

JOYLAND ABOVE

樂土在上

After uniting the world, Motherland begins transforming a nearby island into a new world "Joyland". However, decades on, some there still cannot tolerate the straightjacket of rules and regulations binding this so-called paradise so tightly together. They are determined to leave this "beautiful new world" behind...at any cost.

In the wake of a debilitating global pandemic, the Motherland takes advantage of a distracted world to conquer and assimilate its smaller neighbor, Whale Island, and then rallies its allies to launch a global war that ends in a Motherland-imposed world government. To end the still-deadly pandemic, the Leader orders all infected citizens into exile on Whale Island and works to bring island residents to heel under the ominously named "Joyland Plan".

Linguistic savant Amber, a cog in Joyland Plan's machinery, sees how Motherland's promised "land of joy" is being realized through manipulated language, thought, and laws, creating in the process a population of water-averse, compliant followers. Her delusion is further shattered when, as her assigned task nears its end, she is barred from leaving...condemned to remain on Whale Island forever.

Several decades on, Joylanders are enmeshed in a web of mobile tech and virtual reality. Society is now stratified by Joy Value (JV) rating, with only those at the rarified top able to ride airships, live in comfortable homes, and dine on "authentic" food, while those in lower strata live lives awash in restrictions and checkpoints. Thus, almost everyone dedicates their every waking hour to activities that add to their JV score...to get a leg up on their peers.

However, an "erased" gay, a man who had seen his sweetheart dragged away by the robot brigade, a couple with dreams of raising children of their own dashed, and a teenager fallen to social rejection and scorn find themselves no longer able to even feign belief in the lies they've



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been told. Taking the decision to flee no matter the cost, these outcasts fortuitously cross paths with a now much older Amber.

This book, one in a planned short story and novella collection, brings together five interconnected stories set in the same world and timeline. These stories, while lacking the action-packed twists and turns typical of today's popular dystopian tales, will nevertheless leave you hoping such a future remains firmly in the realm of fiction.

Lâu Tsí-Ū 劉芷妤

Lâu Tsí-Ū's first popularly acclaimed work, *Goddess Buffet*, is a collection of realistic stories spotlighting misogyny and other difficult issues facing women in society that has inspired wider social discussion and debate. *Joyland Above* is Lâu's first work of dystopian fiction.

JOYLAND ABOVE

By Lâu Tsí-Ū

Translated by Jacqueline Leung

Amber wasn't the type of person to ask questions like, *If the world was coming to an end, what would you want to do the most?*

She'd always found this kind of conjecture utterly meaningless. After all, no one knew how the world would end and if people had the chance to act on their last wishes. This question was meant for lovers, with the sole purpose of soliciting the answer, *All I need is to be with you*, followed by, *Ah, why'd you have to say it like that? We're so in love, ah, so sweet*, and some rolling around in bed, and that was that.

Oh, and some might even interject and say, *Am I the only one who thinks ___?* to make a great show of their profound thinking and distinguish themselves from the rest of the bunch.

It goes without saying that this was the tritest problem in the world. If the world was really coming to an end, Amber was convinced it must be perpetrated by these people.

She knew she was a bit out there with her opinions, but she didn't think it was an issue at all. As a linguistic genius, she was busy fortifying her gift by learning more languages, and learning them deeply, to flaunt her fluency to other people. It was typical for someone like her to have more extreme views, and it wasn't like she had any time in her life to reflect on them anyway. Until the day the world was truly coming to an end.

The apocalypse had arrived and, while people were still mulling that over, another apocalypse announced its arrival. How many had there been now? Are we mid-apocalypse or post-apocalypse? Will there be apocalypse after apocalypse, apocalypses breaking the record of previous apocalypses until the next true apocalypse comes?

As a survivor, at least for the time being, Amber felt responsible to start documenting all these apocalypses. But no matter how she retraced the past, she could never ascertain the point when the world had truly started coming to an end.

"Obviously, it's the year the pandemic happened."

On the six-screen video conference interface, most of the participants had pale skin like Amber's. They were all wearing similarly drab-looking home clothes and spoke in multiple different languages. Some even code-switched from time to time. It was as if they were all trying to one-up everyone else by speaking in the world's least-known language – a long-standing, tacit endeavor among their group. The purpose of these gatherings was to practice and exchange languages, and also, of course, to compete.

