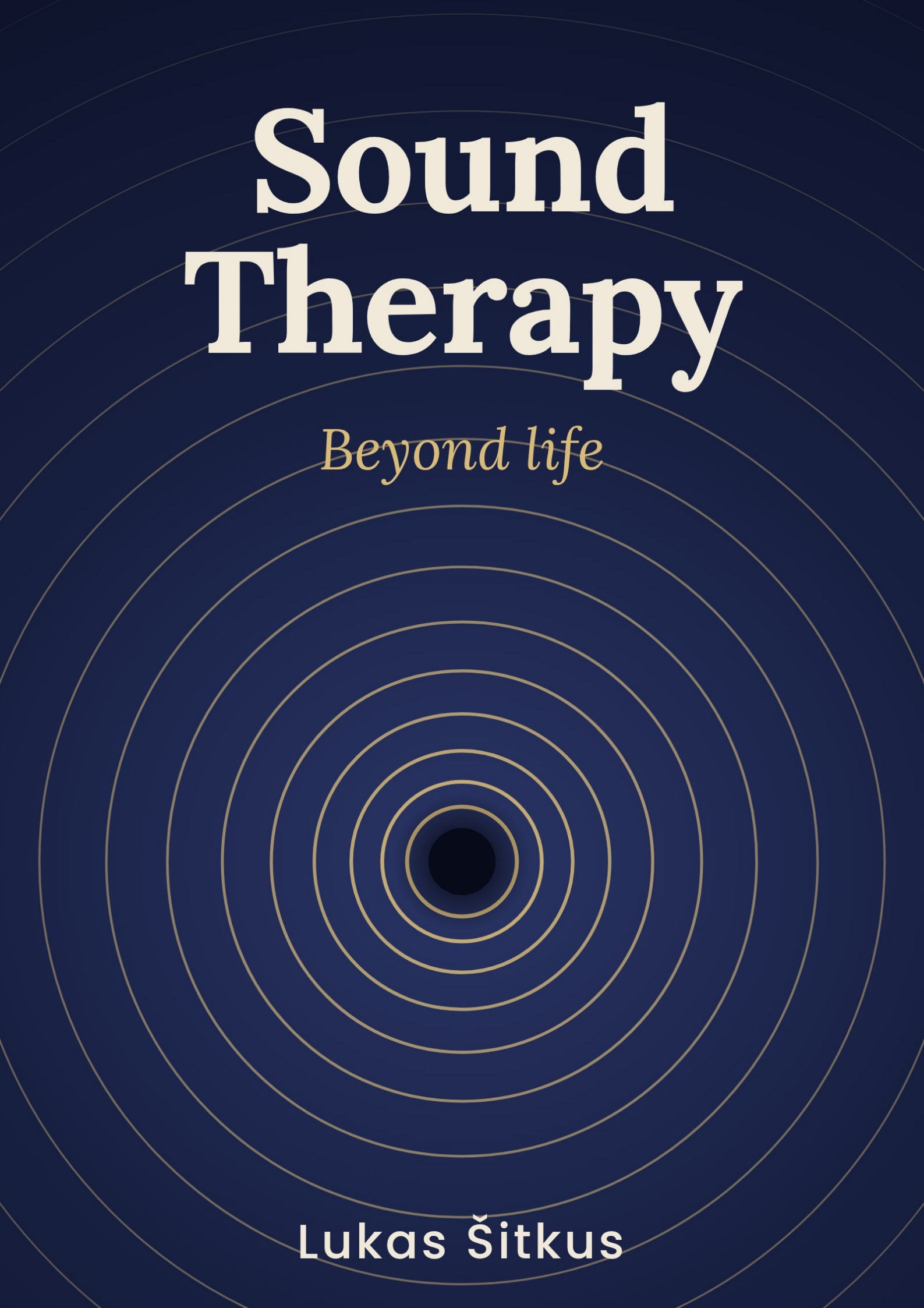
Sound Therapy

Beyond life



Lukas Šitkus

It was a beautiful day to stay home. Rain battered at the windowsill, and I lay on the sofa listening to the calming sounds outside. I dozed off, but Jessie's question snapped me awake: "I'm thinking… maybe we should go out to eat somewhere tonight?"

