

# Midwest

From Atlantis (2017)

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translation Kelsi D. Vanada

You look toward the blinds.

Dawn.

Half-light.

The river flows outside the window.

People are walking over the bridge.

The thermometer reads 95.

The straight streets in their grids.

Incomprehensible shopping malls.

White morning mist.

Too large a continent he says.

No wind to blow the humidity away.

Moths flock around the streetlights in the evening.

I'm careful with the words he says.

When you walk together down the hallway.

Where is your room.

You see it's storming when you come in.

Pouring rain.

Huge flashes light up the dark sky.

He died in shallow water she says.

I always dreamt I carried him.

He was so fragile. Depressive. Suicidal.

You walk over the black-and-white checkered floor.

morning and night

where on the globe

Hang out with us you say.

Tonight.

night will stand open

You get lost in the hotel.

Thought you were just going take the stairs.

You see totally other areas. Hallways. Wood panelling.

Open a door and it's an altogether different building.

Why didn't you tell me I was hurting you?

You sleep late. Wake up with a headache.

Tell me something.

About yourself.

I'm not that fast usually.

You walk through the industrial area.

I've never been here before he says.

I almost drowned he says. Twice.

When I was a kid.

First in a tank.

The second time when I tried to get over the first.

It was in the sea.

I sank like a stone.

Panicked.

How many people do you like he asks.

White lover he says.

Leads you into the elevator. Just holds out his hand.

You take it.

Trace the outlines of his half-moons afterward. Slowly. His nails.

He stops himself suddenly and walks to the door.

Locks it. Turns on the TV.

I think you were right she says.

You look over the cornfields.

To read the earth she says.

While the endless cornfields flicker by outside the windows.

We forget so quickly he says.

Three million dead in the civil war.

The government cut off all supplies.

To put an end to it.

One and a half million children died of hunger.

In three years.

You find the tallest skyscraper with a sky bar.

The city spreads out below. Outside. The glass windows.

Glitters.

Vibrates like flames.

When was the fire you ask the waiter.

I don't know he says.

Leaves to ask someone else.

1897 he comes back to say.

Where were you?

How was your night?

You knock on the door.

Look at the TV that's on all the time.

Are you angry with me?

No.

Come here.

You see blood at an exhibition.

Streaming thickly.

From a hen.

On a woman's head over her face.

You feel the insides of your thighs.

Leaving.

Answering.

Coming.

Leaving again.

The cornfields. Some already harvested.

Mississippi.

The bridge.

You get up as you wait for the flight.

Do you want a coffee you ask.

I'll join you he answers.

You go out of the hotel.

Hear him call your name.

Once.

Twice.

Turn around.

I'm going to find some cigarettes you say.

Join me.

You stroll along the street.

You like walking he laughs.

Where are you they write.

I will find you all later you answer.

I have to go back you say.

You go ahead he says and something moves across his face.

I'll stay you say.

Your hands touch in the crowd.

They get sixteen years in prison he says as you walk down Bourbon Street.

In Nigeria. If they're caught.

The bridge shines orange in the dark. A storm sky above it and the river.

I couldn't have imagined five years ago

I would see the Mississippi he says.

The longest he says.

Isn't the Nile longer?

Yeah. Could be.

Damn he says. Damn.

Sleep here.

I'm sick of working.

I feel like lazy.

I'll go for a swim in the pool and come back you say.

Swim in the tiny pool. Full of saltwater.

You feel his seed flow out into it.

You turn several times in the darkness. In the courtyard.

The humid heat.

Feel the cool water.

You get out. Dress.

Smoke a cigarette in the yard.

Walk up the stairs. Watch him sitting at the writing desk.

Swaying a little. As if to music.

You turn.

I saw you.

Where? When?

How?

Hey.

You weave your little finger with his.

I'm famished he says.

You look at. Toward.

His eyes. The whites of his eyes. His lips.

Over breakfast.

You sit down on the floor.

Put your head in your hands.

Don't do this to me he says.

