

PO Box 484 • Bluff, Utah 84512

### Supporting the Fund

The Ellen Meloy Fund is an all volunteer effort organized to seek out, recognize and support desert writers by providing a \$5000 annual award as well as intellectual support and public recognition.



We exist on the donations of our supporters. You can contribute by sending a donation in the enclosed envelope or through our PayPal link at [www.ellenmeloy.com](http://www.ellenmeloy.com). Contributions are tax deductible.



### Like our page here:

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We post articles and updates from our award winners and other desert-inspired content. We'd love to see you there!

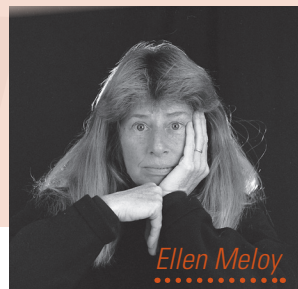


### 2017 Friends Hike, Bluff, Utah

Ellen Meloy Fund Board members and friends enjoying a desert hike during the Bluff Arts Festival. Left to right: Michael Branch, Steve Rubey, Mark Meloy, Ryann Savino, Kendra Atleework, Jan and David Lee, and Jonas Erickson.

### Excerpt from *Last Cheater's Waltz* by Ellen Meloy

They chiseled their thoughts on the rock faces along the river and beyond—bighorn sheep, turkeys, handprints, anthropomorphs with crooks and headdresses, and all manners of dots, spirals, circles, and zigzags—and these petroglyphs remain for me to admire and misinterpret. It is safe to assume that we both stared at the magnificent play of light on the sandstone walls around us, from dawn to dusk and through the seasons an unending source of beauty and exhilaration. Like me, perhaps, they marked the ends of the day by the morning rise of the Canada geese from the river bottom as the birds moved downriver to feed for the day and their noisy, honking return each evening, flying in a low V against the red cliffs, their backs and wings as dark as mahogany and their bellies lit to fire with the molten gold of sunset.



Ellen Meloy

November 2017

# The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

## Michael Branch 2017 Winner of the Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

Michael Branch of Reno, Nevada is this year's winner of the Ellen Meloy Fund's annual Desert Writers Award. A grant from EMF of \$5,000 will support work on his book-in-progress, *Jackalope!: The Complete Natural and Cultural History*.

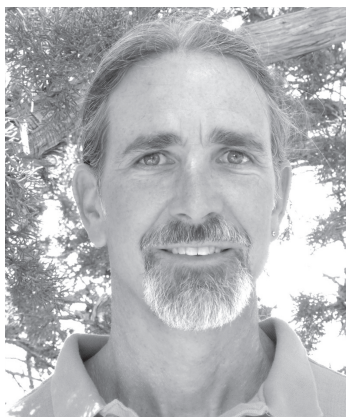
In receiving the award, Branch, a professor in the University of Nevada-Reno's esteemed Literature and Environment Program and co-founder and past president of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, wrote to the Fund: "For many years I have taught Ellen Meloy's work in my university courses. Her writing is a remarkable synthesis of astute observation, breathtaking lyricism, finely-honed humor, emotional intensity, and a genuine love for the landscapes of the American West."

Michael Branch has published five books and more than two hundred articles, essays, and reviews. *Jackalope!* will be his fourth book of literary nonfiction. As he explained, "The book will focus on the horned rabbit that is legendary in the folklore of the American West. I will use humor to embrace this mythic western figure as a place-based icon which is as important to western identity as the sagebrush or the mustang."

In his communications with the Ellen Meloy Fund, Branch continued his gracious commentary on the writing and career of Ellen Meloy, saying: "While I admire all four of her books, *The Anthropology of Turquoise* deserves a place on the short list of the most impressive works of creative nonfiction ever to emerge from and engage the West. Ellen Meloy writes with a grace and power the rest of us can only aspire to."

Branch called "receiving the support of the Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers means more to me than I can easily articulate. The fact that folks who admire Meloy's writing also see value in my work is immensely gratifying."

See page 4 to read a sample of Michael's writing, *The Ghost of Silver Hills*.



Michael Branch



Kendra Atleework

### Don Snow, EMF Board Member & Chair of the Awards Committee

## Welcome Kendra Atleework

We are delighted to announce that Kendra Atleework, winner of the 2016 Ellen Meloy Desert Writers Award, has joined our board of directors.

