



**THE BARK AND
STONES**

**SHORT STORY
WRITING SAMPLE**

The Bark and Stones
By Elizabeth Weidner

We do not eat flesh. Our brothers with four legs, tails, fins or wings are sacred, and we must protect them. It is murder to kill one of these animals, as it is murder to kill one of our tribe. This is what separates us from the barbarians on the other side of the Island.

Q'ohula sat on the dirt floor of Milako, the Small Woman's hut, throwing pieces of bark and stone to the ground; reading the patterns they made on the green-gray earth; dripping cold beads of sweat; frightened of what was to come. Betrayal was written in the chaos of what she threw. Betrayal and death, and those things frightened her beyond all others.

"Why are you reading the bark so early, Q'ohula? You are too good to be practicing still. You are to be the Small Woman when the New Moon rises; do you think I would not train you well enough?" chattered the Small Woman as she ducked into her hut, smiling with missing teeth.

"Milako?" Q'ohula asked. "Why are you so old?" The Small Woman was not supposed to be old.

"You have heard this story many times Q'ohula." she cried, puttering around and not looking at the girl on the floor. "I have told you, so you would know about the dangers of being the Small Woman. It is hard. I would not have been Small Woman for as long as I have been if any of the first three had lived."

"What happened to them?" Q'ohula asked, gazing at the stooped, old hag. "I need to hear it again."

"Kital took one of the heavy stones and walked into the lake, holding it, because she was afraid of the initiation. Forenk, who was the most promising, especially for one of the rare, boy-Women, was walking with me on the high cliffs and slipped. I tried to pull him up, but I could not hold him, and he told me to let him go. Child, these are things I am not pleased to remember. I have kept you safe for these past three winters, and now that the world is brightening, you shall be the Small Woman, and not feel the danger that comes with it."

"What about the third?"

"You know what happened to the third, you were a small child when it happened. She took one of the men's long, curved knives that strip the bark and went to her parents hut. She had inhaled too much of the Tiki leaf's smoke and it made her head rot. She killed her parents, and had no memory of it. She was the only one that the Chief had to kill. It was too hard to keep her alive, and her sins were too many. And that is why we do not say her name."

Milako looked down at Q'ohula on the floor and shook her head. "I am old, Q'ohula. And to lose the power of the Small Woman is frightening, but not so frightening as losing you."

They talked for a little while longer, and then Q'ohula left the hut, less concerned about the story the stone and bark told. She walked down towards the lake, where the women were gathering algae for soups and medicines. She watched them for a time, content to sit on the warm rock, a distance away from the others with her thoughts. The song of the women at the lake, mixed with the wind crashing into the tall trees above soothed her into a sleepy daze. She lay back against the rock, staring up into the canopy of greens, yellows, grays and whites of the Eucalyptus trees above her. They swayed and sang along with the lake women, and when she squinted her eyes, they became tall, moving men, dancing around her. The blue sky was pockmarked with the smallest of clouds, and they wended their way across her horizon. It was peaceful, lying here. And as the greens of the trees blended with the blue sky, a single thought resonated in Q'ohula's mind; *it is good.*

The peace was suddenly broken by the sound of screaming. A young girl in the lake with her mother was shrieking uncontrollably, sobbing and struggling against her mother's arms. From her spot on the rock, Q'ohula saw the women moving chaotically; fighting against the little girl, wading quickly out of the water, and some of them running to the huts at the edge of the forrest. The lake was white with frothing motion. Q'ohula was about to turn around to get the Small Woman or the Chief, when she saw them both running towards the scene. She ran as fast as her thin legs would take her to the shore to meet them.