I looked at her, and then through the window at the cloudy sky and dying light. "In this weather?" I scoffed.

She shrugged. "Yeah, I know, right? I just don't feel like cooking. Do you?" I shook my head violently. That was my agreement to go. There goes my perfect Netflix and chill weekend.

The evening turned out better than I expected. Going out was actually good for me. And after a good meal it just became great. We were walking down a busy street in the city centre of Prague when, out of nowhere, Jessie halted, pulling me to a stop beside her.

"Oh… my… god!" she nearly screamed with excitement. I jerked my head in her direction and followed her gaze. She eyed a poster glued to the wall of a clearly abandoned building. "Can we go? I've always wanted to try this." She pointed at it.

Were we not surrounded by people and shops that danced with life, I'd think we were in the wrong neighbourhood. We stood in the middle of the street, dumbfounded. People walked past us. Some brushed against my jacket; others scowled or gave us raised eyebrows as if we were disrupting their precious day. I returned a scowl to an elderly woman; she mumbled something at us. I grabbed Jessie's hand and dragged her from the road, closer to the poster.

Slightly irritated, I asked, "What? To some therapy? Besides, it's clearly ancient." I flicked the torn, flapping corner of the poster with my finger. Its desaturated colours added to the hint that it had hung here for a while. "Looks a bit sketchy, don't you think?"

Jessie looked abashed. She fumbled for words. "Well, if you'd care to read, it actually says *this* Sunday, so tomorrow…!" She tapped twice at the date directly on the poster. "And it's not a therapy, it's a *sound therapy*." She sighed deeply.

I rolled my eyes.

She fired up. "Don't you want to try something new? You're the one always telling me that we should do something new and fun. Here I am! I'm offering it to you on a silver platter!" She stomped her foot like a mad child.

I stared at her blankly but said nothing. Maybe she was right. Maybe I was

the one never accepting any new opportunities she offered. Usually, when I did go somewhere new, I appreciated the experience, but agreeing in the first place was so hard…

I nodded and read the poster.

Sound Therapy with Yogi Markesh
Beyond Life - you can experience it only once

Its graphics depicted a man in a suit, wearing an eye cover, lying peacefully with his hands resting on his stomach as if he were in a coffin. To make it even stranger, his body levitated above a yellow yoga mat.

I felt Jessie's penetrating stare at the back of my skull. I could almost hear her grinding teeth, waiting for me to surrender.

"Uhh, are you sure?" I asked with slight sarcasm in my voice. "Look at this guy." I circled his levitating body with my index finger. "He's clearly hinting at death. The suit. The neatly crossed hands. Totally a cult." I turned to face Jessie with a serious face. I saw her furious eyes. Immediately I burst out laughing. You should've seen her face. A picture worth a spot in the album. But she rather quickly caught on to my dumb attempt at a joke, punched me playfully and laughed.

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We were the first to arrive, except for the yogi, who fiddled with a gong half his height. Incense sticks spread a comforting scent of a healthy forest, and the room was dead silent. It was a bit too cold for my liking, but I did enjoy the high ceiling and the spacious feeling it created. A soft melody danced from wall to wall, all that volume from just a tiny JBL speaker. I made a mental note to check out this particular model.

The area was filled with yoga mats laid in a grid of six by seven with a reasonable space in between. Each mat had a neatly rolled blanket, a too-thin pillow, and an eye cover.

We tiptoed, careful not to disturb the serenity that hung in the air.

"Ahh, dear new souls!" the yogi said when he noticed us searching for a spot. He clapped once enthusiastically. "My greetings, welcome, welcome. Please make yourselves at home." He bowed with his hands clasped at his heart. We bowed back, though not as gracefully.