Kendra, a native of Bishop, California is currently a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Minnesota and won the Meloy Award on the strength of her memoir-in-progress *Sweetwater: Life and Change in the Rain Shadow of the Sierra Nevada*. Her book project focuses on the Owens Valley where she grew up and the site one of the most infamous water transfers of the twentieth century. Kendra's memoir is, in part, a reflection on the legacy left by the water transfer, but it brings the story forward in time to the water legacy now left to current and future generations in the era of climate change.

(continued on page 3)





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.

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P.O. Box 484

Bluff, Utah 84512

fund@ellenmeloy.com

www.ellenmeloy.com

## Joe Wilkins—EMF Award Winner 2008

### Our Lady of Smoke

Montana, Summer 2017

Though we could not see it,  
& so assent, in the night  
the greasy drift  
slid through open windows

& entered us,  
as you were entered,

by the spirit, by the breath

of God, this god  
the fire  
eating grass & sallow trees—

cottonwoods, jackpines,  
& along the river's bellyfull  
of dust the holes,  
yet smoking, that once housed  
the tender roots  
of willows.

There is no sufficient  
eschatology—  
eastern Montana licked to cinders,

500 square miles & fifty homes or more  
gone to hell.

So the prophecies come to pass—

devil storms & refugees,  
threads of smoke unwinding in our lungs  
& dreams. Lady,

I ask mercy,  
I ask rain,  
though these are of course  
the same thing. Lady,

I ask enough gasoline in the can  
& a last supper  
of butter sandwiches

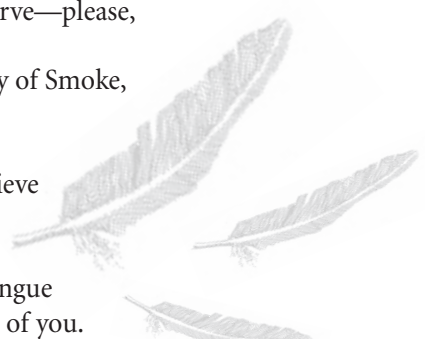
for the wing of gravel  
that is the only road out. Lady,

give us not  
what we have delivered  
ourselves unto, not  
what we deserve—please,

not that. Lady of Smoke,

I speak  
because I believe

in nothing  
but on my tongue  
the gray taste of you.



*Joe Wilkins won the Ellen Meloy Fund Award in 2008. Born and raised in eastern Montana, his recent poem here reflects his thoughts on Montana's devastating 2017 fire season and the continuing desertification of the American west from climate change. More on Joe Wilkins can be found at: <https://joewilkins.org>*



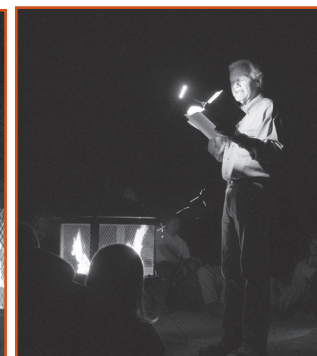
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**ANNUAL AWARD OF \$5,000**  
**APPLICATION OPEN:**  
**NOV 1, 2017–JAN 15, 2018**  
**APPLY AT**  
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**Provides support to creative non-fiction writers whose work reflects the spirit and passion embodied by Ellen's writing and her commitment to a "deep map of place."**

## Bluff Arts Festival

By Ann Walka and Mark Meloy

As part of the Bluff Arts Festival in October 2017, Mark Meloy organizes campfire readings to honor Ellen by the San Juan River. This year many of the the readings were delightfully funny. David Lee, a Utah Poet Laureate and a colorful reader, warmed up the crowd with Ellen's essay from Eating Stone about stopping in to use the phone at a bordello in Nevada. After Ann Walka settled the laughter with her lyric verse deepening the map of the San Juan River, Michael Branch, the winner of the 2017 EMF Award, strode up to the fire to say some lovely things about Ellen. He then read two essays from his new book Rants from the Hill, one the winning piece he submitted for the Award and the other a hilarious story about the Mary Kay Cosmetics sales woman visiting his house in the middle of nowhere Nevada and getting stuck in the Great Basin's spring mud. After a final crazy poem by David Lee, a few minutes of rain sent the audience scurrying back up the lane, still laughing.



