

DISCUSSION
AND RESOURCE
GUIDE

“If we are
to be conquered,
let it not be
because we
never fought.”

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

All my life, I've been fascinated by people who fight back. People who refuse to accept the status quo. People who look at the injustice around them and say: No More.

We know them by many names. Revolutionaries. Dissidents. Activists. Protesters. They are men and women. Of every race. Of every creed. They fight unfairness privately and publicly. Sometimes we celebrate them. Other times we punish them. Many of them live and die in obscurity, but their work lives on for posterity.

My new novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, was inspired by them all.

It is the story of what happens when the residents of a fictional African village named Kosawa decide to rise up and fight back against an American oil company that has been polluting their land. Spanning forty years, it follows a generation of children growing up in this village and what happens to them as they watch their parents fight the oil company, and as they themselves take up the fight. One of these children, a girl named Thula, is at the center of the story and ultimately becomes the leader of the movement to bring the oil company to justice.

Recently, someone said to me, "I know how this story ends—the oil company wins, right?" The statement made me laugh. I understand the allure of thinking along such lines—the world abounds in stories of communities that were decimated by powerful corporations—but what the person failed to understand is that even those who might seem powerless have their own powers. There are wins and losses on both sides in this novel, but I wanted to go beyond that and share the story of this fearless resistance movement and the humans behind it.

In my writing, I looked at movements like the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, the civil right movement, the BP oil spill protests; as well as recent examples like the Standing Rock protests, Black Lives Matter, and the Women's March.

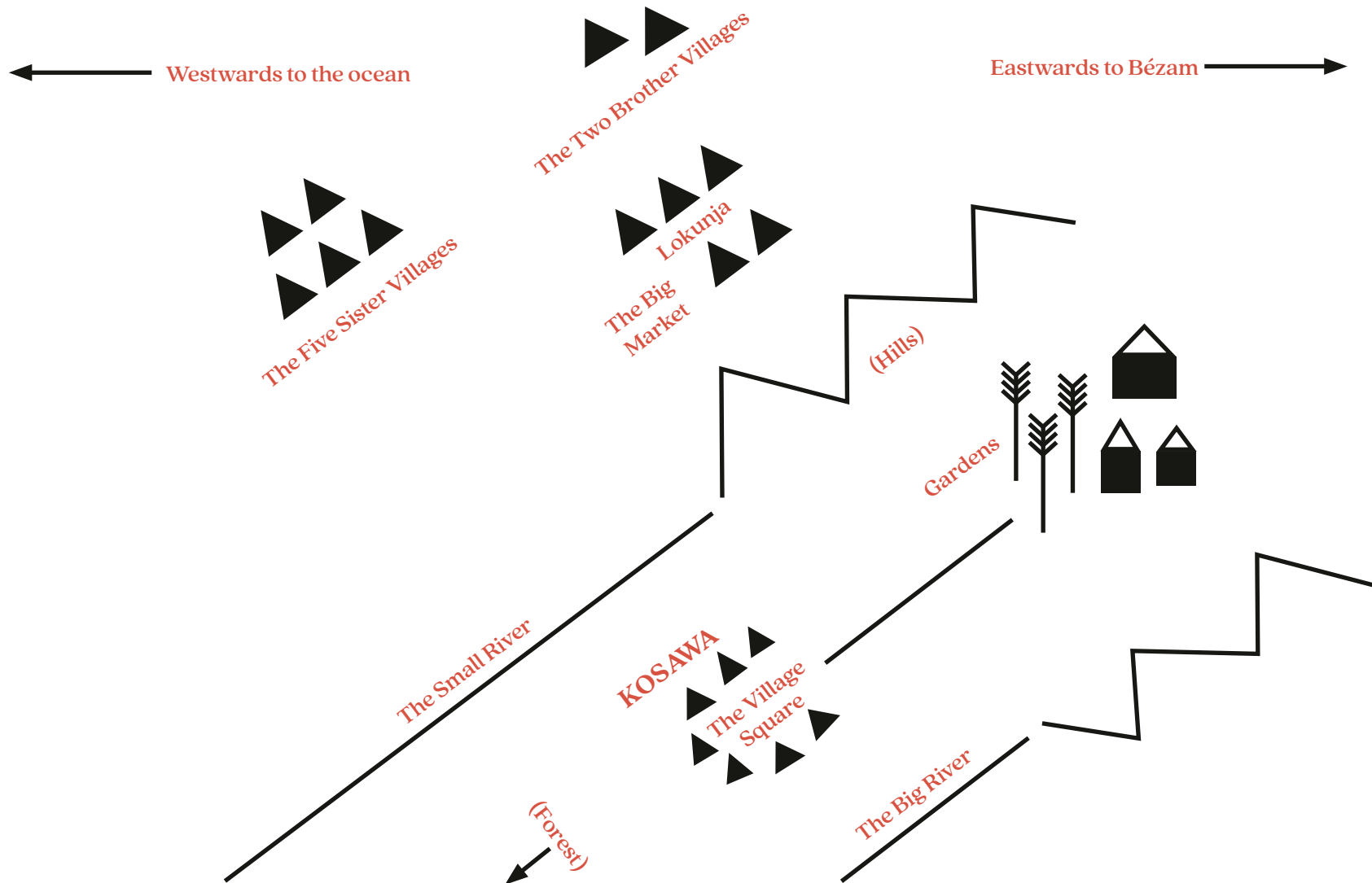
I began writing the novel in 2002 and didn't finish it until 2019, a seventeen-year period. During that time, I wrote and published my debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, but this story never left me. It haunted me unceasingly.