I've had enough trouble tonight.

You woke up early.

Walked along the Mississippi.

Saw the riverboats. The bridge. Sun and clouds.

You go to meet her.

It was the drain system that flooded she says.

Not the river.

They don't settle in layers she says.

They're spreading out.

The swamps.

The six-hundred-year-old oak.

Covered in Spanish moss. In long sheets.

You see his eyes move secretly over your body. Your breasts.

The course of the Mississippi has changed five times in two thousand years  
says the man driving the boat.

You feel the fear in his body. Of the water.

His raw pulse.

As you float over the marshy ground.

The green that falls from the trees.

Falls to the bottom.

When the new leaves come out.

We accused my mom she says.

I heard my mom scream to my sister

it wasn't me who killed him.

It wasn't me.

She told about a moment when they were newly in love and he  
suddenly burst out –

into some kind of, for that moment, shocking death wish.

I was always afraid he would disappear.

She collects the magnolia's petals from the sidewalk outside the church at night.

It only lives twenty-four hours she says.

Blooms.

White.

Turns melon-colored after a few hours.

Falls off.

Fascist she says.

Its intensity. Its beauty.

He strokes your arms. In the evening.

Amber tears from amber eyes you are thinking in the night.

As you wake and fall asleep and wake again.

In the hotel. With the courtyard.

Which you cross.

Up and down the stairs.

You hear him talking with his friend.

Saying words you don't understand.

Calling his name several times.

You go down the stairs.

The man from Armenia sits at the table in the courtyard.

You sit down for a while to chat with him.

As sleepiness spreads through your body.

The seed running down your thigh. Inside your jeans.

Dangerously beautiful says the woman who stops you when you've  
just have crossed the street.

What's this?

He asks about the powdered sugar.

You don't have it in Nigeria?

No.

They grow underground you say.

In Sweden.

Sugar beets.

Sugar something.

And point toward the ground. The floor. The tiles. Under the coffee table.

He looks down. Scared. As if you're pointing at a danger.

We still have time he says and takes your hand in the courtyard.

What happens in New Orleans.

Says the bus driver on your way out of town.

Pauses.

No one remembers he continues.

Then you hear nothing more.

He falls asleep next to you.

You feel his thigh against yours.

He takes his bag and enters the terminal.

Without looking back.

You start to head toward the gate.

He reaches for your arm.

I miss Nigerian food he says. Not Nigeria.

Under the military regime the executions were public he says.

They were even shown on TV.

You see his face in profile a few seats ahead of you.

See the sunset over Chicago.

It's such a weird night she says.

There's so much I want to talk to you about.

Don't turn on the light he says. Unhooks your bra.

Two bombs exploded.

In southern Nigeria.

I can't reach anyone over the phone.

On the news they're just talking about the school shooting in Oregon.

I haven't slept in two nights.

You can't see his face in the darkness.

Sink your nails into his skin.

How are you?

Where have you been?

I didn't see you the whole day.

Where are you?

The swirl in the other nature.

The light.

Falling strangely.

From some wrong angle against the globe.

As though it rose and fell aslant.

Came from everywhere.

The cornfields.

The plains.

Heartlands.

You wake up and your whole back hurts.

It's not God he says.

It's people.

God has no part in what people do to each other.

There are no clean hands he says.

We can't wait for that.

It's completely quiet in the hotel.

You shiver from the overwhelming feeling.

The ease.

A vanishing body. Walking through crystal tears.

You sit on the edge of the bed and read while he writes.

What are you reading?

About the blood. Leviticus.

Read the New Testament instead he says.

Matthew.

The story.

I'm going to take a shower.

Will you join me?

He's still sitting with his back to you.

Says your name.

Reaches out his hand.

Too hot?

No.

He washes your hair.

Weaves his fingers with yours.

Damn. Damn.

You dress a little later than he.

They said that there was a ghost in the hotel in New Orleans.

I brought it home with me you say.

I haven't slept in three days.

You go back to the bar.

