I first met Bolormaa (alternative names Michid Gyalbaa, Nomt Hatan) while we were squashed next to each other in the back seat of Sara’s car on our way to a ‘reading group’. Also attending for the first time, she was a small woman with sensitive, darting eyes and was rather quiet and withdrawn during the meeting. Sara kept mentioning that Bolormaa was a shaman who had written many books, but I just smiled at her. They knew each other through Gerel, who has more than 300 followers (or büleg) and is believed to be the reincarnation of Zanabazar. She reveals people’s thirteenth-century souls (see Chapter 2).

At the end of the evening we exchanged numbers, but I wasn’t sure that I’d ever see Bolormaa again. A few weeks later she called to say that we should meet up. I found her in the corner of a stylish café in the centre of Ulaanbaatar. She had been at work at the Asian Development Bank and wore a navy suit and shawl. Her appearance seemed incongruous with what she spoke about and she didn’t really stop talking for over an hour. Bolormaa trained as an engineer in Leningrad and then in finance as an economist. She also studied for two years in the US for a PhD in traffic management at Colorado University, but such studies were not to be her fate. In 2008 she returned to Mongolia because her son was sick. At that time someone took her money and she went to a shaman to ‘call her money back’ (monggö duudah). In doing so she entered the path to become a shaman. Now she works during the day and writes her shamanic books by night. I call them shamanic books, but they are, in fact, an outcome of a trance-like state that takes her through nights of automatic writing which she claims originate from the Khan of the Skies to Attila the Hun. Being from the ‘Golden Lineage’, with shamans on both her mother’s and father’s side, she has been able to reach the highest levels of the Heavenly Sky (Tenger).
Through these books, I show to others about past history, allowing people to realise that our current lifestyle is wrong. Everyone has a unique gift (bilig uhaan) and we need to make this rise in people ... The apocalypse is very close and the spirits are coming to tell us how to change things. There is a moral crisis, an environmental crisis and an economic crisis – this is a sign of this wider crisis. ... Now a new era is emerging, and everything is awakening. The person who will lead us has already been born. For us the changes may be shocking, but for spirits they don’t see it as lasting for a long time and they see a new awakening coming.

Listening to her talk, I wondered how she balanced the different universes she inhabited. ‘I need the money so I work at the bank, but I also need to tend to the other side,’ she explained. ‘Sometimes I am up until 3 or 4 a.m.’ And then she was off again, describing how ‘everything is fractal’ (büh yum fractal), repetitive and cyclical: ‘We need this knowledge to build a new world. The time has come. By 2050 the centre of the world will be in Mongolia.’

The next morning at 8.30 a.m. I attend my ‘aura cleansing ritual’, again directed by a woman, but this time located on the sixth floor of an office block with mostly empty offices. After my initial reading, using electronic nodes on my fingertips, I am put on a strict two-week cleansing ritual to restore my aura to its original, rounded ‘egg-like’ shape. Lying down on my mat, encircled by candles and ready to read my mantras, I am surrounded by men and women performing the same ritual. Posters on the walls depict Russian women and men engaged in similar activities. On a table in the corner our wallets lie in a circle next to the appropriate shiny electronic boxes containing soundscapes from outer space or Siberian birch forests – recalibrating them to beckon fortune.

This is the personal care needed to survive the precarious stops and starts of life that have become the ordinary. It is a snapshot of the silent rituals people have created for themselves to anchor some sense of stability, tying themselves to their masts as they navigate stormy waters. But it is also a glimpse of the heterogeneous subjects that flourish in the gap, the singular experiences that have given rise to people who have found a space for themselves in among the flux and transition and the paths they have been able to carve out for themselves, even when futures have not been realised as they were imagined. It is to notice the daily rituals and routines, not unlike those attended to by Saruul (see p. 18), that allow people to navigate the unexpected and emerge grounded in the present, creating a space for themselves within it.
Many of these practices appeared like fads, things that would last for a few years and then disappear again. I had to relearn what preoccupied my friends every few years or so as things changed. What was important was not so much to question the content of these things and their efficacy, but to take part; to engage in shared forms of self-care with others. In doing so, one set oneself out as part of a group of people who shared in a single vision. In this way, and here I draw inspiration from insights in Melanesian ethnography (see Leach 2002), the social relations produced out of these activities, the kind of person or subject you were making yourself into by doing them, were more important than the physical outcome of the thing you produced or performed. Furthermore, this could be a singular subject who stood out in particular ways from the other people engaged in the activity, or it could be a subject who was part of a group, network or household. The participants both showed a collective commitment to making changes and provided exemplary behaviour for others to follow suit.