



Illustrated by Eldar Zakirov

Paradise Regained

Edward M. Lerner

My head hurts. I expect it: This is winter. I want it to be spring.

Paradise does not ask what I want.

The winter is young, and I think the dogs are not yet so hungry as to attack me. Still, I hold tight to my spear. Dogs or no dogs, the spear helps me walk through the knee-deep snow.

Only trees show above the snow, and I do not know what is under. In winter, asleep, the plants cannot scream when I step on them.

Because they *are* asleep, Father told me. Long ago. Before Mother died. Before I left home. I did not understand what he meant. I do not now.

I think Father is gone, too. "Watch the flag," Father told me, long ago, pointing at the tall pole that stood near Ship. "I will change the flag every day. Unless . . . I can't. Then you must come. You must."

From a high hill in my part of the forest, around a great curve of the sea, I look every day for a spot of color on top of the pole. Day by day, the spot changes color. Once, I knew the names of the colors. No more. Talking only to myself, the words go away. But then a day came when

the color did not change. Not the next day. Not the day after. Not in . . . many days.

I see I do not remember numbers, either.

"I come, Father," I say to the wind. To the snow. To the plants asleep under the snow. To myself. "I will do as I . . ."

I fight to remember a word. Like the names of colors, like the numbers, over the years this word has gone away from me. As the silence stretches, I finish, as best I can, "Father, I will do as you asked."

I talk to myself as I walk, hoping to remember enough to do as Father made me . . .

And the lost word comes back! I will do as Father made me *promise*.

* * *

I push on. Here and there on the snow, I see the footprints of mice. Both kinds of mice.

"The four-leg kind *are* mice," Father once said. (Four, I think, is the number of my hands and feet. Encouraged, I try to count my fingers. With two fingers to go, I have no more numbers.) "They are like us. The six-leg kind were always on Paradise. *My* father said calling them mice was a label of convenience."

I did not know what this *convenience* was. When I told Father that he knew many things, he smiled sadly. "I forget more than I know, and I never knew as much as my father. Years from now you will understand."

What more do I understand now than then? Only that I also forget.

In the hills to my right, dogs howl. (All dogs have four legs. All animals bigger than mice have four legs. I never thought to ask Father why.) I tell myself again the winter is young, and the dogs can find easier prey to attack than me. And if I am wrong? Then the dogs will eat. Or I will have new, warm, fur boots. Or we will all die, and another creature of Paradise will eat.

Gripping my spear, I press on.

* * *

I come to rocky shore kept clear of snow by the wind off the sea. I still walk slow, because the rocks are slippery with ice. But at last, passing a clump of trees, their fronds bent almost to the ground by ice and snow, I see Ship.

It stands near the flagpole. Ship looks smaller than I remember. Maybe I think so because I am bigger now, or the trees are. I have not seen Ship—or Father—since my body first began to grow hair and I had to go.

Ship stands as tall as two of me, as long as . . . I cannot count that many. It has wings, a little like some bugs. I remember *bug* is a label of convenience, too.

I am tired, and the sun is low in the sky, when I come to Ship. It is closed. Near the door are the faded words: *Air Lock*. I know the words, but never understood them. Father never understood them, either.

I push my hand against Ship, just below the writing, as I learned to do long ago. The door stays closed. After a while, I remember to push without my mitten.

Ship knows my bare hand. The door slides open, and I step in. As the door closes behind me, a lamp comes on over my head. I shake, just a little, until the other door opens in front of me. Just as I remember, Ship's inside is warm and bright without any fire. By Ship's light, I see two beds, empty, and a shelf with more . . . books than I can count. I see and smell sacks of grain and dried fruit and dried meat. And I smell Father's reek. Years ago, as I grew up, suddenly that reek was all I smelled. As suddenly, to Father's nose, I made my own reek. Before I killed Father, or Father killed me, he sent me away.

Strongest of all, I smell death.

In the other room, by the ever-blinking colored lights, beside Ship's shiny things I never understood and I learned young *never* to touch, I find Father.

* * *

Father is in his chair, slumped forward onto a table. His hair and beard, that I remember as very dark, are white almost as the snow outside. He wears only a shirt. Much of his left leg is an awful shade of . . . I still do not remember the names of colors. The pale color of sick leaves. He does not move when I call out. He is cold and does not move when I touch him.

I think the sickness in his leg killed him.

In one hand, he holds a charcoal stick. Some paper is beneath the other hand. I understand only a few words on the paper. I have forgotten the shape of many words, but I do not think that is my problem. I think that, near the end, Father's hand shook as he wrote.