*(continued from page 4)*

stacked neatly beneath one corner of the tarp: an impressive cache of surprisingly well-preserved Nixon-era Playboy magazines. In effect, I had made the astounding anthropological discovery of a western Great Basin Mancave, circa 1973. The cover of the September 1970 issue featured a blonde woman wearing a leather headband and wide macramé belt, accoutered with fringed purse, and flashing not her exposed breasts but rather a peace sign, which she displayed before breasts so completely obscured by a tasteful blue sweater that the entire effect resembled less Playboy than Good Housekeeping. Readers of the October 1971 issue were greeted by a cheerful woman with an enormous afro whose body was thoroughly obscured by a white, plastic chair resembling the head of giant bunny. The cover of the 1972 Christmas issue didn't even deploy a photograph, instead offering a stylized drawing of a woman dressed as Santa Claus—though she did look considerably less grouchy than a Santa at the mall often does.

What would this place have been like in, say, the early spring of 1973, when the ghost of Silver Hills sat alone by a crackling juniper log fire, hoisting Millers and fantasizing about whether he would prefer to share his sylvan sanctuary with the righteous hippie chick



*clockwise: Kendra Atleework, Mark Meloy, Michael Branch, David Lee, Michael Branch.*



or the smiling stone fox with the huge afro? There would have been no home within several miles and no paved road within ten, and it was then a twenty-mile walk to the edge of town. Was he on the lam? Or was he, like me, simply a man who had chosen the hills and canyons over some other life? Was his juniper-bowered Mancave an indication of his sanity, or the lack of it? Would it be accurate to call him homeless, or was this his true home? Was he trying to get to someplace else or only hoping, as I so often do, that someplace else wouldn't catch up with him out here?

The ghost of Silver Hills had chosen the perfect spot, the kind of snug shelter where one might well wait out the Nixon administration—or a parole officer or creditor, or the draft board, or the millennium, or whatever else might need waiting out. As I huddled within the ghost's magic circle, sheltered from the blowing snow, I felt a sudden urge to kindle a small blaze of aromatic juniper, crack a sparkling High Life, and do some light reading until the gloaming swallowed these windswept desert hills.

*From Rants from the Hill by Michael P. Branch © 2017 by Michael P. Branch. Reprinted by arrangement with Roost Books, an imprint of Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boulder, CO. [www.roostbooks.com](http://www.roostbooks.com)*



# Season on the River

by Ryann Savino

River season has come to a close and here I sit in Bluff, Utah staring out at the same sandstone wall and ribbon of yellow cottonwoods that Ellen watched. I hear her voice: *The River is its artery, my bloodstream, the capillaried branches of a riparian cottonwood tree, the splintered lightning of summer thunderstorms, the veins on the back of my hands, full and blue as I hold the oars.*”How many times did I stare at my own hands this summer, worked into the oars, veins bulging, and hear that last line?

I work on the Colorado Plateau running rivers for CRATE, a true family-run operation. The start of my season was two months of back-to-back trips down Desolation, the canyon Ellen writes of in *Raven’s Exile*. On one trip, early on, I was invited into the Ranger’s Station at the put-in and while running my fingers across spines, noticed a plaque on the outer frame of the bookshelf. It read, “Sand Wash Ranger Station, Ellen Meloy Library.” The next trip, I celebrated Ellen’s birthday camped at Log Cabin.

One thing I love about Desolation trips is that families are our biggest clientele. This year I particularly felt inspired by the young girls coming down river. They swam and sang and built hot tubs in the mud. They were eager to take the oars in their own hands so I would often climb atop the baggage pile behind them and then let them begin their own relationship between river and boat --the oars an extension of themselves.

After one last low water Desolation trip, I gathered my river bags and straps and made my way to Fredonia. I would run one trip with a fellow guide, who would cheer me on through our high water run. In September I would make a trip again, alone on my 18-foot boat for those 280 river miles.

(continued from page 1)

In what has become a custom of the Meloy Fund, Kendra was invited to present her work at the Bluff, Utah, arts festival soon after receiving the award. “After visiting Bluff,” she said, “winning the award felt like much more than an abstract accomplishment. I saw the places Ellen loved. I met the very same Mark Meloy who accompanied her on her adventures! And I was introduced to a group of people who care about the things I care about. I didn’t expect the award to provide so much intellectual and creative support.”

