



Poetry for the times

‘Waymaking by Moonlight’ connects humans and nature

I turn to poetry when I need a break from fevered times. Bitterly disappointed that our longed-for fresh start was gnawed away by the rage of a mob, I reach for my familiar bards — seeking solace from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, compassion from Maya Angelou, and different iterations of the long view from Emily Dickinson and Ruth Stone.

I also picked up a new volume of poetry that had some things to say.

“Waymaking by Moonlight” is published by Empty Bowl. Founded in Port Townsend, Washington, in 1976 by Michael Daley and Bob Blair, the press published the work of a gaggle of poets, many of whom back then worked on tree-planting crews by day, then spent their evenings writing poems about nature.

While Empty Bowl has long since moved with Daley to Anacortes, the press adheres to its fundamental thematic underpinnings, publishing works that focus on the intersection between humans and wild places.

That’s demonstrated yet again in the dedication for “Waymaking by Moonlight,” which reads, in part, “May the next generations find both the wilds and civility in tact. / In any case, may they pitch in to mend and maintain both.”

So with that preface, eerily germane to our situation, I moved on to delve into some six score poems written over the last half-century by Bill Yake.

Living along a creek that feeds into the southernmost reach of the Salish Sea, Yake centered his lifelong labors on the environment. In his early days he worked as a fire lookout and fought forest fires. Later, he became an environmental sci-

entist with the Washington state Department of Ecology. All of those experiences find their way into his poetry.

Fungi pop up repeatedly in his poems, as do stones and duff, forests and prairies.

There’s one whole section devoted to poems about birds, but they resisted being neatly caged there. The avian presence and other flying creatures — hornets, bats, mosquitos — roam through these pages.

Yake plays with form. He writes aphorisms and long free verse. He shares three different versions of a poem about the Skokomish River.

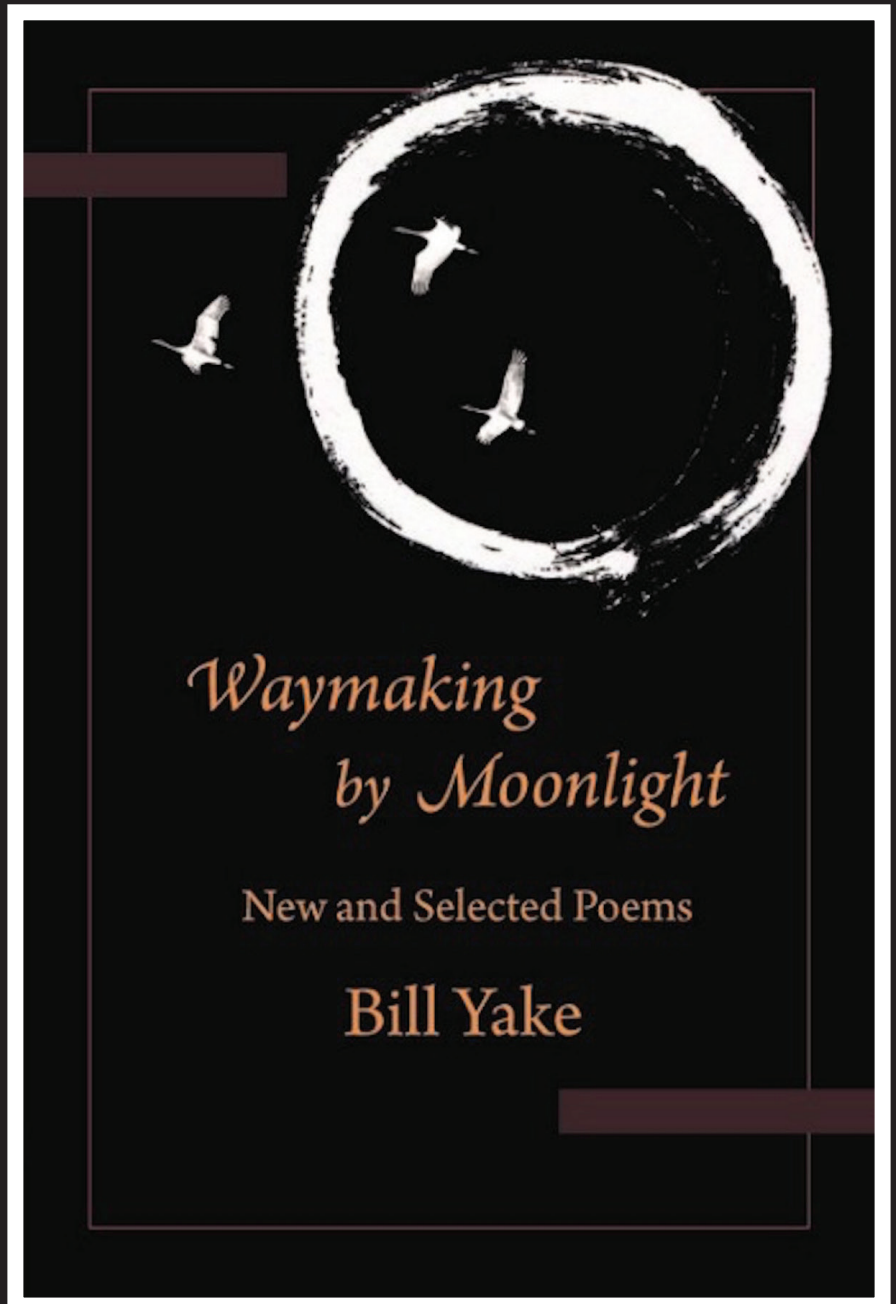
He writes list poems. One bears a title almost as long as the poem itself: “Five Lessons Learned Immediately on Getting Dumped from a Raft into a Wilderness River.” Another is a mouthwatering list of ingredients for a “Forest Breakfast.”

And then there is “Found at a Homeless Camp.” It’s a detailed inventory of the ton of debris that was bagged up during the dismantling of a site near The Evergreen State College in Olympia. The sorry enumeration includes a skateboard without wheels, a waterlogged sleeping bag and a hand-lettered sign that reads “Please Help.”

Near book’s end, there is another devastating piece, “Letter to America — A Version in Which a Mirror Shatters.”

My takeaway? There is no break from these fevered times. We can only pitch in and mend.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com



This Week's Book

‘Waymaking by Moonlight’ by Bill Yake

Empty Bowl — 204 pp — \$20