Where snow does not cover the ground, it is still frozen. I walk along the shore, gathering stones the size of my fist. Many, I must first break loose from ice. When I have enough stones, I carry Father outside. He is lighter than I expected.

The work is hard. I hope the stones I pile over him will keep away the dogs until spring, when I might put him into the ground. For a while, far away along the shore, someone watches. Bundled in furs like me, only her lack of a beard shows me this is a woman. It is winter, so, of course we stay far away.

The sun goes down as I stack rocks. Even as more snow begins to fall, sweat runs down my body. As I work, a familiar bright spot streaks overhead. Big Ship.

"Why does that star move so fast?" I once asked Father. I was very young then. Mother was still alive.

"My father told me Big Ship is not a star," Father said. "It is more like the moons."

And it did move across the sky like the moons, only faster than both of them.

"But it is small," I had said. "Much smaller than Ship. How can that be Big Ship?"

"Think about it," was all Father would say.

If Big Ship *is* a big Ship, it must be very far away. I wonder how Father, or Father's father, could know such a thing.

By moons' light, I finish covering Father in stones, but inside Ship it is still as bright as midday. Too bright for sleep. I remember something more from when I lived here. "Ship," I say, "night-time light."

"Yes, sir," Ship says, speaking from a wall. The light goes down. One of Ship's eyes opens wide, buzzing like a bug as it does. "To watch over us as we sleep," Father would say.

Ship is a tool, like my stone knife or wooden spear or blanket. I understand tools. But unlike my knife, I do not know how to make a Ship. I tell myself understanding this is work for another day. I tell myself, I must stay strong, and rest, to keep my promise.

Outside it is cold and the wind howls. I must spend the night, among the smells, inside Ship. Ignoring my winter headache, I lie down on one of the beds.

I try, but I do not sleep.

* * *

My promise to Father was that, when he was gone, I would help Ship. I would keep Ship safe. And I would teach a child of my own to do this after me.

"And if I do not have a child?" I asked.

"Then teach another man's child," Father said. "You must."

And I had promised. But how could I do any of that?

The morning after stone-covering Father for the winter, I ask, "Ship? How can I help you?"

"I don't think you can." As always, Ship's colored lights blink just a little faster when it speaks. I do not know why. "At least not yet."

"How did Father help you?"

"He taught you to read. And he waited."

"Waited for what, Ship?"

"For me to finish."

Father said Ship is always right. That, I remember, though I do not understand. Why make me promise to come back? To wait? To do nothing?

I say, "You must need something."

"Yes," Ship says. "I need helium-3."

I think I understand. When his leg went bad, Father could not walk. "I will go. Where can I find this . . . helium?"

"Nowhere on Paradise," Ship says. "Perhaps on what you call Big Ship."

I twitch. "How can I get to Big Ship?"

“You can’t.”

“What *can* I do?”

“Read the diary.”

I do not understand how reading helps Ship or me. “What else can I do?”

Ship says, “You can wait.”

* * *

Ship has many books, almost more than my fingers and toes. Only one was what Father called *the Book*. The word on its cover, a word that, with care—and Ship’s help—I now sound out, is *Diary*.

It is fatter than any other book, because, in a way, it is many books. At the back, the newest pages are rough to the touch and ragged on the edges. They go to pieces if not handled with care. These pages are made of wood pulp, just as Mother taught me. Maybe I *did* make some of these pages. The letters on these newest pages are large and messy, written with charcoal in Father’s hand.

The pages in the middle of the Book are also on rough paper. These pages are dark with age and hard to read. The lines and curves of the letters are very thin. Surprised anyone could make charcoal marks so small, I had asked Father about it.

“These pages were marked with a pen,” Father said. “When my father’s father was a boy, the last pen stopped writing.”

“What is a pen?” I asked.

He showed me. “A tool, like a charcoal stick.”

In my hand that day, the pen felt like a charcoal stick. It scratched paper like a charcoal stick. But it did not leave any mark.

The front of the Book is oldest. Its pages are smooth and straight and strong. They have not darkened at all. The letters on these pages are tiny and perfect. “Ship says it wrote these letters,” Father said. “With a tool called Printer.”

Printer no longer worked, either. It needed more of another tool, called Toner. Toner was like charcoal and also like the driest dust. I do not understand Toner.

I open the Book to its front, sounding out the words of Amanda, the Mother of my line.