"No, Q'ohula, you do not need to see this." said the Small Woman, trying in vain to push her back into the crowd. Q'ohula shoved through to a horrific sight. At the screaming girl's submerged knees, there was a fish that accidentally pierced itself on a sharp, broken piece of wood that was jutting out from one of the nets. The fish was small, only several inches in length, but it was still terrifying to watch it struggle and bleed deep, brown blood into the green waters. The women around cried and sobbed as the fish slowly died. The Chief made his way into the water, and pulled out his short knife. He was the only one in the tribe with a knife that was so small and so sharp. He pulled the fish off the wooden spear with his big hands and deftly cut the dying creature's head off, putting it out of its misery.

All was quiet then, save for the young girl sobbing into her mother's stomach.

The Chief sighed, then reached over and patted the young girl on her head. "I'm so sorry you had to see that." The girl continued to sob, softly now, but tears still ran down her face. "I think Q'ohula can make a cup of tea for you child, that will ease your pain." He looked at Q'ohula, and she reached her hand out to the young girl and picked her up, carrying her out of the lake, followed slowly by Milako and the other women. Q'ohula trudged slowly up the shallow hill, the weight of the child slowing her down. Soon the others had passed her as they made their way solemnly dragging their feet and returning to their homes. Q'ohula turned back and saw the the Chief still standing where she left him; his strong, naked legs submerged in the strangely colored water. Blood dripped next to him, slowly dissolving into the lake around him. He stood with his head bent, and the corpse of the fish still in his hand.

The incident with the fish had left Q'ohula unsettled. It felt like a bad omen to happen days before her initiation as the next Small Woman. Using the tea, Milako and her had gotten the story of what happened out of Kina, the little girl. An accident. She was using an old algae net, and had hit a rock on the bottom of the lake, breaking the wood. She did not notice, and plunged the net back into water, hitting the fish.

Milako and Q'ohula lead the tribe's assembly that night, to decide Kina's fate.

"Kina murdered," cried one of the men. "She is tainted with sin, and we cannot have her here."

"It was an accident," said Milako, trying to calm the people in the tent. There were cries for Kina to be exiled for her crime. Accident or no, she had been responsible for an innocent creature's death, and their laws now called for extreme measures. Their attacks at the young girl disgusted Q'ohula, as she watched Kina clutched tighter to her mother, still crying.

Q'ohula, though not an official mediator yet, could not stand to see her tribesmen act so obtuse. She stood and walked towards the fire, where all could see her and began to speak; "We do not eat of the flesh of animals, like the barbarians on the other side of the island. Those of us with four legs, fins, and wings are equal to us. This we know. We do not question this. We do not condone murdering these creatures, but to spurn the girl-child, Kina, to have her live alone in her grief would kill her too. We would be no better than the Chief of the flesh-eater's tribe, gutting a carcass, and leaving only the bones and claws. She has sinned, but the greater sin would be to not let her heal.

“If you exile her, her blood will be on your hands. You will be murderers, far greater than any you have heard of in the old tales. The murder of not just a child and her body, but her very soul. If you can live with that, then see that she is exiled at dawn. One murder has been committed at the lake, but I doubt any of you will stand to see another committed this night.”

Her speech had worked, and the young girl was allowed to live, and hopefully return to a normal life. Q’ohula was now treated differently in the tribe. For the three years of her training, she was not supposed to speak, unless there was a real necessity; an emergency. The tribe had not heard her voice in those years and to hear it at the assembly before her initiation awoke them to the reality that they would finally have a new Small Woman. There was excitement in the air, and the people buzzed and flitted about, speaking about the change soon to take place.

The only one not celebrating was Milako. She grew more and more sullen as the New Moon approached, and Q’ohula felt more and more out of place, where once she had been at home. As they walked around doing chores, the people of the tribe would offer congratulations and praise, but Milako would snap and be taciturn and unpleasant. The time they spent together now made Q’ohula feel uncomfortable, and awkward, and after several days of it she decided to ask what Milako was thinking.

“You have been horrible, Milako. Why are you making things so dreadful? The initiation is not something you have to worry on, it is my burden.”

