sineusov turns around but he his so far away we can't exactly distinguish his face.)*

I would have staid upon this beach if someone had not recognized and rescued me with the past recaptured.

However, we are not there yet, let us return to Falter.

*(Wide shot of the border Hotel of Falter. Cut to shot of Sineusov and Co. climbing the hill up towards the building. Sineusov in boring brown and Mrs.S in a blue dress and heels.)*

You recall that day we climbed the hill like ants to visit my old tutor, Adam Falter. His bright Hotel on the many-terraced Italian border.

*(Dolly forward along the terrace to the back of Falter, as he is engaged with some guests.)*

*(Again, quick montage of cuts detailing his body and how it has changed)*

I barely recognized him from his wiry tutor self. A nimbus of gray fluff encircling a sun-browned bald spot. His silk shirt the colour of stewed rutabaga, his checked tie, his wide gray pearl pants. *(Profile of his nose and mouth moving as he tacks to the guests)* His large nose the same as ever and his beautiful large hands.

*(Falter turns around to smile at the camera. And then a profile close up of his hands enveloping the smaller hands of Sineusov and squeezing tightly with a small shake.)*

Welcoming mine with a squeeze.

*(Pan up the body, starting at the heels and up to behind the shoulder of Mrs. S. We see Sineusov's back as Falter steps out from behind him and makes large motions for her to come over. Medium shot of him taking her hand to his lips - and a pan to her face, smiling and looking bashful.)*

You stood back, in your cobalt blue heels until he beckoned you to come over and jovially kissed your hand by bringing it up to meet his lips.

*(Wide shot, from beneath the Terrace on the hill, capturing the grandeur of the house/hotel. We should see Falter as the recognizable sign of the party, he should be standing and making a great fuss around the table with wild arm movements before he putters away.)*

We drank. We ate and we talked of the past - making promises to keep in touch that neither of us meant to keep.

*(Sineusov, back in his living room. Holding the picture of Mrs. S - pregnant, we can see some of his reflection in the glass.)*

You didn't find nothing remarkable about him - did you? I suppose his type has been done to death. It was however most remarkable when a strong voice hailed me from the promenade.

*(Cut directly to Sineusov's back on the beach)*

Mr. L (Hailing, Off Camera)  
Sineusov? Is that you?

*(Sineusov turns around and we see his face for the first time. Cut to behind the shoulder of Mr.L who leaves the camera to descend the steps to the beach.)*

Mr. L (introducing himself)  
We met at Adam Falter's. I'm his brother in-law. Mr.L. *(He extends a hand)*

V.O. Sineusov

*(Show a quick scene of Falter introducing his brother wordlessly from the previous section at the hotel. We haven't scene this yet, as if it has just been recalled. He extends a hand in much the same sort of shot as above)*

I vaguely remembered him. I proceeded to ask him something about Falter.

Mr. L *(retreating in a tsk tsk manner)*  
Ah. So you haven't heard. Do come with me.

*(They stroll down the beach. Mr. L making the hand gestures of an experienced raconteur)*

V.O. Sineusov

It was then I learned the whole story.

*Exterior Hotel Night. Dim lighting from the garden and the sounds of crickets breaking the night air. The hotel should be small, white and very simple. No elegant embellishments. A small town affair.*

*The camera should have a hazy air to it, provided by p.p. A gentle roll - and perhaps a reduced frame rate. Nothing too noticeable, but the whole feeling should be that of an uncanny lull in the air.*

*(Falter slowly, but gracefully stumbles into the front doors, framed within the shot. He is in high spirits and obviously inebriated to a point)*

It had happened that last spring Falter had gone on business to a particularly viny Riviera town and as usual had made a stopover at a tiny hotel for the night upon his return.

*(A medium shot of the innkeeper, looking up as Falter stumbles by without a word, and then going back to his work.)*

The proprietor was a debtor of his of long standing.