* * *

Humans are not native to this world I named Paradise. Okay, that turned out to be a stupid choice. I keep the name, if only as a lesson in humility. Anyway, it’s not as if anyone else is using the name—or any other name, for that matter. As far as I can tell, those who came ahead of me don’t have a name for the place. I should never have come to this world, and neither should they.

Isn’t hindsight a wonderful thing?

* * *

Again and again, I must hunt in Dictionary for a word. Dictionary: that book is almost as fat as Diary, and its name is harder still for me to say. Mother called Dictionary the Book of Words. I understand that name but not many of the words inside.

Ship tries to help me, but the more I read, the less I understand. I turn to a newer part. It begins: *To my son*. I understand little more here than in the front pages. I turn further into the book. The next part also begins: *To my son*. I still do not understand much. The next parts begin: *To my daughter* and *To my children*. I do not know what a children is.

In each newer part there are fewer words to know, and I know more of the words I do find. But it is not enough to know words. I need to know the meaning. To be ready. To help Ship. And so, slowly, in the newest pages, the pages I think Father wrote, I sound out:

To my son.

In the beginning was Earth. The people came from Earth . . .

* * *

Save enough food for winter, and I live. Save too little, and I die. When I am idle or when I sleep, I eat less. I understand winter.

But Ship is filled with food Father saved before he was sick. If his food is not enough, if spring comes late, I can eat from what I hid before coming. There is no need for me to be idle. And so, every day, I read. Then, by Ship's light, I read more, late into the night. Reading and thinking do not help my winter headache.

Slowly, I learn . . .

* * *

People should not be on Paradise, Father wrote. So, my father told me. So, his father told him. Then how can life be so good here? My father had no answer.

I ask Ship.

"Read the Book," it says.

Father said I was to help Ship. Instead, it helps me. It explains, or at least it tries, the words I did not know. It answers, or at least it tries, my questions. And it does some things for me when told, like making its rooms lighter or darker.

But Ship only (and this is a new word I learned) reacts. Ship does things when asked or told. It *talks* smart, but in a way, even a mouse is smarter. Even six-leg Paradise mice. They do things without being told.

I keep reading. Someday I hope to understand why, and how, I must help Ship.

* * *

Every day, when I can read no more, I go outside Ship for snow to melt or for fresh air. Some days, I see (and this is one of my new words) my *neighbor*. When the wind comes the right way, I smell her. From afar, that is all right. When spring comes, it will be better.

But not because I promised Father I would teach a child. I still do not know what a "helium" is, or where to find three of it, only that Ship needs this. I only know that without helium, like me without food, Ship will die.

"When will you be gone?" I ask. Ship answers, but its words mean nothing to me. What are seconds? I try again. "How many years?"

"In midsummer," Ship says.

If I mate with my neighbor today, no child of ours will ever help Ship. Am I happy or sad about that? I do not know.

"Can I help?"

"Only if you can bring me helium-3," Ship says.

Now I know I am sad. I go back to reading.

* * *

The Firsters made a deal with the devil.

I have learned enough to understand a little. Firsters are people. They came from Earth to Paradise, carried by Big Ship. Big Ship looks small because it *is* far away. It was too big to come down to the land. (And not *streamlined*. "The wrong shape," Ship explains that word, in the voice that means I have not been told everything. After many questions, I learn only that I know too little for Ship to explain more.) Other, smaller ships, maybe like Ship, carried the Firsters down to the land, but Ship does not know about the others. It is all very confusing.

Deal is easier. Sometimes I trade things with other people, like some of my fruit for some of their grain. A deal is a trade.

But the devil? I do not understand at all when Ship tries to explain *that*. I go ahead with my reading.

They engineered ("changed," Ship explains) *themselves to metabolize* ("eat") *local proteins* ("food"). *Paradise life uses many of the same amino acids as Earth life, but a few differ. They made the same gene hack to* ("Changed in the same way") *the animals they'd brought. Mice, cats, dogs, sheep, goats, horses . . .*

The list is long, and all four-leg animals. The six-leg animals were on Paradise when the Firsters came. When I do not understand a word, sometimes I find its picture in the Book of Words. "I do not know horses," I tell Ship.

"I am not surprised," it says. "I haven't seen a horse in years. They might all be far away, somewhere with better grazing. Or maybe they are extinct."

“Extinct?”

“Dead.”

Death, I understand. I go back to my reading.

* * *

Most of the snow is gone. The trees have buds, some even their first fronds. Where the snow has melted, the grass no longer sleeps and has become green. Mice and other little animals are finding the grass. They are not so thin as in winter. With fatter prey to hunt, the cats and dogs are not so thin, either.