For no reason other than pride, they never used any kind of software or machine translation, believing their language capabilities to exceed any translation tool. But come to think of it, there really isn't any translation tool that can deal with a gathering of this kind.

A woman with curly hair, the only one who was dark-skinned, was speaking in a historical language that exuded religious undertones. In a blunt accusation, she said, "All of this happened because of that cursed virus!"

"Do you mean the pneumonia? What age do you think we're in, to have one contagious disease end our world like that?" Amber shook her head. This may have been the opinion of most people, but she could never bring herself to agree. It underestimated humans too much.

"The pneumonia isn't the apocalypse in itself, but it's the *start* of an apocalypse that set a series of consequences in motion which, together, certainly make for an apocalypse. If the International Health Organization hadn't released that damn research report claiming nothing was suspicious while fully knowing where the virus originated from, other countries wouldn't have let their guard down. Or, if those foolish leaders hadn't befriended the Motherland and adopted their quarantine policy, which was in effect a mass grave..."

A vampiric-looking man, with jet-black hair and pallid skin, seethed until he was practically gritting his teeth. He spoke in the dialect of a faraway, landlocked country with extreme weather. When the pandemic started spreading, his government had rashly adopted the Motherland's quarantine policy when the situation was still unclear, and his family had suffered many deaths as a result. He only survived because he was doing research in a remote village at the time. By the time he returned home, his family had already died helplessly from those ill-advised pandemic measures, and had been mass cremated with other unidentified bodies. Amber could only imagine the agony of not being able to see your loved ones for the last time, and to not know where their remains were buried.

"If it was just pneumonia, that would've been the end of it. A virus leaked from a Motherland bioweapon lab and created this whole disaster, but it was not something we couldn't have handled," said a red-haired woman, using a language from a mid-sized rainforest tribe. It was a language Amber was less familiar with, so she had to pay extra attention and surmise using contextual clues to understand everything the woman was saying.

"You're right, the economic and diplomatic sanctions enacted by all the other countries, coupled with widespread civic discontent had forced the Motherland's hand. There was nothing else the Motherland could do but disseminate all of their bioweapons that were still under research and not yet stabilized, so what was supposed to be just a pneumonia outbreak became uncontrollable," interjected a brown-haired man in standard Motherese. The participants on the surrounding screens visibly bristled at this claim.

"Hold on, so you're saying this dire situation we're in is the fault of all of those countries who suffered heavily from this virus and decided to sanction the Motherland? And that if they hadn't done so, things would've been fine? Is this what you mean?" The man who looked like a vampire said in disbelief.

"I'm using our one official global language. If you can't comprehend what I'm saying, that is hardly my problem." The brown-haired man's voice dripped with mockery.

"You don't need to worry about how good I am with languages. *I'm* worried about your memory. Have you forgotten the reason we're like this now? The Motherland unleashed their

unstable bioweapon just to retaliate against the sanctions and suppress internal unrest. *They* caused the virus to interact, creating an uncontrollable number of variants until the world fell into utter disarray. They even instigated war while the other countries were too weak to defend themselves!"

The man who looked like a vampire slammed his hand on the table and leaned forward until his face filled the entirety of his screen, the point of the meeting long forgotten. They were supposed to speak in the most obscure languages to outmatch other linguists, but he'd subconsciously switched to the common language for international exchange before the war.

"Are you slow or evil? Or has age just deteriorated your brain? Just because the Motherland won the war doesn't mean you can say what they did was right!"

On the screen, the video conference descended into tumultuous arguing. As the participants became more incensed, they all reverted to their mother tongues, no longer remembering that they were supposed to practice hearing and speaking in different languages because they couldn't meet in person.

Before the war, they had all been members of the same language exchange association. With the pandemic now engulfing the world, the participants of this video conference were the only ones still around to continue these meetings.

The virus had mutated at a speed far greater than either new vaccines or medications, and Amber had seen the number of screens in their online sessions dwindling at an alarming rate. There was a long time during the war when they halted the calls, and by the time the war ended and they were finally able to resume, the members in this meeting today were the only ones left.