*(Falter ascending the stairs, high angled shot.)*

After warming his night at small bordello he returned to the hotel in high spirits and took to his room. *(Tail end of a shot detailing Falter entering his room and the door closing.)*

*(The same shot of the proprietor, writing at his desk. Very quick cuts of all the other members of the hotel and then back to the proprietor.)*

About half an hour had passed when the collective slumber of that tiny hotel was - no, not interrupted, rent, split blast by sounds that remain unforgettable to the hearers.

*(The sound enters, full blast in stereo, to all. Cut to Innkeeper being incredibly startled, jumping even.)*

Not a scream, no the innkeeper compared it to the exultant screams of a woman in the throes of an infinitely painful childbirth.

*(The following shots should all be about a medium length and be in quick succession as they are spoken of - a single bulb illuminating each room. The scream is subdued now, as if being heard from another room.)*

The newlyweds toiling away in the nearest bed paused and held their breath,

the Dutchman living downstairs scuttled out into the garden which contained the

housekeeper and white shimmer of maids running about at a quiet frantic pace.

*(Close up of Falter's mouth - wrenching. We see only his mouth.)*

It would be almost incomprehensible how anyone's vocal chords could sustain and endure the strain.

*(Medium shot of all above mentioned house quests outside Falter's door.)*

Falter screamed for at least a very long five minutes before turning to a medley of moans and stopping altogether.

It became so quiet all present felt compelled to only whisper.

*(Close up of the landlord, rolling up his sleeves and knocking on the door.)*

Cautiously, the landlord again knocked at the door, and Falter feebly whimpered.

*(The Innkeeper takes his keys and slowly opens the door - close up of the keyhole. Dolly forward into the room and resting on the bed, head in hands and sallow cheeked is Falter. Falter rises in silence and walks past the awed group.)*

*Medium shot from the room, Falter on the outside steps to his room, his back to the camera.)*

He walked past them all, urinated copiously and then promptly returned to his room to sleep.

*(Shot of Falter wandering the streets in a slow shuffle. His gaze is not fixed, just roving. He grabs an orange and eats it from a fruit stand. The seller looking at him and yelling as we dolly back and she is removed from focus)*

After the fact, he seemed to have lost everything. Not just his mind, but respect for life, and all in interest in customary or traditional feelings.

*(Cut to shot of the smiling Dr. Bonomini checking into the hotel, perhaps a dolly shot a wall filled with his book "The*

Heroics of Insanity". He wears a lab coat over his suit or shirt.)

Which attracted the attention of a well-known Italian psychiatrist, who happened to have a patient at Falter's hotel.

*(Cut to medium shot of Mrs.L Sitting on a chair, holding the hands of Falter who is gazing downward and talking - backlit and almost silhouetted although we should be able to discern he is talking. Mr.L stands with arms crossed behind his wife.)*

His sister and brother in law having established, through brief penetrations of silence, that something had happened to Falter that fateful night encouraged the doctor to use any means necessary to withdraw this event from him - and hopefully put him back together.

*(Bonomini's smiling face as Falter opens the door to his room. Falter lies on a couch as Bonomini holds a pendulum closer and closer to his face.)*

So, one day Bonomini, for that was the psychiatrist's name, boarded himself up with Falter and managed apparently to get an exhaustive reply out of him.

*(Dolly forward to a close up of Bonomini's mouth as he screams and turns red. Quick cut to a medium profile shot - Bonomini falling backward of his chair dead on the ground and Falter looking nonplussed and twiddling his fingers.)*

*(Medium shot, Mrs. L knitting a gray scarf. She looks off camera.)*

Unfortunately, the poor man became prey to Falter's Medusa. Eleonara, Falter's sister, feeling the exchange was going on a bit long

*(Camera Behind Mrs.L and slowly dolly forward into the room to the body of the doctor on the floor and a Falter, after a second, looking up and smiling from the brochure).*

came in only to find the poor doctor long since dead and her brother sulkily flipping through an alpine brochure.

*(Simply silhouetted figures behind a "police lamp" shining at Falter - who looks displeased with the light.)*

The police questioned Falter briefly, but he only relayed that "having accidentally solved the riddle of the universe" his artful exhortation to the doctor had left him dead from astonishment.

