Palaima: Poetry is one way to make sense of war's horrors

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"You asked if we've got enough cannons.

They laughed and said: More than enough

and we've got new improved antitank missiles

and bunker busters to penetrate

double-slab reinforced concrete

and we've got crates of napalm and crates of explosives,

unlimited quantities, cornucopias,

a feast for the soul,

like some finely seasoned delicacy

... and we've got cluster bombs, too,

though of course that's off the record."

--Dahlia Ravikovitch, "The Fruit of the Land," translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld.

A friend of mine asked me a few weeks back -- when Israeli airstrikes in Gaza were confined to blowing up cross-border tunnels and had not yet shifted to destroying high-rise apartment buildings of middle-class

families, and associated offices and shopping malls -- what book to read about the continuing conflict there.

What book can explain the history of violence and hatred in a way that makes sense of the logic of directing violence at mothers, fathers and children in order to get those then-homeless and traumatized people, and others who care about them, to put pressure on a duly elected terrorist element (Hamas) in their government to stop their acts of violence against Israeli soldiers and civilians?

Who makes such choices? On what balance scales do they weigh what they call the accidental deaths of women and children, the displacement of families and the destruction of schools and hospitals? How can we look at news images of these attacks so unimaginatively, just as we once looked at footage of the bombing of Hanoi or Tokyo, and the smart bombs we dropped ten years ago on buildings in Baghdad trying to kill the sons of Saddam Hussein?

One quote from a 38-year-old engineer who escaped with his four children and aged mother calls into question the strategy of violence. He would speak, I guess, for tens of thousands whose lives will never be the same: “I have become homeless, my children’s fear will never be soothed, and something new has now been added to our feelings toward Israel and all the world, which has been looking on without doing anything.”

His words seem powerless when the violence on both sides is so deadly and taps into deep human feelings that terrible wrongs have to be righted. They reveal how the suffering of normal human beings can go unrecognized, or worse yet, be noticed and justified by desire for vengeance: We cause suffering because they caused suffering.

I answered my friend eventually that we might read what people with poetic sensitivities have to say. Maybe it’s better, I thought, to feel raw truths than to try to make sense of what is senseless. So I wrote to Naomi Shihab Nye and Chana Bloch for their advice. I have now read a selection of what they recommended: “Picnic Grounds: A Novel in

Fragments" by Oz Shelach; "Does the Land Remember Me?" by Aziz Shihab; Dahlia Ravikovitch's collection of poems "Hovering at a Low Altitude;" and more broadly, Nye's collection of stunning poems written by many ordinary people on the question that is its title: "What Have You Lost?"

Charles Griswold in the "Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" sums up Plato's warning about poetry, that poets and their poems "induce a dream-like, uncritical state in which we lose ourselves in the emotions in question (above all, in sorrow, grief, anger, resentment)."

But when the logic of international politics leads to bombings of civilian targets; when reason dictates the targeted killing of leaders of what are called, from our perspective, terrorist organizations; when we feel justified in striking out with violence preemptively, we might be wise to feel the conflicting feelings that sympathetic poets and writers can evoke, the ambiguities that cast doubt on what seem like rational, clear-cut and necessary decisions. Ravikovitch's poems leave us with feelings of sorrow, loss and waste, no matter which side we favor or at whom we point our blaming fingers.

In "But She Had a Son" and "What a Time She Had," Bloch and Kronfeld explain, "a grieving Israeli mother loses her son in a questionable military operation." In "A Mother Walks Around," "a pregnant Palestinian woman loses her fetus as a result of beatings by Israeli soldiers." And Shelach gives us this to ponder: "When the undercover squads began operating, we reported the deaths of 'wanted locals.'" When it became clear that innocent people were being killed by mistake, "we updated the term to 'local inhabitants suspected of being wanted.'"