And now, it looked like even polyglots had lost their ability to communicate with each other.

The virus had interacted and mutated so quickly that no one could remember the numeric titles of its variants and strains. Even their transmission methods, symptoms, and targeted organs became untraceable. People simply came to call it the "castastrophavirus", effectively turning this unprecedented man-made tragedy into an inevitable natural disaster.

Catastrophavirus had taken countless lives, but that wasn't all that the world lost. For each of the participants on the screen, whatever they may have accomplished with their hard work and talent no longer mattered.

Was it possible for a world so wrecked by war and disease to rebuild itself?

Amber shook her head. This was a problem for someone else to solve. "I have to pee," she told the group in an indigenous language of some tropical island. She unplugged her earphones, got up, and left her desk.

Everyone had a different perspective on just when the world had started coming to an end. To the man who looked like a vampire, the apocalypse probably dropped when almost all of his family members died; for the brown-haired man, he may still think the world was simply undergoing some major changes, and that the true apocalypse still lay far ahead.

However, even though they were radically split on certain beliefs, there was plenty they could still agree on, like the necessity of eating and drinking...and peeing and pooping.

She headed to the bathroom, pulled down her zipper, and sat on the toilet.

For example, the vast majority of people who had survived the pandemic and the war would agree that the linchpin leading to the collapse of the formerly chaotic but more or less equilibrated world order was Whale Island.

It was global knowledge that the Motherland, vast as it was, had been coveting Whale Island, its eastern neighbor across the strait, for at least a century. Every single leader of the Motherland had used all strategies known to man, tactics soft and hard, to annex the territory in the name of unification. Although Whale Island was a small country, it was surprisingly resilient, and was markedly different from the Motherland in terms of its political system, socioeconomic structures, and culture. It, too, used tactics soft and hard to retaliate against the Motherland's advances.

When Whale Island, like the rest of the world, was thrown into a state of crisis by that atrocious pneumonia, the Motherland grasped the opportunity to take the country using its lethal bioweapon and dominating military strength. They very nearly achieved their long-stated goal of "seizing the island, purging the people".

For Whalepeople, that must have been their apocalypse.

In hindsight, that may not have been an apocalypse for just Whalepeople, but the entire world.

Amber wasn't aware of the situation then. She didn't live in Whale Island, in fact she'd never even traveled there. She was from a different continent far away from the Motherland and Whale Island, and cared little about the long-standing strife between the two countries. And so, like most other people, she had no idea at the time why the end of Whale Island might mean the end of the entire world.

In order to take over Whale Island in one go, the Motherland had spared no effort in using the multiple bioweapons at their disposal, so the viral strands and mutations on the island were more diverse and much stronger. As Whalepeople escaped as refugees, they brought with them several more contagious strands, triggering a whole new wave of the pandemic when the world was already struggling to contain the pneumonia. This was the start of the catastrophavirus that has yet to be subdued to this day.

After instigating war to "recapture" Whale Island, the Motherland made an alliance with several countries ruled by authoritarian autocrats who had been developing weapons of mass destruction in secret for years. Together, they invaded the rest of the world, already inundated by catastrophavirus, and emerged victorious in just three years. They established the Federation of Earth, and all the countries had no choice but to fall under their jurisdiction. Although the new order was touted as a federal system, each territory was under the de facto rule of the Motherland.

The world was fundamentally changed, and many people died – but not everyone, so maybe it doesn't count as an apocalypse after all?

Having emptied her bladder, Amber wondered how high the death toll needed to be in order to declare an actual apocalypse. As she zipped her pants back up, she suddenly heard a loud impact outside the bathroom – the noise was intrusive, forceful, urgent.

Her first thought was that the arguing in the video conference had gone too far, but then she remembered that she'd taken off her earphones and couldn't have heard any of the audio.

Amber rushed out of the bathroom at the very moment several armed troopers broke down her door and breached the passageway, shattering her fish tank and potted plants all over the ground.

One of them called out her name and personal details loudly, and asked her to verify if that was indeed her.