Warm darkness. The lit-up library.

The checkered floor.

You wonder which woman it was. Who stepped into the river.

And spoke.

America is waking up. May always be awake. In some time zone.

Randomized.

Beautiful morning. The sun is shining. 63 degrees. Birds in the trees.

The fire truck drives past with its sirens.

*Double-edged.*

A terrible word.

Cuts into your morning.

In grammar, you say the first person is the person who speaks.

The second person is the person to whom I speak.

The third person is the person of whom I speak.

But who is the person who speaks to me?

It's quiet inside you.

Dear he writes.

You hear his voice in the hallway.

Didn't anyone tell you that Africa is not a country.

What's happening?

Where are you?

You slipped into the elevator like a shadow.

I live a boring life.

There's nothing to tell.

Take off your clothes.

Bliss.

The short time a dress lasts.

Sigh.

Come and make love.

Why the smile?

Coming.

The candidates in the American election are on TV.

Ben Carson. A real black president.

Russia's attacks on Syria.

You watch his face for a long time.

From the floor while you eat his rice.

Your gaze just stops at his face.

Why are you looking at me.

I didn't know I was.

You tremble. From everything.

Long for his scent. Skin.

You hear him call your name.

I should ban this he says and taps

the cigarette packet in your jeans pocket.

Your eyes meet as you leave.

You see that his gaze is fully open. Wondering.

But walk away from it.

I live in my mind.

And your body.

Body?

You make me laugh. Yes. Body.

Don't get obsessed he says and gets up.

The whole day his seed is flowing out of you.

What's happening.

Nothing.

It's not about you.

I have to be soft with you he says.

Your bed smells of him.

47 degrees.

You wake up. Swim.

Hey.

Hey.

You hear his laughter outside your door.

You see a biking woman get hit on the street.

Hear the thud.

See her fly through the air.

Her screams carry over the whole block.

Several people rush over.

The red car pulls over to the side.

The ambulance arrives.

You walk for a long time through the forest.

Effigy Mounds.

Animal shapes for the dead.

Arrive at Hanging Rock.

You see the Mississippi fan out.

The border with Wisconsin.

My whole lunch fell in a hole she says.

The dead were hungry.

You drive back in a bleeding sunset.

Long time through the dark.

He reaches for his heart.

It's a hard work you know.

You became so silent he writes.

*The eyes of others.*

It darkens above the river.

The streetlights are mirrored in it.

You hear the knock at the door. A faint knocking.

Beautiful.

The knock. The shirt.

The sad sensitive eyes.

Are you going out?

I'll join you you say.

I was old he says on the street. I've always been old.

You walk silently.

I heard you're going to Alaska you say.

Yes he says. In December.

You're sitting on the floor.

Get the impulse to rise.

Thinking you should leave.

You are the only one I want to be with.

You want to say.

But you just sit and rest your head on your knees. Waiting.

Don't sit there like a stranger he says.

Take off your boots he says and pulls them off you.

Lay down in bed.

You lay down. Almost fall asleep.

While he writes to someone.

Whom he finally calls.

You hear her voice.

The long silences.

The tenderness with which he urges her to speak.

Their shifts between languages.

I have to call my sister she says. My sister is calling.

I have to hang up.

He lies down in bed next to you.

Was that your girlfriend?

No. My ex.

He gets out of bed again.

Calls again.

You don't move.

Wonder what would happen if you got up.

You lay still and listen.

They hang up.

You look at your hand on his arm.

While he lays with his back against you.

You undo his red shirt.

Trace with your hand to the top button.

Sun. Breath is visible in the chilly morning.

Quick you write.

*Quick quick quick* you hear it echo.

He grabs tight around your hips.

His fingers dig into your thighs.

*The nick of time.*

Breathe inside the scent. Every breath. *Inhale.*

Don't push me away you say.

You laugh at the laughter on TV.

Why do you hate America?

I don't.

I don't want to talk.

He must have locked the door again.

Maybe you're late.

Lingered longer than you thought.