Milako sighed then, and slumped down on the soft leafy bed of the hut. She slouched into herself. Her voice was raspy and harsh as she began to speak slowly. “We do not murder, Q’ohula. I have taught you this well, as you showed me at Kina’s judgement. But this rule is bent for our kind, for the Small Woman. And there is one of the magics that you must perform in order to become the Small Woman.”

To Q’ohula’s horror, Milako began to illustrate the most terrifying of spells she had ever heard of. Her bones felt cold as the images of death, and carnage raped her mind. Her hair stood on end, and her stomach ate at her heart.

“This is what you must do.”

Q’ohula shivered though she was not cold. “If you say I must do this, Milako, then I shall do it.”

Q'ohula sat in the solitary hut, away from the tribe, alone. She began setting up the Eucalyptus-wax candles for the last ceremony and lighting them, counting them off one by one.

"One... two... three..." her thoughts were dark as she went over what it was she had to do. "Forty-five... forty-six... forty-seven..." The knife she had stolen from the Chief was burning a hole in her side, where it sat against her skin, tied on with a strip of bark. "Ninety-eight... ninety-nine... one hundred." The hut which before was too dark to see in, was now illuminated to its unnaturally high ceilings. Q'ohula did not take time to observe the paintings that graced the high walls and roof of hut; too distracted to notice anything beyond her preliminary task. She lay leaves around the base of the many candles, and then drizzled sap over them. She then took the remaining sap and poured it into her gray-gold hair. She felt it run over her face, but made no move to wipe it away, as she lit a stick of pungent, sticky incense. She then sat down in the center of the room, drew some designs on the floor, and pulled out a small pan-flute.

The flute was old, and spent most of its time sitting in the window of the Small Woman's hut, gathering dust. It was lighter on one side where it had become bleached by the sun. Q'ohula had used it once, when she first began her training, and only to aid the Small Woman instead of performing the spell herself. Now holding it in her slender, shaking hands, she found that the tune to play was coming easily to her mind, and as much as she did not want to, she could do what Milako had asked of her. Putting the flute to her lips she began to play the elegiac song of summoning.

At first there was nothing, the stillness of the room was unchanged, and though she knew it had worked, she hoped that she had played the flute wrong, and she could not continue the spell, and would never have to deal with this again. But soon the sound of leaves crunching near the doorway told her that she had to resume the magics. A young fawn stood, silhouetted by the sunlight. It walked into the hut towards Q'ohula. It still had its white spots, and stood no higher than the middle of her thigh.

"Hello." Q'ohula said softly. In the golden light of the candles, the young deer was a beautiful thing to see. The flute had pacified it, and it was docile, and eager for her petting. She rubbed its ears, and it nuzzled her hand.

Q'ohula pulled out the knife then, and slit the deer's throat, collecting the blood in a bowl. She then cut into the animal's chest, and pulled out its still beating heart. The incense caused her to feel no remorse, she simply did what she had to. The deer's eyes fluttered shut, and its body stilled. Q'ohula chanted the words the Small Woman had told her, and drew symbols on her neck and face with the blood.

She held the heart in her hands, feeling blood running down her arms and dripping off her elbows onto her legs, and the floor. She stared at it stupidly, taking in the minute details, such as its texture under her thumbs, and the color of blood reflecting the candle light. She paused for a few beats, feeling her own heart pumping in her chest, and pulsing to her fingertips. She brought her hands to her face and bit the heart.

She continued to eat the heart slowly, knowing she should not, but unable to stop once she had started, grateful to be alone during this. No sooner had this thought crossed her mind than shadows passed in front of her. Two shapes, with the sun behind them in the doorway. It was Milako and the Chief, she knew their silhouettes well. The Chief's shocked face frightened her and she felt her heart stop. She looked at the Small Woman and became even more frightened, for Milako smiled a cruel smile, opened her mouth and began to scream.

"Murder!"

Milako began to shriek, and one thought passed through Q'ohulu's mind before the Chief hit her with his staff on the side of her head.

The stones and bark told of betrayal...