Amber tore her gaze away from the goldfish flailing on the wooden flooring and slowly nodded her head. From the corner of her eyes, she glimpsed the monitor on her desk. A gun was visible on almost every participant screen, pointing at one of the world's few remaining linguists.

"Greetings. We have orders to escort you to your assigned work location. Please remain calm."

That can't be right. If you want people to remain calm, surely breaking in with guns blazing isn't the way to go about it?

"M-May I know where I'm g-going, for what work? Who will I work for?" The trooper spoke in Motherese, so Amber responded in Motherese, too.

"I had heard you're a genius linguist..." The trooper glanced at her suspiciously. "With the way you're stuttering, you don't sound fluent in Motherese at all."

What an insult! You're a braindead soldier with a toy gun who probably doesn't even know old Motherese. Don't think I haven't noticed you dropping the honorific – and you say I'm not good with languages?

Amber raged inwardly.

"I was panic-stricken. Respectfully, you're pointing a gun to my head. I'm so good at Motherese, I'm probably better at it than your teacher."

The trooper gave a noncommittal shrug and pulled out a communicator. He pressed a few buttons, and then the hologram of a handsome, dark-skinned man flickered into life from the device.

"Greetings, Amber. I'm the project leader of Pristine Island. You can call me Noah." If this were before the war, the man looked like he could've been scouted as a movie star. Even through the hologram, he looked like he had a great figure, though the language he spoke wasn't Motherese, but the pre-war lingua franca. "As you may have heard, the Federation of Earth is implementing a global language policy for everyone on this planet to speak Motherese and learn about the Motherland, the world's oldest civilization. By unifying our language, we'll also reduce communication barriers. With these goals in mind, we need to draw on the linguistic expertise of you and the members of your association."

"The Motherland is a world power with a huge population, with so many native speakers of Motherese that even multiple pandemic waves won't kill them all off. Why do you need us? You can just send these native speakers to all the other countries... no...just to the autonomous states, and teach them the language." Amber shook her head. Her instinct was telling her not to take this job. Her Motherese was of course impeccable, but she didn't like the language.

Languages have no right or wrong in themselves. They're just tools for communication. But, shaped by the cultures and communities that use them, they take on vastly different characteristics, causing languages to have simpler or more sophisticated terminology for certain concepts... In any case, as Amber understood it, the structure of Motherese was one that prioritized society over individuals, which she disliked a great deal.

"Yes, but you linguists are fluent in Motherese and many other languages. You're capable of developing elaborate strategies better suited to different linguistic communities that will facilitate the implementation of the unification policy. For this reason, we're going to treat all of you experts with the highest courtesy..."

"You're all armed, and your trigger-happy leader has his finger on a button. I'd be surprised if there are any policies you aren't able to implement quickly." Amber looked at her monitor again. On the screen, the members were all in shock or crying. Some seemed to have dropped their cameras on the ground amid the chaos, so their screens were broadcasting only noise.

She thought back to the heated argument they were having, and suddenly everything clicked. "...Ah, you bribed that man and located all of us with our IP addresses, didn't you? No wonder he was praising the Motherland like mad just now, he was being extra loyal because someone was watching. It all makes sense now. Oh, you're really courteous to us experts, I feel so honored!"

"Honestly, I don't know how they found your group. All I know is that you're the linguist assigned to the program I'm overseeing. Also, I only received your details ten minutes ago." Noah paused and lowered his gaze, as if to suppress his urge to sigh. "You know that everything must go according to our Leader's will. Even if you refuse, I must still continue with my project, just with a different linguist. I understand your frustration, but I implore you to follow the instructions of the man holding the gun next to you. Too many people have died these past few years."

Once he finished speaking, the communicator stopped projecting and the hologram disappeared. The trooper in front of Amber retrieved the device and held up his gun again. He pointed his chin at the door and ordered her to walk out of her home.

Amber took a deep breath and glanced at her monitor one last time. Most of the screens now showed only empty interiors, their occupants no longer present. Only the man who looked like a vampire was still on camera, face down and lying on the floor. He was motionless, and the only thing discernably moving on his screen was a spreading pool of blood.

Immediately, Amber knew she had no other choice.