Have to knock twice.

He looks suspicious.

Only after a while he says take off your shoes. Your coat. Your things.

Searches for your breast.

You see the whites of his eyes. Only the whites. Look toward them again.

Look out across the river. Through the blinds.

At the people walking across the bridge.

Quick quick quick you hear within you.

I'm cold.

Aren't you?

I'm ok you answer.

She laughed.

Her voice was near tears all the time.

About to break.

54 degrees. Sun in the morning. The leaves yellowing.

You can stay here.

He searches for your breast.

Near orgasm.

His or yours.

His body was closed.

You didn't think he'd get an erection.

He didn't seem to need it.

Searched for you.

Entered you.

It was as if you listened he says.

As if you drew in the city.

You get to the hotel just when the car arrives to pick him up.

You see him behind the grimy window.

The car turns.

You walk in his smell. In the memory of it. Down the slope.

You stand by the fire in the garden in the dark.

You walk home with her in the dark.

The first chilly evening.

See stars. *Emergency*.

Written on the sign outside the hospital.

Two vapor trails catch your eye as you walk inside after smoking by the river.

The shivering grass in the wind.

The first chilly wind.

Though the sun still brings warmth.

The dew in the grass shimmers in the sunlight.

It's interesting. I've never seen anything like it.

Sweat runs. Your hair completely soaked.

You want to stroke his back.

In the strobe light.

The sudden explosions she reads.

A wedding begins just outside the window.

In the beautiful warm day.

Gentle afternoon.

The wind moves through their dresses.

Grabs hold of them.

Ruffles the water.

A journalist from Lagos.

No one comes from Lagos he says.

An Igbo he says. When he hears his last name.

Tensions she says.

His blue shirt shimmers in the lightning.

You think about the autistic girl.

Filled with the urge.

In the alley.

To become the orange.

When she heard the word.

Understood that it was a word.

For orange.

It filled her an entire day.

The thought. The feeling.

That they were the same.

What these eyes have seen he says.

What lights up the gaze. The years.

Do you want to die?

No.

You just undress.

Lie down beside him.

Reach for his nipples. Navel.

He moves your hand to his sex.

Doesn't get up afterward.

Just falls asleep.

Soon.

You hear him snore.

Fall asleep.

Wake up.

See the wall outside the window.

Try to figure out which view his room has.

What time it is.

You hear him in the bathroom.

You get up.

Can I take a shower.

Sure.

You hear his mild almost whispering morning voice.

He pulls the covers over you.

You search for his feet with yours.

A strange day you say.

A strange day he says.

You see your face in the mirror.

It's too early to eat breakfast.

What will you do today?

No shoes he says and laughs.

Pulls you away from the window.

You look out over the river in the evening.

The sun in his laughter. You'd like to live inside.

You stroke his hair.

Along the soles of his feet.

If he reached for for your breasts last night.

Or just your sex. Briefly. Calmly. Willingly.

The pain of war you read.

They call it pornographic here he says.

You see sunlight against the red brick wall.

Dawn light.

You don't fold your hands.

To fill the body.

Sink into the moment until it becomes elongation.

The woman at the front desk sees you.

When you turn the corner.

Barefoot across the carpeting.

She is up with the birds she said one morning to the woman  
who came for the morning shift.

It's lightning. Thundering. Raining.

A big lightning bolt cuts across the sky on the other side.

All the way down Linn Street you think.

No.

The answer is no.

No to whatever question you could ask.

Truths no lies.

Ok.

Why are you avoiding me.

I am not avoiding you.

First lie.

A house is burning.

Burned yesterday.

For seven hours.

Is full of water.

In the thunder.

Giant lightning bolts.

You smell the smoke as you go along the path.

He barely touches you.

Doesn't look at you.

What is it.

You stop.

He turns you around.

Aren't you afraid of the emptiness you ask.

To live here. Stay here. Leave Nigeria.

America has always been good to me.

He strokes his sex several times.

Many times.

Under the covers.

