

# War's Earth

Bestselling author of memoirs «Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood» and «Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier» Alexandra Fuller wrote this article for the ICBL for the upcoming [Nairobi Summit on a Mine-free World](#).

**«We had a policeman come to our school to talk to us about mines. Vanessa said he had come because I sucked my thumbs and the policeman was here to chop off my thumbs. I tucked my thumbs into my fists, but the policeman stood on the stage in the Assembly Hall and rocked back and forth on squeaky shoes and stared over the top of our heads and didn't look toward my thumbs once.**

**‘Mines are hidden in cake tins and biscuit tins.’ He showed us. The tins were bright and promising, with pictures of roses painted on their sides, or small children with rosy cheeks in old-fashioned winter clothes running behind snow-covered trees, or butter-soft shortbread with cherry-heart centers. ‘Would any of you open this tin?’**

**A few of us raised our hands eagerly.**

**‘Children like you open the tins and get blown to pieces.’**

**We greedy, stupid few quickly sat on our hands again.”**

**The policeman showed us pictures of holes in the ground where a mine had been.**

**A kid asked, pointing to the picture, ‘Was a kid blown up by that mine?’**

**The policeman hesitated, caught between wanting to scare the hell out of us and wanting to preserve our childhood innocence. He said, ‘Not this particular mine, but you can never be too careful, hey?’»**

From «Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight»

When my memoir of a childhood growing up during Rhodesia's liberation struggle came out, journalists asked me during interviews **how I could remember my childhood so vividly**. They wanted to know if I had kept notes or a diary as a child (as if I, aged six, had any idea that my life would contain enough material one day to fill the pages of a memoir.)

“Neither,” I replied.

“But you write as if you had committed every moment especially to memory.”

And I nodded. “Yes, it's true,” I told them. “I committed every moment especially to memory.” But that is all I will say.

I don't bother to try to explain war to people who have never walked over war's earth. War's earth – which is when the very ground under your feet might, at any moment, erupt and blow you sky high. Because war is so much more than the perils you can see and hear. War is the very real prospect of the hazards you can't see and hear rearing back and shredding you to ribbons.

Yes, so every day of my childhood was seared onto my brain with unnatural brightness. I remember thinking, “If I die right now, I want to remember what the world smells like. If I lose my legs, I want to remember what wet grass feels like on my skin when I run through it.”

The guns of the war I knew have long since stopped their deadly chatter, but the ghosts and demons of war take years, maybe a lifetime, to silence. Conflict replays over and over in nightmares and flashbacks, in the memories

of lost comrades, children, sons, daughters. **Peace is not an automatic gift that comes at the end of war.** The end of war is only the first step toward peace and peace is hard, sometimes dirty, often dangerous, work. Peace requires rolled-up sleeves, compassion and a lot of sweat. Peace makes gardens, plants trees and fits prosthetics. Peace attempts to rebuild civilians and soldiers who have seen lives and limbs swallowed by the machine of war and whose psyches are shattered by the horror they have witnessed. Peace in action looks a lot like an overworked midwife.

And peace cannot be achieved when the people who are working toward peace – some indelibly traumatized by the memories of their war – are still walking on war's earth. Peace requires that fields can be tilled, children can play safely, cattle can graze and roads can be used. **Land mines are weapons that act in a similar way as shell shock.** Long after the peace treaties have been negotiated and signed, land mines can still shock, maim and kill. The international movement to ban these weapons is helping to ensure that the precious gift of an innocent childhood is restored to countries that have known war.

So much has been achieved in restoring war's earth to the earth of peace but we cannot and should not rest on our old achievements, however laudable. **One limb torn from one unsuspecting body by a mine should be a nightmare of our shameful past** but as long as mines lay below the feet of civilians this threat stays urgent. All sides on a conflict must be persuaded away from the use of these weapons; producers of landmines must be dissuaded. The stockpiling of mines must end. Land-mine victims must receive prompt and proper attention. The Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World is the best chance we have to ensure that on-going plans continue and that address these important areas and that a plan is formulated that will take us closer to the goal of a mine-free earth. **The cost of war is high enough as it is – why keep asking future generations to pay for old hatred?**