

Home Sweet NewHome

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We founded our community with the best of intentions, chartering our Earthtrust Agricultural Cooperative with shared courage and shared hope, collectively signing a ninety-nine-year work contract in exchange for a complimentary starter set of NewHomes and NewWells and NewFarms and NewSeeds, all guaranteed to help us establish our new town and maximize its productivity. According to our Homestead Experience Coordinator, these bespoke technologies were programmed just for us, maximizing the benefits of our changing climate and our reshaped biomes, all while taking the messy human guesswork out of relocation and resettlement. *You hardly have to do anything*, he explained, the first and last time we saw him in person. *You settle where the app instructs you to settle, plop down your NewHome and your NewWell where it says, and then, once the water flows, activate your NewFarm by inserting your NewSeeds, matching color-coded seed packets to the provided planting grid.* So easy! And for a while it was easy, despite how damaged the assigned land was, even though it was right on the Florida coast – what was now the Florida coast but used to be, say, Orlando, before they bulldozed all the condos and amusement parks and tilled it into fresh uninhabited American farmland, a new frontier eagerly awaiting our productive inhabitation.

Migration is a fact of human existence, our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator had told us, shaking our hands as we boarded the buses heading south, and wasn't that just the truth? Arriving on what had only recently become fertile coastline, we launched the Earthtrust Manifest Destiny app and let it guide us to the optimal places to unpack our NewHomes and sink our NewWells. After several over-the-air updates and a system reboot, our NewHomes finally let us inside, where we troubleshooted the malfunctioning NewWells while staying mostly safely out of the weather. And wow, what weather there was! Turns out, when you unfold a prefab house in a tropical storm, some of the tropical storm ends up inside the house with you. But when the downpours finally ended a week later, it only took a couple hours to muck out our tiny domiciles, and as we did so, didn't we recall all our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator had said, like *What's left of your country needs you* and *This offer expires in fifteen minutes, so decide quick* and *It can't rain all the time, probably?*

Our NewHomes were smaller and blander and boxier than the houses we'd abandoned to the dustbowls of Minneapolis and Omaha and Grand Forks. But hey, they also weren't located in a dustbowl. You win some, you lose some! Anyhow, who cares about three rooms and two baths in an open floor plan if the open floor plan is decorated with sand dunes and airborne silt! Ha ha ha. So what if we arrived in what had been Florida to find so much more ocean there than there used to be, so much ocean that it was now a constantly imminent existential threat! The roiling, crashing water still looked awful pretty, with or without fish, which is good, since we found it without fish. I suppose you could only truly appreciate how pretty it was if it wasn't your heavily mortgaged, uninsurable house that had been dashed to pieces right here by sea rise, if it wasn't your retirement community drowned under the angry waves, if it wasn't your precious heirlooms we found sparkling in the flotsam and jetsam.

Which it wasn't! A bad thing had happened here but not yet to us. Someone else had suffered and fled. We had arrived to thrive.

Thankfully, the NewWells worked well enough, and within weeks we had our NewFarms irrigated and our NewSeeds planted. There was still plenty of other work to do, which meant doing whatever the Manifest Destiny app directed for months on end. Meanwhile, we were getting pretty hungry, with the drone drops slowing and nothing ripe yet anywhere and no livestock around for us to fatten up with the no plants, ha ha. But wow, look what wonders very slowly and sometimes sickly grew! Corn and potatoes and rutabagas, parsnips and carrots and what might have been meant to be citrus just like the old days of Florida and also the only thing that really thrived, if we're being honest, which was more beets than anyone wanted. (Which means: Beets! Gross!)

Farming takes so long and is so boring, some of us said. Watching beets grow is almost as bad as eating them, all of us agreed. Sadly, none of the other crops tasted quite like we remembered either, once we finally got them ready for harvest. Our results to date were dissatisfying but after a community vote we determined that a majority of us were still *Option 3: Not Yet Disheartened!* So we tightened our belts and reached out to our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator with a friendly suggestion. *Maybe some animals to keep us happy? To keep us happy and to feed us their meat which will free up the time we're spending missing eating meat?*

The NewCows the drones brought us were odd animals, and even odder once clumped together in a herd. Their albino hides, their red-glowing eyes! They were so much fast-moving light-reflecting albedo we knew we'd later have to somehow kill and butcher and eat, whenever the app told us we were allowed! And what voices the NewCows had, all of them not so much mooing as perpetually screaming like they were being perpetually attacked by predators, predators that were probably extinct and in any case were not right here, on our very safe, ocean-isolated NewFarms! Our NewCows weren't perfect but we aimed to love them.

