



The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

Dedicated to the memory and legacy of writer, artist and naturalist Ellen Meloy (1946-2004)

Supporting the Fund

The Ellen Meloy Fund offers an annual award of \$2,000 to an individual to write about the desert from the desert. Visit www.ellenmeloy.com for the latest information.

You can contribute to the fund in two ways—either visit www.ellenmeloy.com and donate through PayPal or use the envelope inserted in this newsletter to send a check. All contributions are tax deductible.



*****AUTO**3-DIGIT 596
Bill and Patti Borneman
100 Jefferson St
Helena MT 59601-6252

1
37

A Message from Mark, *cont from page 1*

part of the Whitman College semester in the west; students camping and learning in the desert.

As people like Kevin budget us into their lives, we will reach our fund-raising goals and provide even larger awards to more writers on an annual basis.

She died a few hours after her last teaching session. Obviously it came as a huge blow to the group. Kevin sent a rather poignant letter with his donation. "Her kind words and encouragement helped me wake up to the joys of language," he wrote. Her method of teaching was simple and direct: read, observe, and write. Discipline born of natural curiosity was the message to her students.

As people like Kevin budget us into their lives, we will reach our fundraising goals and provide even larger awards to more writers on an annual basis. We seek a permanent endowment that sustains our annual award, and will increase as the fund balance gains momentum. The success of the fund is extremely gratifying. Our volunteer fund-raising effort has inspired young people of limited means to reach into their wallets and share. If all of us share a bit more we will reach our goal.

Our success aids the larger nature writing community. It is clear that we have become an integral part of a much larger effort to enliven science and natural history. As word spreads about this annual award, our esteem strengthens as a reflection



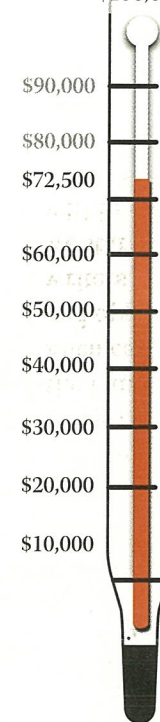
all illustrations are by Ellen Meloy

of the quality and number of applicants seeking support. When a writer's resume includes being a recipient of our Desert Writers Award, it tells the publishing world to take a look and a chance on publication. The cash stipend is important, the recognition invaluable. A writer will be successful in using his or her gift, if they have the confidence to use that gift. We give them a shot of confidence and pay a few bills as well.

Thanks for the help!

What began five years ago as an effort to honor the talents, spirit and memory of a cherished friend and vastly talented writer has grown into a stable, vibrant and enduring organization providing recognition and a small base of financial support for exceptional writers of the desert who carry on in the spirit of Ellen Meloy.

Only
\$27,500
to
Fund Goal
\$100,000



The Ellen Meloy Fund has now provided four awards to emerging writers of the desert and will bestow a fifth award in Spring 2010. To date, the recipients are uniquely talented and enjoy solid reputations in their own right. We deeply appreciate their contributions to this newsletter, in which they articulate the significant roll the EMF award has played in their lives and careers. (See page 3.)

It brings both pleasure and pride to watch the reputation and prestige of the Ellen Meloy Fund take root and grow in literary circles. Stabilizing the Fund so that the work embodied by Ellen can continue to find expression and opportunity among emerging desert writers is the central goal of the effort we started five years ago. It is now well within reach. Ellen's friends, colleagues and family have helped establish a modest but significant endowment—which despite the recent disastrous financial downturn still stands at \$72,500.

We are honoring this fifth year since Ellen's passing by mounting a sustained funding drive with the goal of reaching our \$100,000 endowment mark. At that level, the Fund can maintain its fiscal stability in perpetuity while continuing to provide our stipend to the ever-growing and talented pool of well-deserving writers. In good years, with continued growth, we will be able to increase the amount of our award and potentially provide two awards while keeping the Fund's principal intact.

We are hopeful you, the friends and family of Ellen Meloy, will help us reach



Message from the EMF Executive Director

Mark Meloy

It's nearly inconceivable that Ellen died five years ago. It's hard to consider the rich experience she's missed, the journeys we would have shared and that she would, so eloquently, have delivered to her readers. We all are denied her expanding brilliance and companionship.

In my own personal way, I honor Ellen by continuing to do the things we did together. I lack her writing ability, but not the arms and legs to travel. Realizing it was time to move on, I resigned my government job, sold our wonderful home in Bluff, and headed out to explore new places. I did so, however, knowing that we have built a permanent legacy to this remarkable person. The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers is five years old.

