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Gomantong Caves, Sabah, Borneo

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Gomantong Caves
Sabah, Borneo

We sit on folding stools along the new-mown hill.
Banded woodpeckers call. Clouds of wrinkle-lipped bats,
like puffs of smoke against last light, waft from limestone caves

before us—caves shared with centipedes and edible-nest swiftlets.
An orangutan, newborn in hand, distracts us from bats.
She breaks branches to fashion her evening nest.

Red leaf monkeys work their way up white-barked trees
to the leaf-crown where they will sleep tonight.

Pole-perched all afternoon, the crested serpent eagle,
having exhausted at last any possibility for an evening snack,
flaps white holed wings to the canopy for his night roost.

Still the bats radiate from the mouth of the cave—to cruise
the skies for moths and mosquitoes, three million strong.

Brahminy kites, peregrine falcons, a rufous-bellied eagle, the ridge top
fills with raptors, waiting their turn to feast on the feasting mammals.
A bat hawk dives through dense clumps of bats.

We turn our backs on them, relocate the orangutan,
bald-headed baby clinging to her chest, still rummaging
in the branches, still rearranging them to just the right spot.

I watch with my binoculars and catch her face through leaves.
She seems to look right at me, making kissing motions
with pursed lips that I return with mine.

Marcyn Del Clements

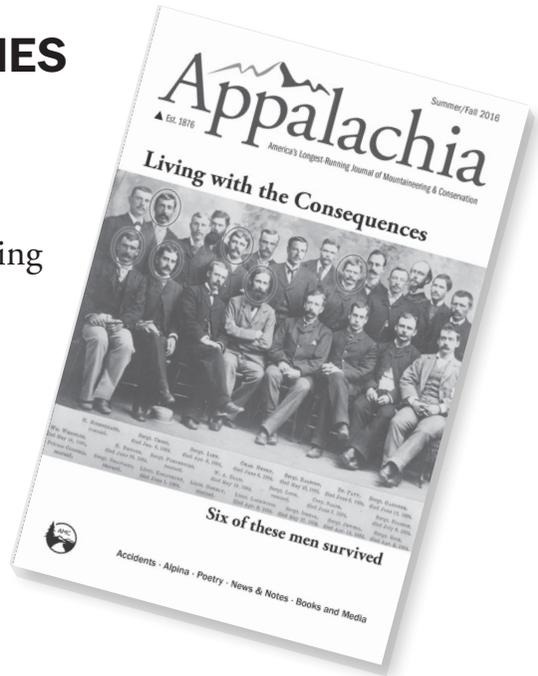
MARCYN DEL CLEMENTS has contributed to *Appalachia* for many years. In 2013, she traveled to Borneo to study the plants and animals found only there: Bornean pygmy elephants, rafflesia (the world's largest flower), meat-eating pitcher plants, the endemic Bornean bristlehead, and swiftlets, whose nests, after the chicks are flown, are gathered and eaten.

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