I'm so grateful for the incredible support and kindness you showed me with *Behold the Dreamers* and would be delighted to hear what you think of *How Beautiful We Were*.

With gratitude,
Imbolo



THE VILLAGE OF KOSAWA



CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

THE NANGI FAMILY

Malabo, papa

Is the government a rock, a thing with neither brain nor heart?

Sahel, mama

He was worthwhile, my husband, my dream. . . . In our youth and freedom, our exhilaration seemed as if it would last for forever.

Thula, daughter

I know nothing about how a girl makes men pay for their crimes, but I have the rest of my life to figure it out.

Juba, little brother

Alone in my bedroom, I thought about the night I returned from the dead.

Yaya, grandma

Life is funny. . . . Everyone wanting something to make them happy only to realize once they get it that they want something else.

Big Papa, late patriarch of the Nangi family

Something in his eyes told me that he yearned to be happy but he was too consumed with despair and knew of no way to free himself from it.

Manga, Yaya's brother and Sonni's father

The people in America have never seen our suffering with their very own eyes.

Bongo, Papa's brother

There's no shame in admitting that we're in need of help from those with the power to free us.

Sonni, family's cousin, who would later become Kosawa's leader, holding meeting after meeting to beg for an end to the destruction.

Tunis, Sahel's cousin

Why do people in Bézam make their building so tall—do they want to live in the sky? Are they afraid of the earth?

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

THE VILLAGE OF KOSAWA

Jakani and Sakani, twin brothers, respectively, the village's revered medium and medicine man

They did and said nothing besides what they needed to do or say to bring us healing and peace.

Konga Wanjika, the village madman

We are the only ones that can free ourselves.

Woja Beki, village leader but working with the enemy, the American oil company Pexton

My very dear people, even a sheep knows how to tell its master what it wants.

Jofi, Woja's third wife, a village gossip who used to strut around the village in stylish clothes before becoming a pariah who hides in her fancy brick home

Gono, Woja's son, who works in Bézam for Pexton, the enemy—and who will find his position could not save his father

Pondo, Woja's brother-in-law, who would later seek to take his place

Bissau, Papa's best friend since childhood—the first to suggest there was something wrong with the village's water

Cocody, Bissau's wife, who cries as easily as she laughs: ka ka ka oh

Aisha, Cocody's younger cousin and Mama's friend

In the days to come, the world would function the way women want it to.

