# Ex tenebris lux

Have you ever encountered a shapeshifter? To be honest, I hate them. You never know who you’re dealing with.

Until recently, I've been perfectly happy being “me”. I know I've changed a bit - you have to, don't you, when you live with someone else and have children to bring up? But I thought of that as a natural development. I thought I was this slowly maturing person in my ageing male body - with my waistline the only shape that was doing any shifting.

But that all changed last weekend in the space of just three Zoom calls in as many days: three conversations that shattered my hitherto stable existence.

Ever since I retired nearly four years ago, I've been spending a lot of my time on my "retirement project". Freed from the constraints of my professional persona, I've been able to roam far and wide across the scientific and philosophical landscape. And great fun it has been!

Talking of landscapes, I have gradually come to recognise that my primal landscape –where I spend my time inside this dome-shaped bone prison - my "estate", if you wish - is as extensive and varied as any other virtual reality world I have ever seen. Full of bright verdant sharply-defined uplands, but with many deep, dark, dangerous places where all manner of monsters may lie in wait.

Over the years, I have come to know the uplands intimately and have learned to spend most of my waking time there. So confident have I been of what I know that in my retirement, I’ve published blog posts on my website and even promoted them on Facebook and LinkedIn.

And it was one such article that brought about my undoing.

Stan, a professional colleague I haven't spoken to for a few years but for whom I have the greatest respect, set up a Zoom call with me to discuss the article. So, on Friday morning, we spent an hour during which, to my horror, he demonstrated how a sizeable upland section might be home to monsters. Even worse, he gently led me down into the shadows at the bottom of some cliffs and suggested that the local denizens were harmless fabrications. My stable world began to wobble.

We agreed to speak again on Sunday, and I stayed transfixed where Stan had left me. I was bewildered and scared but determined to stay put until we spoke again.

Then, on Saturday, I attended a Zoom call promoted by an Institution that, in my world, represents complete stability. The call lasted for nearly three hours. With mounting dismay, I watched from the shadows as a succession of young women with names like Olga and Elizaveta presented terrifying videos of natural disasters linked to impressive-looking pseudo-scientific charts and tables. They claimed that all life would cease to exist on earth in thirteen years, eleven months and fourteen days. Norepinephrine flooded my circuits, and to my horror, I shifted shape. My worst fears had been realised. I was a shapeshifter, just like the others.

By Sunday evening, when I spoke to Stan again, I had learned how a few drops of chemicals could transform a mental landscape. This time his words no longer destabilised me despite their hallucinatory power.

I had become my nemesis. Now I take my place alongside all the other shapeshifters, navigating my scarcely recognisable terrain with an abundance of care.