We are three-quarters of the way to our fundraising goal. We have given an annual stipend to four wonderful writers. Our efforts are an unequivocal success.

our goal this year by making a generous contribution. The success of the Ellen Meloy Fund is nothing more than our combined success. The outpouring of generosity among Ellen's friends and family made the idea of the Fund a reality and with the work of some dedicated volunteers, the EMF is now a recognized and established award in literary circles. We lost a friend five years ago, but thanks to your support, the voice Ellen gave the desert continues to teach and inspire us.

We sincerely appreciate your past support. Please send in your tax-deductible contribution as soon as you can.

We are three-quarters of the way to our fundraising goal. We have given an annual stipend to four wonderful writers. Our efforts are an unequivocal success. Donations to the fund have come from several hundred people; family, friends and readers who seek to give literary voice to the desert. Recently we got a check from a Kevin McNellis, a young man whom Ellen mentored as a

(A Message from Mark, cont. page 4)



The
Ellen Meloy Fund
for Desert Writers

Dedicated to the
memory and legacy
of writer, artist and
naturalist Ellen Meloy
(1946-2004)

The Ellen Meloy Fund for
Desert Writers provides
support to writers whose
work reflects the spirit
and passions embodied
in Ellen's writing and her
commitment to a deep
map of place.

Board of Directors

CO-CHAIRS
Tony Jewett
Joan Miles

Patti Borneman
Greer Cheshier
Grant Ditzler
Maile Meloy
Beth Satre
Sandy Shuptrine
Don Snow
Ann Walka
John Wilson

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Mark Meloy

CONTRIBUTING
CONSULTANTS
Janet Hess-Herbert
Kim Konikow

P.O. Box 484
Bluff, Utah 84512
fund@ellenmeloy.com
www.ellenmeloy.com

The 'Chuck' Belt by Don Snow • Whitman College • Walla Walla, WA

My wife wears it now, because I've gotten a touch paunchy around the middle. Doesn't fit me anymore. Probably a 32. I was a petite 32 then.

It's a puzzling thing, that belt. You glance at it and don't really notice it much at first—a standard Western belt, tan background with a darker brocade of roses embossed into the leather, a square silver buckle sporting a pair of brass cowboy boots against a background of a dozen cattle

And I'm still laughing, laughing with Ellen. Read those four books of hers, and you'll be laughing too. She broke new ground, is what I tell students when I introduce them to her works every semester.

brands etched into the silver. Standard size and weight tack-shop apparel. But then the wearer turns around, and you notice that it's a custom job: a name is embossed right where the belt crosses the tailbone. The belt says "Chuck." You don't pay much attention at first, then you do a double-take and your mind finally catches up with what your eyes already noticed. The name is in quotation marks. It literally reads "Chuck." And you wonder, "Who the hell's 'Chuck'?"

Ellen gave me that belt. She had it made for me sometime around 1979 after she and

I and bunch of grad school friends attended a Halloween party in Helena (or was it Missoula?). I didn't have a real costume that year, but I did own a pair of cowboy boots and a western shirt with pearl buttons, so I invented a character—with a little help from Good Will—and went as that guy. His name was "Chuck." With quotation marks. I tried to stay in character all night, making my behavior my costume. "Chuck" was a sexually ambiguous forerunner to those Brokeback Mountain fellows. He took his beer with just a touch of peppermint schnapps (try that all night!). He had elaborately coiffed hair which kept falling out of his Stetson. He knew the words to all of Tammy Wynette. He held a seat in the Montana legislature. Ellen loved it. A few weeks later,

she presented me with the "Chuck" belt and encouraged me to make him a regular partygoer. She saw no need to restrict him to costume events. One time, "Chuck" visited a group of us on the Green River. Ellen was the only one laughing.

And I'm still laughing, laughing with Ellen. Read those four books of hers, and you'll be laughing too. She broke new ground, is what I tell students when I introduce them to her works every semester. Imagine: in the midst of the planetary crisis, a funny nature writer. Imagine: you don't need to be morose in order to be effective. In fact, your moroseness may be counter-productive. You may become a walking parody of the nature-elegist, the robed figure carrying a sign that reads, "The end is STILL near." You could end up like, well, like "Chuck."

I joined the Fund's board to help keep up the laughter, and serving for this organization has become a new joy in my life. I loved her as a friend and colleague, a sister, sometimes even a mentor. I want to do what I can to keep her marvelous spirit in view. She made it easy for us. Just read the books.