The local newspapers made the proper embellishments and Falter nourished a Tibetan-sage-like existence thenceforth. *(Close up of fake newspaper - reading something like "Local Proprietor releases secrets of the Universe! FATAL results" and a large picture of Falter's dull grin.)*

As you know, having not read papers *(a pile of old newspapers sits outside Sineusov's door as we walks down to the beach.)* I was simply out of this loop. Upon, hearing it and receiving Falter's current telephone number *(A piece of paper on the writing desk, with a number etched into it)* from his brother I experienced a rather shamefaced desire *(Shot of Mr.L writing and handing the number to Sineusov).*

*(Medium shot, profile, of Sineusov at his writing table - exasperated and deep in thought.)* You understand that at this point I had two options. The first being my work, my art, the consolation of my art; the second consisted of taking the plunge and believing that Falter,

*(Cut to shot of illustration the Northern King and a sorcerer whispering in his ear.)*

despite his average ness, had conclusively learned what no seer or sorcerer had commanded.

*(A shot of a café table, looking at the mysterious author who simply pushes a cloth bound draft in Falter's direction. The title "Ultima Thule" on the cover.)*

My art? You must recall the strange Dane, or Swede-or even Icelander for all I know. The well known writer that who commissioned me to illustrate a series of pictures for his epic poem.

### **Ultima Thule.**

*(Manila illustration of the islands - without the ink blot.)*

Written in his native tongue I could never hope to get it. But the price, you remember, gladdened you.

*(Again, a hazy camera feel, we see only a close shot of Mrs. S in bed. Smiling and generally happy, but clearly ill. She smiles as the hand of Sineusov touches her face. Quick cut to her holding a small framed chalk board with text and pictorial examples of her favourite things)*

At this point you were confined to bed and unable to speak. Taken to tracing out trifles - remember? For instance that the three things you liked most in life were "verse, wildflowers and foreign currency."

*(Manila illustrations, slow pans over each image. As described at the beginning they have the feel of Teniel's illustrations for Poe or Carroll)*

I drew out what I could discern from our discussions. A Northern king, unhappy and

unsociable. His kingdom, islands amongst the sea mists. A white horse which had lost its rider - he liked my first drawings but upon calling his hotel to view the seconds,

*(A shot of Sineusov's back, on the phone. And then, in silence letting his phone and hand drop at the news.)*

found he had left for America.

*(If possible, the writing table in the foreground, and a door from the study into the wife's bedroom open in the back. Showing Sineusov at her side.)*

I concealed his disappearance from you, but the drawings lay alone - my India ink waiting for the sickness to pass.

*(Shot of the ellipsis islands and Sineusov again sitting on the beach from behind. Early morning, if possible with fog rising up off the water.)*

But now, Ultima Thule, that island born in the desolate gray sea of my heartache for you, now attracted me as the home of my least expressible thoughts.

However, before leaving the Riviera to begin work again, I had to see Falter. Who's health was flagging.

*(Medium shot of Sineusov on the phone - back to us. Cut to Mr.L smiling and shaking his head, and mouthing the words "No, we'll visit you.")*

I offered to visit him but his brother in-law insisted a visitation.

*(Sineusov opens the door, Mr.L is standing there. Mrs.L's profile to his right behind him (facing left) and Falter looking at the ground in the background - if visible at all.)*

And so they arrived.

Sineusov

Welcome. Do come in and seat yourselves. Mr.L, Mrs. L (*He nods politely as Eleonora, Mr.L and Falter all file in. Falter, with his mouth hanging open and shuffling at a slow pace makes his way in slower than the others.*)

*(Mr.L helps Falter into an armchair across from where Sineusov sits. Mr.L and Eleonora sit next to each other in wooden chairs and in unison remove their knitting supplies and paper and begin doing their respective actions)*

Falter (Seeing the picture)

So, where is the missus hiding?

Mr.L (*Without looking up from his paper*)

Come, you know perfectly well she's dead.

Falter

Yes. Oh well.