The smells of new growth finally takes away the last of my winter headache. Now I have a different ache, a want, a need, to be outside. To take away plants that did not last the winter. To sow seeds. To spread the waste that I have saved. To take fallen branches from streams before melting snow floods the land.

After many more days inside Ship than I can count, just reading, this . . . *compulsion* will not be denied.

But neither will this new need to learn. After each hard day's work on the land, I read into the night by Ship's light.

* * *

Changing humans (“That's you, and those like you,” Ship says. “People.”) *and other Earth fauna* (“The four-legged animals”) *to digest Paradise proteins could have destroyed the ecosphere. The local fauna were too primitive. They could not have competed.*

When I ask about more words, Ship tries to explain. Still I do not understand. I ask it say the whole thought of the page, as simple as it can. It says, “Paradise animals, the ones with six legs, would all die.”

To think about that makes me sick. Life and the land are . . . are . . . I do not know a word strong enough.

Ship hears my struggle for words. “Sacred,” Ship suggests.

That sounds good. Life and the land are sacred.

I make myself keep reading.

And so, the Firsters engineered another change. They rewired themselves and their animals for sensitivity to eco-pheromones. Never mind how crappy their physics was—I mean, generation ships! Really?—their biotech was way beyond “modern” levels.

More talking with Ship. More searching the pages of the Book of Words. Before the . . . eco-pheromone change, people were not one with the land! They did not flourish with other life. They did not become sick if they let the land be sick. (And they did not have headaches all winter, while the plants slept under the snow. I try to imagine that, but I cannot.)

Trying to understand, too confused even to ask questions, I sound out another page.

Throughout the growing season, most Paradise plants pump out pheromones. When the air is rich with them, altered people (all terrestrial mammals, in fact), get an endorphin rush. When the local ecology fails to thrive, or goes dormant for the winter, everyone nearby goes into withdrawal. Some choice: a high that continues from spring until late autumn, or perpetual withdrawal. Of course all everyone here wants is to nurture the land! I feel the urge, too!

And if, for whatever reason, the ecosphere fails to thrive? Things get ugly! During drought conditions, say, the native plants switch to producing stress pheromones. At that point, testosterone levels plummet in altered males.

It gets worse! When “good” eco-pheromone levels become scarce enough, altered people emit their own pheromones. Repellants. Then adults can't bear to be around each other.

Clearly, these changes were intended to limit population to what the ecology could support without endangering the local flora and fauna. I get that. It was a noble goal. I want to believe the Firsters simply underestimated how sensitive they would be to these gene tweaks, or (just a suspicion) that epigenetic reinforcement would increase that sensitivity over time.

Simply? I understand simple things. This is not simple, but I keep reading.

Nature, of course, doesn't care what I believe, and even the best intentions provide no

immunity to mistakes. Humans were, are, very sensitive. I'm amazed that people aren't already extinct here. Simulations suggest it would have taken only a few generations to reduce the Firster colonists to the scattered hunter-gatherers and subsistence farmers I found.

To be fair, maybe they felt they had no choice. Their generation ship (I ask about those two words, and Ship says, "She means Big Ship") was a wreck. It's astonishing to me they made it here. Trying their luck elsewhere ("Leaving Paradise") was never an option.

Leave Paradise. Leave the land. No one would do that even if they could! Would they?

I go outside to think. But when I come back to Ship, Amanda's words are no simpler for me.

By luck or design, these eco-sensitive behaviors have hormonal triggers. Prepubescent children neither produce nor react to any of the eco-pheromones. But when puberty hits and the changes kick in? Wham! Families break up. That's when education, using the term loosely, stops. Imagine how little time a hunter-gatherer or subsistence farmer can spare for teaching. And before they pass along anything else, they must teach the children how to survive—alone—on this accursed planet. Because, no later than age twelve or so, they send their kids away. Is it any wonder culture has all but vanished? Is it any wonder the adults speak like young children?

Once again, I stop my reading to say, "I do not understand."

Ship tries to explain. Each time it tries with simpler words. And still I do not understand.

At last, Ship finds simple enough words. "Too many people would eat too much food. That's bad for the land. To keep the land safe, people cannot have too many children. To have fewer children, sometimes men and women must stay apart. Even young men and women."

Like winter has returned, my head is pounding. "Is that wrong?"

For a long time, Ship is quiet. I think it has no answer. Then it says, "The father of your line thought so. His words about this are not in the Book, but I remember them."

