

ANDREW VILLENEUVE

## Islomania

Like a coiled foetus it lies. Reptiles and mammals can appear alike in their first stages of development, so it could be a human embryo, a lizard embryo ... but, this is the Island, a brown and green foetus gently bathing in the saline waters of the Indian Ocean. It is dreaming.

The Island is part of an exposed ancient barrier reef that encircled an ancient volcano long since dead, separated from the main *terra* of Madagascar by waters hundreds of feet above present day levels. A product of long interglacial periods millions of years ago. The corals accreted their calcium carbonate sarcophagi and grew on top of one another in an over-packed graveyard rising hundreds of feet until the glaciers returned on the other side of the planet and the sea levels dropped here. The brittle battle-grey limestone thrusting out of the protean seas was exposed to the fresh, acidic rain and slowly, slowly it dissolved. Like candle wax, like wet sand dropped slowly between the hands. Except this was sharp, jagged, hellish rock. Labyrinthine grooved pinnacles like gothic cathedrals and decaying Mayan temples and Khmer wats. Geologists call it karst. The Malagasy call it *tsingy* – where one daren't walk barefoot.

It is on this fragmentary Island of diluvian rock, where trees can only survive in pocket valleys, that the world's smallest chameleon crawls under dead leaves and eyes its toy-box surroundings with clockwork eyes. *Brookesia micra* has no common name because no one lives on the Island to give it an affectionate moniker. No one bothered to give it a scientific name for that matter until 2012. But it has been here forever, a primordial monster stalking a virgin land.

*Brookesia micra* is found nowhere else. Just in a valley the length of a suburban street on an island barely larger than a city block. This is what We Know. The only valley on the entire Island accessible to humans; the rest is guarded by the phalanx innumerable of *tsingy* towering a

hundred metres into the air. Interlopers into the interior are defeated by sheer cliffs and hundreds of angry hornet nests and rock that snaps underfoot and pierces through the rubber of shoe soles. If a fleshy human falls, they will be gored instantly. But this valley we can get to. Here, *Brookesia micra* was made known to Western Science. Smaller than your thumbnail. Brown. Orbiting eyes in a head massive compared to its body size. Feeds on small arthropods (probably). Hunts in the leaf litter during the day. Roosts like a dragon in twigs a few centimeters off the forest floor at night to avoid predators. Charismatic only in its extremes.

Before I took the rickety panga to the Island, the National Park director in Antsiranana gave me two pages of *fadys* – taboos. The Sakalava people know this Island to be sacred. You are not allowed to touch snakes. You cannot whistle. You cannot have sex. And you cannot be one of the highland Merina people who chased the Sakalava into hiding in one of the Island's caves hundreds of years ago. I had my guide, and my colleague Lisa had her guide, and we knew there would be two park guardians living in a hut on the beach. We loaded 30 water *bidons* on the boat (the valley's streambed is dry for most of the year and the only spring is underwater at all but the lowest tides), some 50 pounds of rice and 20 of beans, and our small bags. One each.

The campsite on the beach was recently developed by the National Park to encourage tourism, or at least comfort the few who managed to get here. We set up our tents on three concrete platforms and gathered under the single palm roof at a single picnic bench with our guides and the two guardians, Michel and Nico. They listened to the *vazahas* (word for strangers – used for white tourists and the gendarmes) talk about measuring the tiny chameleons and the colour patterns of a frog also thought to be found only on this Island – *Mantella cf. viridis*. If the crazy *vazahas* were paying 30,000 ariary a day to count tiny lizards and frogs, so be it.

A week and a half in. I work in the late mornings, early afternoons and evenings going into the forested valley to count and measure the miniscule brown chimaeras, and Lisa goes into the forest at dawn and dusk when the golden-jewel mantellas are active. This evening I am sit-

ting at the picnic bench under the palm roof writing field notes as the sun descends and silhouettes the limestone peaks. Slowly, a feeling awakens on the back of my neck and under my eyelids and in my spine as the towering limestone loom and stare down on me. I look up, confused, at the tsingy enclosing the tiny valley and the tiny beach. I begin to feel as if the Island is creeping around me, watching my movements with thousands of hidden eyes. A controlling, terrifying feeling. I sit with my stomach in my throat as fear coils in my abdomen.

I sit until dusk falls and Lisa emerges from the forest, sweaty and exhausted. She slips into the opposite bench and doesn't say anything.

'Do you feel the Island? Watching us?' I ask, not tearing away my stare from the tsingy above us.

She pauses in the roaring silence. 'Yes. I feel it.'

As dark falls all six of us sit on a tarp and eat our watery rice and boiled beans with too much hot sauce and listen to the land crabs scuttling in the periphery of our headlamps. I eat silently and dread going into the forest that night.

Around nine, Nico and I begin our walk into the forest, my headlamp and his flashlight dim from old batteries. The crabs click and scuttle under our feet, like the mythical dragon-eating ichneumons. I almost step on them as they bolt from underfoot, and a cosmic sense of anguish overwhelms me. 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry!' I mutter aloud, and Nico turns to eye the crazy vazaha with a bemused air.

I crawl through the underbrush for two hours that night catching sleeping *Brookesia micra*, with the fear and awe and despair tumbling around me. Each tiny protean creature I pick from slumber swings its telescopic eyes accusingly at me and trembles violently – its defensive technique to make the giant tarantulas and cackling birds drop their prize. I am working all this time muttering silent entreaties to the Island, to the chameleons, to pardon my intrusion. The thought that the Sakalava call these creatures *Zanaka-tsiny* – genii, is worming around in my mind. A trap set for man, for it is evil to kill an animal without reason. And here I am treading on the tsingy where one daren't tread, crushing the Island beneath my feet. *Insula eleison*.

I work my way up a slope until I find myself under a massive fig tree,

its buttresses binding and entombing and embalming the tsingy and the leaf litter and the plants. I stare up at the Milky Way way beyond the treetops and the sounds of millions of noiseless lives and deaths echo off of the guardian tsingy. *De profundis.*

After the last chameleon is measured, I hurry down the treacherous trail and walk across the beach to my tent. I get in my sleeping bag despite the oppressive heat, and curl nose to navel. *In paradisum.*