Speaking only for myself, I told everyone who'd listen how I personally found them quite adorable, once we got them printed and activated and showed each NewCalf how to take its wobbly first steps, on its own six legs!

After all that, we thought we'd be ready for the NewLambs that arrived in the next drone drop. And we were! We were so happy to meet them! We were, at first, so happy! And so what if they weren't exactly what we thought lambs were supposed to be? Who needs wool in this humidity, anyway? Wouldn't it be a waste for a lamb to grow fleece just for us? Is there anyone anywhere still trying to get warmer?

Not even the lambs, I guess!

Somewhere around then, the sinkholes started appearing. Surprise! Some of us yelled, *Bye, NewHouse! Bye, NewFarm!* Some of us yelled obscenities instead. But if we lost a little real estate here and there, there was still plenty of places to live and work, if we crammed in together and made the most of what we had left. That's community! It's like our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator said after we pounded the Contact Us button in the Manifest Destiny app a couple dozen times: *You can't sink a hundred NewWells into the ground without risking a few sinkholes. Maybe you'd like to try fishing next?* That's how we decided to pool together to requisition some NewCoral and NewFish, specially designed for the conditions of our new coastline by Earthtrust engineers and AI working together for the greater good against the biggest crises of our time, as the brochures said.

Our fish farm worked beautifully right up until the NewCoral molted, growing fins and fangs and one rocky fin, terrorizing the coastline and hunting the NewFish almost to NewExtinction. *There's always more fish in the sea*, our Coordinator said when we complained, but sometimes the old idioms misfit the new world, you know?

Sometimes you don't know what else to say. But remember how that was also the year NewSky launched, with Earthtrust firing sulfate aerosols into the stratosphere to cool the globe, with the only cost (other than all the money) being that it turned our clear blue skies bright white forever? So much wild weather followed! So many windbent crops, so much windthrown livestock! Amazing what innovations scientists can come up with when they put their minds to it, properly motivated by progress and profit and an unenforceable corporate values statement! Sure, there were setbacks, but what are setbacks but learning opportunities for both corporation and consumer?

For instance, after a few months spent chasing NewSeeds and NewLambs every which way, we noticed it was not, in fact, even that much cooler. But thankfully the scientists did not give up in the face of our complaints. Soon, NewSky+ turned the sky even whiter! And then came NewSky+ Max, which practically made the heavens glow.

After NewSky+ Max, the climate cascaded again, our weird weather rapidly growing more weirdly weathery. A lot of existing NewSeed crops wilted in a heat

wave or got frosted in a cold wave or got drowned in a wave wave. We saw only one solution: newer NewSeeds! Plus! Max! Plus Max Ultra 2! Whatever it took, we would try. But seed innovation had slowed, it seemed. We complained but not enough. Maybe we were exhausted from the backbreaking labor. Maybe it was just a hard time to face our mounting troubles, with our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator promising innovative technological solutions were just around the corner and with all of us resettlers at last working up enough hope to start the families we'd come to start.

Or, well, trying to work up the hope. With house and farm secured, we should have been ready to become parents, but, whew, was this ever a hard world to choose to bring kids into! What with all the strange animals and oddly colored crops and the terrifyingly radiant sky, plus the climate shock and psychological distress we'd all shared and still suffered, the dying world trauma we'd bonded over long ago, back when we fled our dustbowl homes to enter the Homestead Experience lottery. By the time our town's first toddlers were toddling about, wandering our ever slimmer spit of shared land stuffed by our shabbying NewHomes and NewFarms, trying to pet the hairless NewLambs and crying when the New-Cows growled, all the children so sunburned despite slathering them with the silvery protective goo our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator said was now necessary for outdoor activities just in case NewSky+ Max experienced a sudden and catastrophic customer service error, well, by then, some of us were wondering if we really needed children of our own.

Wow! So many emotions to untangle. We thought first of our own faithless parents, who'd believed our future would be brighter than theirs, even though they seemed to have done so little to make it so before saying goodbye forever and moving into retirement climate bunkers paid for by the last Social Security checks ever. We also thought about how we were getting older too. And how we'd always been a bit scared of adult life and its personal struggles, but also of the global problems we'd been taught to care about but didn't have the power to change, and still we had to admit we were sad that there might be no one to carry on our legacy, to make great what mighty works we had started. Plus, there were so many years left on our ninety-nine-year contracts, years of indentured labor that the fine print said would be transferable to our children and their children, or at least someone's children, somewhere. What was there to do about it? We'd signed that contract in good faith. Earthtrust was very litigious and we were very poor and all the world's pro bono lawyers had gone the way of the dodo and the bald eagle and the domestic cat. If someone had to pay for what we'd bought, what we'd taken, why not kids of our own, who we'd at least get to watch live happily for a time, before they found out what they'd inherited?