"Since you're first, I'll let you in on a little secret. The first row is the best." He motioned to the six yoga mats in the first row. "Not only will you hear me better, but the experience will also be the most… vivid." He smiled widely and, after acknowledging our nods, returned to his preparations.

Jessie grabbed my hand and dragged me to the first row. I shook my head. We occupied two spaces in the very middle of the first row.

Great. It felt like sitting in the first row in a cinema, a bit awkward, and not the best view, not that I'd need it here.

More than half of the spots remained empty when the yogi began the *ceremony*. Of those who joined, most were not newcomers; they walked barefoot, wore nature-toned clothes, and bowed gracefully to the yogi, exchanging nods and smiles with him. I began to worry that this really was a cult gathering.

The yogi sat in the lotus position when he began. How predictable. I almost chuckled. "You came here for various reasons. Some are here to seek knowledge and try new things, others to experience life and grow their awareness… some… perhaps to fall asleep," he chuckled, and the others and I followed. "Believe me, these things do happen. But! Never do I judge, nor should you judge yourself. If your body dictates the need for sleep, let it have it." I saw bobbing heads. I couldn't agree more.

He took a sip of water, licked his lips, and continued. "We'll fixate our minds on the sound, hence the name *sound therapy*. Music will play, as it is now, and change throughout. Some of the notes you hear tonight will come from my instruments." He gestured to the line of instruments in front of him. They reminded me of salad bowls.

"The gong behind me." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I understand it looks loud and threatening, but I assure you, it is not. In fact, it is considered a small gong!" He gave a hearty laugh. I wasn't sure if this was a joke or not. *What would a large gong look like, then?*

There were a few questions before we began: how long the session was and whether we were allowed to leave early.

"An hour, give or take ten minutes. And yes, of course." He answered both with a charming smile. "We're all free as birds."

"Now, with all the stress and questions out of the way, let us begin, shall we?" He

cleared his throat as if preparing to sing for us and, without waiting for an answer, began. "Please lie down and get comfortable. Atop your pillow, you will find an eye cover. Use it to cover your eyes."

Someone made a joke about what else the eye cover could cover. I laughed. It was my kind of joke.

"Don't shift your positions," the yogi interrupted when one of the newcomers tried to switch the pillow to the opposite side of the mat. "Keep your heads in my direction."

"We will begin slow." His tone changed abruptly. He spoke like a different person, every word spoken with clarity and softness. "Imagine a scanner going through your body from top to bottom. We'll relax every part of ourselves as we descend… Notice how tense your forehead is, and now let go of that tension, the bridge of your nose, earlobes, corners of your lips… Through the toes of your feet, let go of the last bit of tension. Take a deep breath in, and now let it out completely. Empty, empty, empty your lungs. Feel your body and mind being put at ease… Forget about the existence of time, about the work you do on regular days or the chores you have forgotten to complete. Let those thoughts swirl around, but do not enter them. Think of your thoughts as clouds; watch them as you'd watch the sky from a meadow on a beautiful summer's day."

Partly I was able to achieve this and I felt… liberated. But after a moment the tension in my body returned like a wrecking ball. When your eyes are closed, time passes very differently. Imagine going to sleep, but purposefully not sleeping. Everything is amplified when you're there, in that state.

Next came the breathing practice. Inhaling for three and exhaling for six, as the yogi called it. He counted out loud, and we followed. Those first minutes were challenging. At times I drifted with the music and missed a word or two. Then the thoughts I had turned into clouds started popping up again as real thoughts.

Have I followed his instructions correctly?

Have I locked the doors?

Did I turn off the lights?

A pinch of pain sparked at my neck, then at my left shoulder, as if poked by a needle. I fought to remain still. The thin pillow was to blame for this, I guessed.

The guidance ended and only music endured. Without much to do, my mind created obnoxious thoughts.

Is my body still or tense?

What if I'm fidgeting with my fingers, as I often do, but just can't be aware of that?

What is that, a trickle of sweat running down my cheek? Damn it, I must endure!

