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KIM CHINQUEE

Mainland

THEIR LAST DAY on the island, they went to Miller's Marsh, where they walked the trail, looking at brochures, matching the stations with the numbers. They read about red maple. Students took pictures. The yellow birch, which didn't look yellow, you could scrape the bark and smell wintergreen. Michigan Holly and the Princess Pines looked like miniature villages of Christmas. Students walked ahead and the instructor stayed so far behind that she couldn't even see them. She lifted rotting branches, finding salamanders crawling underneath, picked up mushroom fungus that had fallen from white birch, and sat staring at the tree stumps that beavers had had their way with, like wooden knives, blades straight up that could kill you if you stumbled. After the one-mile journey, the instructor saw her students already situated, writing in their places. By now, she knew that Alex would write in questions and Fred would write something funny. Rochelle would surprise the instructor with compassion. She was a smiling girl, sweet and honest, making the instructor want to go back to twenty again. Kyle would write something purple-ish, which the instructor would have a hard time correcting, and Emma would write about God. The others sat in the van, and the instructor sat on an outstretched root of a red maple. The past two days had been stormy and they spent time at the museum, at the Mormon

print shop. The instructor hadn't written anything those days, but sat in the office looking out, since the museum was closed for the season, and the curator told her she could have the office and to just turn off the lights when they left. She sat and stared at the books, wondering what was in the files, what secrets resided in the cabinets.

The birds chirped and sounded off in treble, the woodpecker a drum, the wind and sky conducting. She thought of her boyfriend, a pianist, composer. She tried to write about his sounds, comparing them to now, and then she wrote about their history. She'd been trying to call him all week on her cell phone, but the service didn't work well on the island, and they kept getting cut off. She thought about being next to him. She looked around, then read what she'd written, thinking she could never write exactly how she felt. She heard rumbling, a big truck, which turned up the gravel road. It sounded like thunder. She put her notebook down and watched the lilies floating in the pond, watched the rippling water. She watched for a very long time.

Later on, the students would share their writing, but she'd keep hers to herself. They'd sit in a room and after reading their marsh stories, they'd get ahead of themselves, talking about the dead deer they'd seen at the lakeshore, wondering why it hadn't decomposed. They'd ask their instructor if they could end their discussion early.

The deer had turned over. Part of it was buried, on its other side and you couldn't see its head or its limbs. They tried to dig it up with a stick; they wanted to see its face. This side had no fur, just skin, almost see-through and the body was bloated. Some students were too grossed out to come. The instructor remembered the deer from earlier, when she'd come out for a run after her cabin-mate, another instructor, had told her there was a dead dog there, or maybe a deer. It didn't smell, but she didn't look at it long enough then, not as long as she'd wanted. Then the storm came.

They turned back, giving up. Poor deer, some of them said. They'd have snacks: chips with salsa, Coke without fizz, and then they'd pack, notebooks tucked away, deep. They'd think about the next day, looking over the deck, then out the dirty windows, hear the giant choo then rumble. They'd fall asleep and eventually wake, stepping off.