A Few Words from the Ellen Meloy Fund Award Winners

BECCA LAWTON (2006) With Ellen's passing I wondered if I could, even in some small way, help carry the mantle of speaking through our pens for beloved wild places. The EMF Desert Writers Award in 2006 supported travel to the Green River basin for the research and writing of a book portraying modern pressures on the landscape and its resources. I've considered myself part of the devoted EMF network ever since: the EMF web works in ways I can only describe as mystical. An example. This summer while preparing for a three-week writing residency at Hedgebrook Retreat Center in Langley, WA, I packed Ellen's *Eating Stone* as a reference. My sense was the love and fire in her words would nurture my own. By day at

LILY MARBURA (2008) Thanks to the Ellen Meloy Fund, writers like me have gone out to the far-flung—to those desert places that stretch out with hot sands and hot stones and where hot winds blow through as the sun rises and as the sun sets. From Kenya's Chalbi Desert, I brought back memories of the Rendille and Garba tribes and their camels. From Lake Turkana, the world's largest desert lake, I brought back memories of El Molo fishing villages, crocodile islands, and big fish swimming in a never-ending jade-green dip of alkaline waters.

AMY MCHARG (2009) The last conversation I had with Ellen took place at Pack Creek, in southeastern Utah's La Sal Mountains, about a month after my daughter was born. She blew into the house like a spring wind out of the Sea of Cortez, and said she wanted to make Ruby smile. In Navajo tradition, she explained, the person who managed to evoke the first such response was then obliged to throw a large party in the baby's honor.

Ellen looked vibrantly beautiful that day, and I said so. She glanced up from my daughter only long enough to reply that she was done writing for a good spell. "I've run out of things to write about," she concluded, "so I better get out there and start living again." She died unexpectedly several days later.

To receive the 2009 Ellen Meloy Desert Writers Award is to brush up against Ellen's grace, to sway against her glit-

the residency I wrote deeply, in the evenings I read Ellen, and at night, inspired by her words and immersed in creativity, I dreamed the scenes and sentences I'd write the next day. This focused work fostered completion of two more books firmly rooted in our cherished West: one, a collection of short fiction, *It Can Only Kill You: Water Tales*; the second, a collection of poetry, *Swimming Grand Canyon*. Both are in submission and meanwhile have won awards or finalist nods.

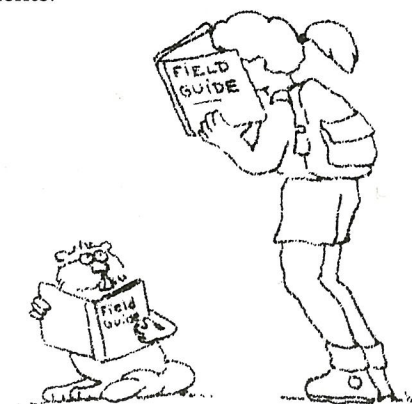
With its very existence and recognition of desert writers, the EMF provides a hub of support that honors and protects the land. I can't think of anything more important in such perilous times for fragile environments.

These are the memories that run through my current novel, *House on a Jade Sea*. I could write of a dry oasis, doum palms, and salt pans on caked brown earth because I had seen them and touched them and smelt them down to my very lungs. I wrote because I had been there, thanks to Ellen Meloy, who cherished the ways of the desert, and the Ellen Meloy Fund and community at large, which honors her memory and the things she loved. Supporting the Ellen Meloy Fund is supporting this dream of traveling and writing deserts and their secrets across our planet

tering body of work. And the funds provided have allowed me to forge ahead with the manuscript of *Terra Firma*—a project that was difficult to launch amid the financial uncertainties of today's publishing world. Indeed, when it is finished, the project will be all the better for having Ellen's mark on it.

But there is this too: The award alchemized Ellen's last words to me, and I have responded by grabbing my pack and running hell-bent into all the wild remaining corners of my life. Ellen's parting words serve daily to remind me that more time at the desk cannot ever—no matter how clever the writing becomes—replace the prowling and howling of our own bodies when they slip into the outback unfettered.

And in this sense, since Ruby comes with me, Ellen did indeed evoke my daughter's first smiles. And I will be forever grateful.



JOE WILKINS (2007) My trip along the Rocky Mountain front was stunning. My wife, Liz, and I, along with Johnny Cash, our dog in black, drove backroads and hiked buttes and slept on river banks through seven states. We spent time in all sorts of small town museums and heritage centers, and we also had the chance to talk with friends and strangers about their place in and views of the Great American Desert. Since then, I've finished a number of essays about the region; two came out this September—one in *Orion* and one in the *Sun*, and another is forthcoming from *Orion*. Also, with the time afforded me by the Ellen Meloy Fund, I've put together a book of essays about memory, story, and the high plains West. It's now out with a few publishers, so we'll see!

I'm truly thankful for the help the Ellen Meloy Fund has provided me, and I more than admire Ellen's relationship with the desert country and her art—hers was a life to aspire to.