How's Jessie…?

Suddenly, the music seemed to be closer and louder. Perhaps I should ask the yogi to lower the volume. My body grew stiff as the strained string of a ready bow. My mind galloped like a wild horse let loose.

One, two, three, breathe in. *Four, five, six,* breathe out… I tried to begin anew, to loosen my body and start from the top of my head, as the yogi had instructed. *It's like guided meditation*, I reminded myself. *No, it's much scarier. This music is tense. Why doesn't he play something soothing?* Full darkness, and being alone with your own thoughts, can break the brightest mind.

Someone snored nearby. I heard footsteps, and then fidgeting, followed by a low gasp. I snapped back and found an eerie track playing. *When did the music change…?* The song flowed one way and another, like a tide beating against the rocks. I was sweating like a pig before slaughter. *Do pigs even sweat?*

A lump formed in my throat. I had to swallow. *But am I allowed to? I could ignore it, and maybe I'll forget about it or it'll disappear on its own. To hell with it.* I swallowed, and even the sound seemed to penetrate the music. I gritted my teeth and awaited the doom. I was sure that the yogi would come to nudge me with his bare feet and tell me to *f off*, that I had somehow disrupted the serenity of his stupid therapy. But nothing happened. Apparently nobody cared, or everyone had already left and I was alone. No, Jessie wouldn't leave me. No.

How much time has passed? I urged myself to calm down and felt my heart pounding in my chest. *It's just my mind playing tricks on itself.*

I'm safe…

It's not real…

I'm in a building with unknown people and a yogi who I've never heard of before! Oh god! Why did I agree to this? I vented.

This time I noticed the melody change. It shifted to a series of soft, rippling notes. I calmed my breathing, and my mind relaxed. Intricate patterns formed on my closed eyelids. A silhouette appeared; shapes swirled about and most I couldn't discern as anything sane. But then I saw a woman. She entered a house, and the house turned into a cloud. A massive wave came crashing down and swept it all

away.

I drowned. Desperately flapping my arms, I tried to keep myself afloat, but the waves were too strong. I gasped for air, panicking. As soon as I scrabbled to the surface, the wave yanked me back down. I thought of Jessie and how I'd leave her in such a horrible way. Tears streaked down my face.

I'm safe, I'm in a sound therapy session. It was all I had to remind myself of, and I was back as swiftly as I had gone. Smooth sounds of trickling water greeted me.

How much time has passed?

Has the yogi said something?

When will it end?

Will they wake me if I fall asleep and snore?

The yogi said it's an hour-long session; it feels like more than an hour has already passed… I longed to just stand and exit the building. But I wasn't a coward, and I had come here to keep Jessie company. *What would she think of me if I did so…?*

Dung, dung, dung.

I almost flinched when the gong broke in unexpectedly. The tremendous sound rolled beautifully throughout the whole space, echoing and slowly dying, only to begin anew. Soon there were many gongs from different directions.

Dung, dung, dung.

I drifted with the music.

For a brief moment my very essence slipped out of my body. I could see myself lying there as if I were playing a video game and controlling a character from a 3D perspective. Jessie lay next to me on her mint-coloured yoga mat. Her blonde hair was spread out on the ground beautifully. She looked funky with the eye cover; I almost laughed. My body was there too; it lay stiff like a log. I knew it was impossible to view the world from such a perspective. It had to be only a figment of my imagination. Nevertheless, it scared the *sh* out of me.

If I let go of my own self, I might never find my way back, I thought, yet I wasn't sure where such a thought had even come from. My body twitched and I snapped back. I came almost wide awake, as one would snap out of a sudden nightmare, or just before falling asleep. Cold sweat drenched me, and I didn't dare to think of what had just happened, nor open my eyes. At first, I couldn't understand who or where I was. It lasted for just a brief second, but to me it seemed… longer.

I'm safe, I'm in the sound therapy practice.

This is one of the illusions; it's not real!

I'm safe…

A long time had passed since that strange occurrence. Yet I didn't trust myself to truly know that. My sense of time was wildly twisted by then.