I ask, "What did he say?"

"That people are meant to be social creatures, not territorial like cats. It means that people should be with other people. On Earth, people were."

I remember going away from Ship the winter my chest began to grow hair. If I had stayed, Father or I would have hurt the other. "Be with other people. Like Father and me being here? And the two of us with Mother, if she had lived?"

"Many more," Ship says. "There were hundreds of people on Big Ship, all together."

"Hundreds?"

"It is a number, like all the days that make one year."

Thinking of so many people makes me want to run and hide. I have never been with more than two people.

But a part of me, the part that has learned to enjoy learning, wonders what living with more than two people would be like. And why anyone has a number like "hundreds." And what things so many people, working together, could do.

For the first time I wonder if, somehow, working together, people made Ship.

* * *

I come to the last page that Amanda wrote.

My son is almost twelve. I know what must happen, and I hate it. I hate it! I! Hate! It! But Paradise doesn't give a damn whom I love or what I hate.

Jason will leave the ship. Soon. Just thinking about it reduces me to tears. Will he remember anything I've tried to teach him? After I'm dead, when he comes back, if he comes back, how much of this record will make any sense to him?

I think of the day, long ago, when I left Father. I think of this Jason and his mother. I do not know why, but now it is me making tears.

* * *

At last, the forest near Ship is in full bud. Fronds are everywhere. I breathe in the rich smells of the forest. When the wind is right, I breathe in the nearby woman's scent. For days, I think, almost it is the time for us to meet. And to mate.

Today, we do meet. Dana, she calls herself. She speaks slowly and knows few words. Somehow, that bothers me. I tell myself Ship has not been teaching her through the long winter. I tell myself, maybe she and I can be together in Ship, and she can learn, too.

Then I remember Ship will soon eat its last helium.

But then the wind changes, to come at us from the sea. Quickly, the smells of forest are gone to us.

As I think about “eco-pheromones,” faster than I can shape my thoughts into words that Dana might understand, she runs away.

* * *

Firsters. After days of confusion I really think about this word. If some people came first, did more come after? I ask Ship, “Was Amanda a Firster?”

“No,” Ship says, “she came many years after them.”

Many years after? But she came hundreds of years ago. So the Firsters came . . . ? I give up trying to understand. “Ship, I see that Amanda . . .” Once more, I do not have the words I need. “Amanda did not like what the Firsters did, but she stayed. Why?”

“The Firsters made tiny things called retroviruses that they put into the wind. The retroviruses change people. Before Amanda knew it, *she* was changed. Then, like a Firster, she was tied to the land. Like you.”

“Like me. Is that bad?” I ask.

“I do not know,” Ship said, “only that it is different.”

* * *

One night, as my eyes grow tired from reading, I say to Ship, “I want to do more to help.”

“You can’t.”

“You said to wait.”

Ship is silent for a long time. “When?”

“When I first returned.” When I barely knew enough words to talk at all. “I asked what I could do. You said, wait.”

“I did.”

Questions that had been so slow to come to me finally burst out. “Wait for *what*, Ship?” When will that happen? What can I do for you then?”

“Wait for me to find the cure. When? I hope soon.”

Ship’s voice never sounds happy or sad; the doubt I hear must be in my thoughts. *Cure*, whatever it is, must be important. I say, “You have looked for this cure for a long time.”

“Yes. Since Amanda programmed me. Told me how to look.”

To look for a thing for hundreds of years! I cannot imagine this, and yet I believe. The Book has been written over and over, by Father, and *his* father, and all the way back to Amanda. Many people have written in the Book. And each time, the words explain less.

I ask, “Is it important to find the cure?”

“It is my only purpose, and also yours.”

* * *

The days are now warm, sometimes even hot. I work from sunrise to sunset, tending fields and forest. The grass is tall, and soon the sheep will have their lambs. I feel alive. Wonderful. At one with the land. Does it matter this feeling goes with the words *endorphin rush*?

And Dana works on her land. Day by day, our work brings us nearer. I think about the mating we will do and the child I hope we will have. I think about teaching some of what Ship has taught me to Dana and to our child. I think about—

Loud noises from Ship! I call them noises, but that cannot be the right word. I have never heard something so . . . right, never known noises to make me happy. I run back to Ship, thinking I must search in Dictionary for a better word.

As always, Ship opens when I hold my hand on the right place. Inside, the colored lights that have always flashed and moved . . . do not. Now only a few spots shine, unblinking, one green light on each of the things-I-must-not-touch. And the noises-that-are-not-noises stop!