May the kingdom of heaven be hers-isn't that what one is supposed to say in society? (*He asks this to no one in particular but fixes a slight smile at Sineusov*)

*(The next shot is compsed like the optical illusion of two faces forming a cup. Falter and Sineusov in the forecroung, their profiles framing the actions in the background of Mr and Mrs.L)*

Sineusov

I wanted to see you Falter. I wanted to see you in order to have a frank conversation with you. I wonder if you would consider it possible to ask you relatives to leave us for a -

Falter (interjecting)

They do not count.

*(From behind Falter's shoulders, we see a medium shot of Sineusov leaning in even closer)*

Sineusov

When I say frank, it means that since it is I who shall ask the questions, I expect answers from you. Everything here depends on your consent to give straightforward answers.

Falter

*(Medium shot, he twirls his finger around in a fake address.)*

To a straightforward question, I will offer a straightforward answer.

Sineusov

*(Satisfied and leaning back)*

In that case, please relate to me, verbatim, what you told the Italian doctor.

Falter *(retracting)*

Well, I'll be damned.

Sineusov

Don't deny me this. The information won't kill me - I may look tired and seedy  
*(Cut to Falter, who sizes him up with a quick eye overview)*  
but there is much strength left in me.

Falter

I refuse. Absolutley. *(He looks away)*

Sineusov

For the sake of starting our talk, I'll accept your refusal. For now. I understand that the essence of things has been revealed to you.

Falter

Yes. Period.

*(The camera begins a rotation around the two. Stopping when it is behind whomever is not talking to linger on the speaker.)*

Sineusov.

And from this I make number deductions: things do have an essence and this essence can be revealed to the mind.

Falter

A blunder of yours is already present; I cannot explain it you since the least hint at an explanation would be a lethal glimpse. As long as the proposition remains static, one does not notice the blunder. But anything you termed a deduction already exposes the flaw. Logical development inexorably becomes an envelopment.

Sineusov

All right. For the present I shall be content with that much. May I call your discovery a 'revelation' in the theological sense.

Falter

You may not. *(Close up of his lower face.)*

Sineusov

Right. Now then, I am interested not so much in the method of discovery as in your conviction that the result is true?

Falter

In Indochina, at the lottery drawing the numbers are extracted by a monkey. (*Manila illustration of a grotesque monkey pulling cards from a machine*) I happen to be that monkey. I kept combining various ideas and finally found the right combination and exploded. Somehow I survived the incident, and another in my place may have done the same, but after the incident with the charming doctor (*Quick cut to Dr. Bonomini falling over*) I do not have the least desire to be bothered by the police again. (*Quick cut to Falter shying away from the police lamp*)

Sineusov

You're warming up Falter, but back to the point. What exactly makes you certain that it is the truth?

Falter

Truths, and shadows of truths - are so rare in the world, that the recoil upon perceiving Truth, the instant reaction, remains an unfamiliar, little-studied phenomenon. The truths we perceive each day, such as 'black is darker than brown' or 'ice is cold' barely require the mind to raise it's rump from the bench. In these truthlets, to coin a diminutive, is contained nothing related to the other truthlets. What then, would you say about a Truth with a capital T that comprises in itself the explanation and proof of all possible mental affirmations? One can believe in the poetry of wildflowers or the power of money but neither belief predetermines faith in homeopathy or the necessity to exterminate antelope on the islands of Lake Victoria Nyanza. The point being, having learned - if learned is the correct term - what I have was like receiving the key to all doors and treasure chests; Only I have no need for it. Some water please?

Sineusov (*Handing him a glass of water from the table.*)

Can I take it then that you are a candidate for omniscience? I grasp that you do know something

fundamental, but your words contain no concrete indications of absolute wisdom.

Falter

I'm saving my strength.

Sineusov

Well let me ask you this. Does God exist?

Falter (His gaze roaming the room)

Cold.

Sinesuov (non-plussed)

Pardon? Does God exist?

Falter (*Coming back to the conversation*)

Forget it. I said cold as they say in the game, when you must find a hidden object. You're looking in the wrong place and in the wrong way. How can I answer whether God exists when the matter under discussion is perhaps sweet peas or a soccer linesman's flag?