Naked from the waist down.

Gets up and shuts the door.

Hillary Clinton is being questioned about Benghazi on TV.

He asks about your name.

Where it comes from.

The best of Nigeria is here he says.

While you stroke his stomach.

They never got to America.

My parents.

They traveled while they still had money.

My mom always says the most sophisticated people  
can be found in Scandinavia.

How does she know?

Why wouldn't she?

You don't hear the answer.

It makes you so confused.

Everything he says.

You untie your shoes.

He gestures.

Starts to unbutton your jeans.

It's like an abusive relationship.

To live in Nigeria.

Does that make you abusive?

Am I abusive to you?

No.

Ok he asks.

Are you ok?

Let it go he says.

Tell me something you say at the bar.

About what?

Anything.

Autumn leaves blaze in the morning.

You go out in what you think is fog.

But it's just the steam on the window after your shower.

It's cold. The leaves are falling.

You walk over the bridge. Along the river.

Back across another bridge.

Feel the cold. The fall. Pressing in everywhere.

Tell me something from your childhood.

I was in the house. It wasn't ready. Only half of the house.

I was imagining.

What was outside the house?

He falls asleep.

With his laptop next to him while the TV is on.

The music.

Downtown. I love this song.

He lays his head on your breast.

I have to work he says.

Nearly falls asleep while talking.

I've heard they killed a lot of black people in these barns he says.

About the night ride.

The dread in the dark. Fear.

Ghosts.

*Dear* he writes again.

You walk in the silence that word awakens in you.

When he says it.

You think about the maimed body.

The half-built house.

Body he says.

Not a safe answer.

Do you wanna come.

No.

He calls.

You say no.

I wanna spend the night with you.

Me too.

The rush hour traffic made it almost impossible to get out of town.

You're delayed for hours.

Until the bus finally frees itself into motion. Darkness. Streaming fields.

The vast darkness outside the windows.

Long hours.

*Acoustic and image merge.*

The voice. Fractured.

Sounds. A moan.

She sang suddenly.

*Worlds souls sun.*

A feeling similar to pain or anxiety.

Which makes the birds start their migration journey.

You heard the guide tell about the skyscrapers. The lighting.

The lit-up facades. Disturbing their flight. Path.

How they're confused by the light. The mirrorings.

Fly right into them.

Get crushed.

One skyscraper mirroring the other.

The contours.

The skyline was sketched even in the subway.

Silver-shining.

The sleeping people.

Arrival and departure meet.

Departure is arrival.

The full circle of the compass.

To rise.

*That you shall walk. And I shall fly.*

*Wishing you.*

I wish.

That I shall walk. And you fly.

You don't want to eat again. Forget how. When. Why.

The most endangered species.

Black men in America he says. Didn't you know?

Could you come?

Did you miss me?

He boils rice in the microwave.

You lay looking at him.

Naked in bed.

As he sits at the computer.

His face. Eyelashes. Lips.

So chiselled.

The computer and the TV are on at the same time.

The U.S. supports the Syrian rebels with weapons.

Sends a small ground force.

It's like Vietnam he says. It's on the verge of becoming like Vietnam.

The conservative values. The old ones.

He says in the morning.

The calm on the faces. The river.

To write about rivers he says.

She's anorexic. She's sick she says.

It's so sad.

She's talking on the phone all the time while eating.

Aren't we all you think. Sick.

*the goat shall be set free in the wilderness*

He undresses you.

You should sleep he says.

The totally quiet city in the morning.

As if the dead had returned to their kingdom.

Were parted into appearance and then returned.

Sirens wailed all night.

What would you rather he asks. It be.

The police or ambulances.

I don't know you say.

You walk to his room.

Undress and lie down next to him.

He's watching some bad movie.

Turns around.

Close it you say. About the laptop next to him in bed.

You don't need it.

He falls asleep half a minute later.

The autumn leaves sweep over the street. Fall from the trees.

Some still glowingly yellow.

I will go back and make some jollof rice.

Was that an invitation.