We constantly worried about *what next*, and as we did so, the world kept changing. It always had. Always would. Maybe we were more scared by these changes

than ever before. And maybe in the end we just wanted to feel some hope, irrational as it might be. *Is there anything more hopeful than a child*, we begged each other, and then, dissatisfied with each other's flagging enthusiasm, our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator: *Is there anything more hopeful than a child?*

Oh yes, he said. *There sure is. Have we told you about NewKids yet?*

Our designer children arrived in the next drone drop. A little apprehensively, we opened the packaging, cutting through cardboard and plastic wrap and supposedly biodegradable zipties to reveal beautiful baby after beautiful baby, all perfectly normal looking, perfectly cute and friendly and obedient. They cooed. They raised their little hands. We picked them up, passed them around, named some names, fell in love. The NewKids were so smart, right out of their eggshell packing! Much smarter than the children some among us had borne ourselves, which we had to admit were a little slow growing, and so needy. And wasn't the world hard enough, without having to care for helpless children too? The NewKids, on the other hand, barely needed us. They'd been made for this burning, drowning world. Wasn't it amazing to watch them grow and learn and thrive, spending their carefree childhood days playing outside together, loping in happy packs over the NewFarms, giving hilarious chase to the surprisingly alarmed NewCows and NewLambs?

Things were good. Things were good enough. Despite the shining sky, which lately had begun to...throb? Yes, throb. And despite the encroaching waves, which nibbled more of our NewFarms every month. And yes, one or two more NewHomes had fallen into the ocean or into a sinkhole, just like OldHomes used to do. Florida's going to Florida! But we still had our kids. And our NewKids. And if we didn't think too hard about it, we could gauzily imagine the NewFuture they would inherit, one we made ourselves believe would somehow turn out better than our bad old present, which simply could not get much worse.

Or so we thought.

But then Bob had to go ahead and request a NewKid+ without telling anyone. And once Bob had one, didn't the rest of us want our own? No one ever wants to have less than a Bob. Certainly not *our* Bob, who was, we all agreed, the worst.

You know what they say: nothing's harder to resist than an upgrade. Especially when a no-questions-asked payment plan pushes the cost way faraway into the future.

This time, our Earthtrust Homestead Experience Coordinator wasn't there to answer our call. But it was easy enough to use the Manifest Destiny AI that had replaced him to order our own NewKids+, no questions asked, on generous credit terms, with free shipping.

Two days later, the drones arrived.

Now there are NewKids+ everywhere, more NewKids+ than there are parents to raise them. Thankfully, the NewKids+ are so tall and strong and fast, so capable

and independent. And so, so blue! Blue as the old sky. Bluer. And born with such big teeth! And as they grow, those big teeth keep getting bigger and longer and sharper! Wow!

These children do not play. They do not want to learn or take advice or heed our commands. They resist when we tuck them into their too-small beds or smooth back their shocks of white hair or try to scrub clean the weird angles of their weird blue faces. Faces we love, that they do not love us touching!

All our children really want to do is eat. Like a horde of giant blue humanoid locusts, they chew up every sprout and tuber and seedling left on our NewFarms, they hunt our NewCows and NewLambs, they dive into the ocean and empty our shelterless bay of what few NewFish escaped the NewCoral. (I haven't even told you about the NewPets. Don't get me started on what they did to the NewPets.) Like all parents eventually must, we look at our NewKids+ and think, *Well, this is your world now, to do with what you will. We have done all we could.* But our wilding children do not believe us. They are never full, never sated. They do not obey our commands, do not listen to reason, will not be slowed or taught restraint. Their appetites portend our doom. Perhaps it's this that makes us love them so, despite their oddities, even as they destroy everything we're still paying for, that one day they're going to have to pay for too.

After all, weren't we once the very same?

Aren't we still hungry for *more*, despite every good thing we already devoured?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Bell is Professor of English at Arizona State University. He is the author of several books, including *Refuse to Be Done: How to Write and Rewrite a Novel in Three Drafts* (2022) and the novels *Appleseed* (2021), *Scrapper* (2015), and *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods* (2013).