Lulu, Mama's friend, whose twin brother joined Papa on his ill-fated journey to Bézam

Why is it that women feel they have to apologize for their men's failings—when was the last time a woman was the source of our village's suffering?

Teacher Penda, a kind government man from a village on the other side of the country, where *a woman can marry three husbands if her beauty is too great for one man to bear.*

Lusaka, father of two departed sons—and one of the most peaceful men in the village

We don't kill other humans. That's what you do, not us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Throughout this novel, the author immerses us completely into the village of Kosawa—the people’s beliefs, hierarchies, customs, and rituals. What resonated most with you?
2. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from multiple points of view? How did this impact your reading experience and connection to the characters?
3. The stakes in this novel are high, and the fear and defiance of the characters are personal. What are the parallels between the environmental degradation in the novel and the socio-economic challenges our country is currently going through?
4. When Konga rallies the village to take the Pexton representatives hostage, how did you feel? Were you glad some action was taken, did you feel a sense of foreboding, or both? Could you understand the characters’ desperation?
5. What do you think is responsible for the conditions in Kosawa? Pexton, His Excellency and the country’s government, the legacy of colonialism, or a combination of all of these things? Explain your choice/s.
6. How would you describe Woja Beki in one word? Why do you think he chose to work for Pexton? Was it a choice? Do you know anybody in real life who behaves in a similar way?
7. *It takes a village to raise a child* is an African proverb. How do you think it relates to Kosawa and its people? What about the United States and the rest of the world?
8. What do you think was the catalyst for Thula’s transformation from student to revolutionary?
9. When Thula arrives in the United States she observes: *This is a place where people stand in lines for every thing, those who arrive first standing in the front, no one paying any attention to who is oldest or neediest. And: There’s a great deal of speed over here, everyone seems to need to be somewhere sooner than possible.* What does this say about America?
10. Do you think there’s an ideal way a U.S. oil company could work with another country and its citizens? What guidelines would you set for such an arrangement?
11. What role does the American media play in Kosawa’s battle with Big Oil? Do you think it helped or hurt the people’s cause? What more, if anything, could the media have done?
12. The front cover of this novel is striking. What does this image mean to you, and how do you think it relates to the themes of the novel?

RECIPE

FRIED PLANTAINS

Ingredients

- Very ripe plantains (yellow, with black spots on them)
- Cooking oil
- Salt (optional)

Instructions

1. Peel plantains, trim the ends and slice diagonally into 1" slices
2. Add a dash of salt (optional)
3. Heat oil in frying pan or skillet, wait until oil is very hot, but keep burner at medium heat
4. Place first batch of plantain slices one-by-one into frying pan. (If the first slice doesn't create bubbles in the oil, it's not hot enough. Wait a little longer.)
5. When the plantains are browned on one side, flip to brown the other side. (The amount of time it takes for the plantains to be ready depends on the type of cooking oil.)
6. Take plantains out of frying pan and place on a plate/tray lined with a paper towel.
7. Serve while hot.



Photo: Fried plantains by Alice Snell under [Creative Commons 2.0](#)

FURTHER READING

FICTION

Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison

Small Country by Gael Faye

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri

Devil on the Cross by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

NONFICTION

Blowout: Corrupted Democracy, Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth by Rachel Maddow

Why We Can't Wait by Martin Luther King, Jr.

What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City by Mona Hanna-Attisha

Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance by Nick Estes

THULA'S READING LIST

The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon

Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire

RESOURCES

GLOBAL GREENGRANTS FUND: Where Change Takes Root

Tackling climate change, mining, and oil-extraction to defend resources and land

greengrants.org/where-we-work/africa

CLEAN UP THE WORLD

Supporting local environmental action to make a world of difference

cleanuptheworld.org

SAVE THE CHILDREN

Providing lifesaving health care and nutrition to children in impoverished nations

savethechildren.org

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Providing support to refugees and asylum seekers

rescue.org

THE WATER PROJECT

Provides reliable water projects to communities in sub-Saharan Africa

thewaterproject.org