Sinusov

All right. I shall believe you. Let us grant that theology muddies the issue. Is that right, Falter?

Falter

This is the house that Jack built.

Sineusov

Let us abandon that trail of question and allow me to pose this: Can one expect an afterlife?

Falter

Does it interest you very much? *(He glances to the photo of Mrs. Sineusov)* I call your attention to the following curious catch: any man is mortal; you are a man; therefore it is possible that you are not mortal. Why? Because a specified man (you or I) for that very reason ceases to be any man. Yet both of us are indeed mortal - although I am mortal in a different way from you.

Sineusov

Don't spite my poor logic *(slightly angered and with this anger his eagerness increases)* - give me a plain answer: is there even a glimmer of one's identity beyond the grave?

Falter

Bon. You want to know if Mr. Sineusov will forever reside in the snugness of Mr. Sineusov, otherwise Blue Moustache, or whether everything will abruptly vanish. Let us examine for a second the human mind. Either it has no way to express what awaits you - I mean **us** - and then total unconsciousness is excluded as that is accessible to our imaginations. Every one of us has experienced the total darkness of dreamless sleep. Or we do have the capacity, in which the most probable solution seems unconscious stupor.

Sineusov

I asked you two questions, Falter, and you have twice proved to me the impossibility of an answer. It seems to me useless to ask you of anything else. *(He leans back in his chair)*

*(Here we see Mr.L check his watch we follow his glance over to Mrs.L who meets his gaze and smiles placidly.)*

Here's the odd think though Falter. How does superhuman knowledge of the ultimate truth combine in you with the adroitness of a sophist who knows nothings? Admit it, you absurd quibbling was nothing more than an elaborate sneer. *(His arms are crossed)*

Falter

Oh well, that is my only defense. (*He looks at his sister and starts to get up.*)

Otherwise, you know, you might have teased it out of me.

(*As he puts on his overcoat*)

However, even if I did browbeat you a little, let me console you: amid all the piffle and prate I inadvertently gave myself away - only two or three words, but in them flashed a fringe of absolute insight-luckily, though, you paid no attention.

Mr.L

Time to go Adam. It's been lovely Mr. Sineusov. We'll be in touch.

(*They shuffle out the door hurriedly and the camera pans back to Sineusov, mouth still agape and obviously thinking back to conversation. He falls onto the couch - sitting in the centre*)

V.O. Sineusov (*picking up the phone. Back to the camera*)

The following day his brother-in-law rang up to say that that Falter charged 100 franc's for a visit. I asked him why he had not told me this in advance and replied simply that (*Mr.L's mouth mouthing the words as Sineusov speaks them*) "a second conversation would cost me only 150".

The purchase of truth, even at a discount, did not tempt me. (*He hangs up the phone.*)

(*Familiar beach shot, Sineusov's back. An unfamiliar telegram carrier comes up and hands him a note.*)

I forced myself not to think of him until yesterday I received a note - written in his clear hand.

V.O. Falter

*(A shot of the note, on a slight angle, resting in the hands of Sineusov or in the sand.)*

"I shall die Tuesday, and I would like to venture to inform you that - "

V.O. Sineusov

And then there are two blanked out lines. Ironically.

*(Sineusov at his terrace again, dolly forward from the inside of his apartment. He turns around and leaves the shot.)*

But all of this brings me no nearer to you, my angel. Just in case, I am keeping all the windows and doors of life wide open,

*(Shot of Sineusov in bed, as with the shot about his dreams earlier.)*

even though I sense that you will not condescend to the time honored ways of apparitions.

*(Shot of the Ellipsis islands - perhaps the movement of someone is visible on one of them. Sineusov is nowhere in sight.)*

Alas, with a pauper's passion I am doomed to use physical nature in order to finish recounting you to myself, and then rely on my own ellipsis.

*(Cut to black. Music comes in - Album Leaf's "Thule" or Rachmaninoff)*

*(Credits)*