The melody that played reminded me of childhood. It lured me like a sweet lures a kid. So, I went back into that world. I believed I was equipped to avoid the pit this time. Whenever the current caught me by surprise, I dragged myself back here by reminding myself of my body and place.

But then a fantastic thing happened.

I stepped into a forest. It was raining, and an occasional rumble of thunder sent shivers down my spine. A bit of moonlight slipped in through the branches, but it was as dark as night could get. My worries vanished in an instant, and I no longer feared being there alone. I don't know where this notion came from, but in that moment I knew I had to dive in.

When the next opportunity arose, I didn't resist. I flung myself into that pit, whatever it was. In a flash, I saw the ground open beneath me, and my body fell right through. All negativity ceased to exist, and only positivity and love remained, encompassing everything. This feeling, if I dare call it that, reminded me of euphoria.

Thoughts, no longer calm like clouds but wild as a tsunami, rushed through me. One I remember particularly well. I thought of Jessie and how sorry I was to leave her here. Somehow I knew she would not undergo the same experience. Jessie would not have the courage to dive in.

There was no snap for me to wake up, even if I wished for it. I became the vastness of the world, and the more time passed, the more I lost my true self. At one point I wanted to return. Pounding at invisible walls, I screamed soundlessly into the ether, but nothing happened.

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After an unknown length of time, I was no longer bound to my body or mind; life itself stirred within me. There was no *I* anymore. Even the people I once knew were just a mist without names, completely alien to me.

I became the trees and the thunder, the rain and the clouds. Knowledge of all rushed through me, and I finally understood why the wind blows south.

Around the world I floated as a cloud, bearing no emotions and no

thoughts, simply being a spectator of life. Planes went right through me painlessly. It was a simple life, one with few choices, one that had to submit to the winds.

The river smashed into me, and I became it. I swam through beautiful green forests that bore no hatred to anyone, even those who trashed them. The river was a much faster-paced life, always flowing over and over again. Yet I learned a lot about the people who came to stay the night in the forest near the riverbank, and about the animals that came for a sip of water.

As thunder, I struck, not out of anger, but simply to release energy. Trees that were close to the end of their lives were my targets. But I didn't always have a choice. I struck a man and was tormented by the look of his twisted jaw. This was the way of life and I had no real say in it.

Then I was tossed into a whirlpool and became the vast emptiness. Without a soul or a purpose, I wandered through the abyss, searching for my place in the world.

At last I was cast into a body I had not chosen. Knowledge of all was within me. No mere mortal could have had such wisdom, yet to be so gifted was also a curse.

A baby screamed for the first time. In the blink of an eye, he was a teenager helping with monastery chores. A tide swept away the whole village. Sun and rain brought the best harvest in a hundred years. People held hands and merrily danced around a huge fire. A war terrible and cruel passed with thousands of pointless deaths. Peace lasted only for two decades.

"In between misery and happiness, there's always balance," I found myself saying, yet my own voice felt unfamiliar and distant. "Never does the world tip in one direction for too long. And so like a scale, it will always begin anew. To understand the purpose of life—" *Purpose of life? I couldn't grasp what I was saying.* "—you must meet yourself and see who you are. As adults, we are strangled by emotions. We learn to bury them deep inside ourselves. By doing that, at some point in life we lose our true identity for fear of being trampled in the everyday world. But everyone is capable of finding it again." I opened my weary eyes and met the gaze of thousands of people watching me.

"The first time it happened to me," I muttered after a longer moment, "it was infinitely beautiful."

I sat cross-legged on the couch onstage, gazing at all the people seated slightly below me. A microphone was pinned to my collar, and nearly blinding

lights shone straight at me. I searched my memory for who or where I was, but there was nothing, as if I had been born right on the stage. I felt old: even an act as simple as taking a breath demanded strength. I raised my hand to clear my brow of the sweat that had just accumulated. The crowd gasped and fell into a murmur. Wide eyes and faces full of hope stared back at me. But I was too weary to think it through, and so I shut my eyes and slowly breathed out.