No.

Not an invitation.

You go by plane.

Land.

You join her for breakfast at the airport.

Leaving him without a word.

Then you board for Washington.

Now?

I can't.

The man I'm waiting for arrives in fifteen minutes.

You meet him in the elevator.

He takes your hand.

To say hello to the man who is expecting him.

You hesitate.

Move toward the swinging doors.

I can't even he says. And gets up.

So many problems.

The sadness.

The divided body you think.

The inscription.

That extinguishes the memory of the event.

Archives the event by extinguishing it.

You went out in the morning and saw a woman by a church.

You bent down to grab your coffee or find cigarettes or a lighter.

Saw her worn shoes. Clothes.

Bless your day.

Her gentle shy eyes.

You took the newspaper. Left.

She said something about payment. Smartphone.

For a moment you thought she had seen yours somewhere.

That you had forgotten it.

It took you an unbelievably long time to understand she wanted money.

You went back. Gave her some.

Bless your day.

Bless your day too.

The marble in the buildings.

Library of Congress.

The White House.

I planted asthma inhalers in the garden she says.

My mom and my son needed the medicine.

It couldn't be found in all of Havana.

Because of the embargo.

That's when they took me to the mental hospital.

We're a small country she says.

An island.

The U.S. is a powerful empire.

You get up.

He grabs your arm.

You're leaving?

I'm tired.

You can't stand to listen to the words.

So powerless.

Late.

You just walk out. Get lost.

Write to him.

Come to my room he answers.

You walk back.

Lie down next to him in bed.

I like that your mom says

Scandinavians are the most sophisticated people.

He smiles. A little.

*If desire is mystery. Or truth. Trust.*

Poverty is in the mind he says and points at his head.

As you sit facing each other.

There are no black people here he says when you turn at the door.

In one restaurant after another.

I woke up at four this morning he says.

Takes his asthma inhaler out of his pocket.

I promised my mom I'd always carry it with me.

I'm good with people he says.

I know you answer.

You sit down next to him on the bus.

Listen to music.

Rest.

Sense his body. His thigh. Arm.

The heat of it.

He points as you approach.

Points out the skyscrapers sketched against the horizon.

The city I love most he says. In the whole world.

The door to the room doesn't open.

You see the well-dressed porter get down on the floor  
to use a primitive tool.

Made out of wire.

He takes off his expensive watch.

To be able to slide the wire under the door.

It's the batteries he says.

Finally it opens.

You step into the hotel room.

See the view of Times Square through the glass windows.

The corner of glass.

You open your suitcase the wrong way and everything falls out.

You rush out together into the night.

Eat.

You leave him and take a taxi.

Meet her.

Take the subway back.

Come up at Times Square and can't find the hotel so

late at night.

Look for a long time.

Finally get there.

Take the elevator.

Lie in the light. The glass corner. Against the skyscrapers.

Hear the city fully awake all night.

The twinkling commercials. Billboards. Neon signs.

Feel the heat from his body.

See his sleeping face.

Your heart beats fast. Hard.

You wake in the light.

He's already up. Ironing his shirt.

In bright white underwear.

He turns on Amy Winehouse.

You get up.

Call her and walk out into the day.

You walk through Central Park in the rain. In the morning.

Talk about the 9/11 monument.

About the situation in Turkey.

The arrests after the election.

See the fall colors. Their abundance. Glory.

Are you safe you ask her.

I want to know you're safe.

I'm leaving you you say.

When he wakes because you get up.

You take the elevator to your room.

Sleep for two hours in the empty bed.

Wake up.

Knock on his door several times.

He opens it.

Looks surprised.

Kisses you.

Walks toward the elevator.

Help me carry my bags.

I have no makeup you answer.

I'm still mad at you he writes from Seattle. While waiting for the plane.

Night in Alaska. Maybe long. Without end.

Are you still mad at me?

No I am not.

What are you then in your silence?

Writing.

I will defy gravity she says.

I will use gravity you say.

To reach you.