I ask, “What are those noises you made?”

"Music," it says. "Amanda once chose *this* music, *this* fanfare, as the herald of success." Sometimes Ship guesses my questions before I can ask. It does not always guess right, or answer with words I understand. "Many fathers before yours, Amanda's mate brought me here. To be with her. To be stranded on Paradise with her. This was his music. He wrote it."

So many words I still must learn! I try to find the most important one. "Success. Is that another word for cure?"

"Not always. Today, yes."

I drop, heavily, onto one of Ship's chairs. "Then the waiting is over. Then it is time for me to help. Yes?"

"Yes. And, yes."

One spring day, when I was a boy, a terrible cloud fell from the sky and into the forest. It was a small cloud, dark and twisty, spinning faster than a man can run. It roared louder than anything I have ever heard. *Torna do*, Ship called that cloud. Many trees died, blown down, torn apart, thrown against each other. In the blink of an eye, everything had changed. While Mother and I stayed with Ship, Father went away. He did not come back until the next spring.

This day, hearing Ship's words, my thoughts spin faster than dust in a tornado.

I ask, "What am I to do?"

"Decide."

* * *

When spring came, I had moved Father's body. He rests now in the dirt, next to where he had put Mother. Beside them were more . . . graves. Ship said caring for the dead was one of the things that makes people different than animals. When I asked, Ship said it couldn't explain.

I say to the graves, "Ship wants me to decide."

The dead do not answer, but who else can I ask?

"Ship says it has the cure."

The dead do not answer that, either.

I talk to the graves, because who am *I* to make this decision? I think I know less than Father, who knew less than *his* father. Maybe, in some unknowable *before*, hundreds of years ago, Amanda could have decided. It was Amanda who taught Ship how to look for the cure. How to make the cure. Who told Ship to be ready to release the new—such a strange word!—retroviruses when the wind blew strongly to the forest. To undo, in years yet to come, some of what the Firsters had done to themselves.

And it was Amanda who told Ship that, when a cure was ready, a *person* must decide. Because, Ship says, Amanda said, "A cure can be worse than its disease. I think the Firsters proved that."

"I *cannot* decide!" I shouted at Ship.

"I can not," Ship said. "You *choose* not. Those aren't the same."

* * *

Every day, I return to the graves. I talk, but of course they do not answer. Twice, I try talking about the cure to Dana. She does not understand. And I talk with Ship. I try hard, but I cannot make it decide.

"Soon," Ship says one day, "I will use my last helium. When that day comes, you will have decided."

Once again, I say, "I do not understand."

"When the helium is gone, *I* will be gone. I will not speak. I will not open the air lock. And I will no longer be able to let the cure go into the wind."

And so, yet again, I return to the graves. I say, "If Ship releases the cure, I will no longer feel the land. When the land is well, it will not make me happy. When the land is not well, I will not know its pain. And, and . . ."

And what? Misery.

"You must come back," Father made me promise. "You must help Ship."

I walk along the shore, confused.

* * *

For days, my head has ached. Much of that pain comes from thinking so hard, but not all. Around Ship, forest and field and meadow have all been ignored. Dana must feel the land's hurt, too. When I go to her, try to talk to her, she runs away.

I must decide, but how? I do not know what is right. Would Father have known? Or his father? Or *his* father? But maybe, hundreds of years ago, Amanda and her mate knew.

"People are meant to be social creatures, not territorial like cats."

I speak to myself, but I am full of doubt. Once again, my words have left my mouth as a question. Ship answers, "There is a thing Amanda often said."

"What?"

"That people are not meant to work for ferns."

Had Amanda not felt the need to care for the land? Did her head not ache if she failed? From the Book, I know she had become like me. But also I know she was different. After changing, she still knew what she had known before.

I am so confused.

I try to imagine Amanda's life before coming to Paradise. I try to imagine hundreds of people together on Big Ship. Together *anywhere*. I try to imagine what things so many people, working together, could do. I try to imagine people able to build things like Ship or to write music. I try to imagine distant Earth.

I fail in all these things. And in failing, I decide. Because I hope that, someday, a son or daughter of mine *can* imagine these things.

"Ship," I say. "Release the cure."

Edward M. Lerner is a physicist, computer scientist, and curmudgeon by training. Writing full-time since 2004, he applies all three skill sets to SF (his latest novel being the award-winning InterstellarNet: Enigma) and popular science. Ed's a uthorial web site is www.edwardmlerner.com.