The abyss sucked me in.

After a long, long time, I felt youthful and full of energy again. Barely existing in there, I floated without any sense of where north or west was. In the darkness, a tiny flash of light sparked, and I followed it. There were people lying on the yoga mats. I sniffed the air, and the sweet scent of a healthy forest touched my nostrils. My lips curled into a smile as a memory of the yogi came to me. I caught sight of him. He walked around stealthily with an instrument that reminded me of a salad bowl, and hit it occasionally, producing a melodic, serene sound.

My eyes fixated on Jessie. *Jessie, I know her name. Where from?* I glanced at myself lying there. All the memories of my life burst into me at once. I panicked. *No, let me back in!* I shouted, but my voice didn't even come out. I heaved my ghostly self at my body, but I simply passed through. Terrifying thoughts engulfed me. *Am I destined to be imprisoned here forever, unable to reach anybody or even myself?* The sound therapy would soon finish, and I would be the one never to wake up. I witnessed my *real* body twitch at the thought.

Hope reappeared. If I could somehow make my body react from here… it would mean the connection was still there.

I remembered what had brought me back from the other life.

I closed my eyes.

"They called me Guru Hanushi," I told everyone after the yogi had asked us to share any experiences from the session. "There were thousands of people. I was trapped in what seemed to be a life of someone else. Centuries passed, but remembering it now feels like it happened in a moment no longer than a single breath…" I groped for words to describe it, but I couldn't understand it myself, let alone retell it in a way that didn't sound insane. Jessie stared at me questioningly, but I held myself back from meeting her eyes. Everyone was silent. No one else shared stories of vivid travels. *Did nobody experience anything like this? Why…?*

The yogi finally nodded at me. "It's possible you have met your inner self."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Some call it the inner child that is long gone when we grow up…" he trailed off.

"Inner child? That doesn't make any sense. Why would my inner child be an old guru?" I scoffed. "I'm not that kind of person. Why would I dream of it?"

"I doubt it was a dream…" he muttered. "I mean, it's possible," he quickly added and continued, "We simply don't know the future, or who we will become. One changes a lot over one's lifetime. Yet it's possible—"

"Are you saying I'm to become a guru?" I interrupted. "Me? A guru?" A hollow laugh escaped me. Yet inside, anxiety wrapped around me like clothes a size or two too small.

He took a deep breath in and locked eyes with me. I watched him intently, hoping for a straightforward answer. *He's the yogi, for God's sake. Shouldn't he understand?*

"I can't tell you the reason for this… Listen to your mind. I'm sure the true meaning of it all will come to you. This is partly why we gather here." The others nodded in agreement. "To learn awareness and seek our inner selves. To learn to notice small details we usually overlook or pay no mind to."

My eyes escaped his watchful gaze and wandered around. I nodded. It was going nowhere; he would not tell me anything. I suspected that he knew more but simply wouldn't share it.

When my eyes met Jessie's, she looked at me with worry. I cracked a smile at her, as if everything were going to be fine. She slipped her hand into mine. Hers was warm; mine was cold as stone.

"Ben. Are you alright?" she asked when we exited the building.

I shrugged, masking my nervousness. "I guess… I just have to give it some time."

"I don't understand. Was all this… real? What happened to you in there?" She looked at me as if waiting for me to burst into laughter and tell her it was all a big joke of mine. For a brief moment, it felt like my dream-state again: I saw my life as if from a 3D perspective, and Jessie seemed like part of a dream. She noticed my face painted with worry and looked away. I snapped back abruptly.

There was no answer to such a question. Certainly I wasn't able to describe what I couldn't understand myself.

What's real anymore? I wondered. Was this life simply a dream, a bad dream,

from which I would soon wake up? I hoped it was just that, just a horrifying dream. How do you even know you're in the real world? If a pinch doesn't wake you, does that mean you're awake?

What is *real*…?