In recognition of the fact that the original members of the



Rowing a boat bears a similarity to writing. Both require confidence to follow one’s instincts. Both require strength, stamina and a desire to read. Copying another’s work isn’t a good decision.

That last September trip, I pushed off from the scout and moved toward Lava Rapid totally alone. Day ten of a fourteen-day row trip, three days before my twenty-seventh birthday. I wore my leopard-print tank top in honor of Georgie, the first woman to lead commercial trips through the Grand, and my multi-colored baggie shorts for good luck. I curved my boat onto the bubble line, saw the boats in front of me drop, no way of knowing if they found the sweet spot. Should I trust their disappearing heads?

My heart rate quickened but then I sat down, planted my feet and worked my hands into a hold on the oars, wiggled my butt into the cooler cushion. One deep breath, maybe two. Read that water, keep patient, know that you have all the strength you need within you. I enjoy being part of this generation of women on the river.

Fund’s board are now mostly retirees, the board in 2012 set a goal to bring on younger members to carry Ellen’s legacy forward. We have had great success on that front, with Kendra now joining former award winners Kate Harris and Sarah Johnson along with Edie Lush, Jullianne Ballou, Crystine Miller, and Ryann Savino.

In her statement of interest in serving on the board, Kendra said, “For me, trying to act as a steward of the desert extends beyond desert ecosystems to all that is fragile, scarce, or not economically valuable. The fund embodies the essence of conservation: the ability to see beyond immediate gain and convenience, and the desire to protect that which challenges popular definitions of beauty and utility.”

“We are extremely fortunate to have someone as talented and energetic as Kendra join our board,” said co-chairs Joan Miles and Tony Jewett. “It is also very gratifying for us as an organization to now have several past Ellen Meloy Fund award winners as Board teammates and leaders helping maintain Ellen’s legacy.”

EMF 2017 Award winner Michael Branch’s essay about an unknown occupant of the land Branch and his family came to purchase and build on in the Nevada desert, reminded us of Ellen’s writing about the Anasazi who lived on and near her and Mark’s home in Bluff, Utah.

## The Ghost of Silver Hills

You may recall the novelist William Faulkner’s famous Yoknapatawpha County, which, though fictional, was based upon the Mississippi town in which Faulkner lived. Well, I’m ready to give a fictional name to my own real home place: Silver Hills, Nevada. Silver Hills is much like Yoknapatawpha, only with a little less incest and a lot less rain.

I live with my wife and our two daughters in the high desert of the western Great Basin Desert, at 6,000 feet, on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, on a desiccated hilltop so mercilessly exposed to wind, snow, and fire that our house appears to lean away from the trouble, like a juniper canted by the constant blast of the Washoe Zephyr. It is a stark and extreme landscape, one that shows no concern for our flourishing or even our survival. To us, it is the most remarkable home imaginable.

A decade ago, when we first scouted the rural high desert where we ultimately bought land and later built our home, there weren’t many folks out here from whom to get stories of whatever and whomever might have come before. We knew from the obsidian arrowheads we occasionally found on prominent outcroppings that, in the deep past, this was Northern Paiute hunting grounds, and the quartz-rimmed test holes dotting the steepest foothills marked the moment when silver prospectors had come and gone. But the recent human history of Silver Hills—from the era before the main road was paved and power brought in—consisted of little more than rusty, old, church key-style beer cans found beneath the sage. Among the few neighbors who had moved out here ahead of the grid, only scraps of stories remained. There was the day a black bear cub strayed over from the Sierra and terrified somebody’s dogs, and the night a huge wildfire crested a nearby ridge and broke like a scarlet tsunami, flooding the valley with flames. Some folks said that a small plane had once crashed in the hills nearby—and that the pilot had survived and simply walked out of this rugged country—though nobody recalled the details. One old off-the-gridder told me that twenty years ago a neighbor who built on a remote BLM inholding had kept an elephant as a pet, though with this tale, as with all others, there never seemed to be anything behind the stories but more stories.

An unconfirmed legend that touched my family more directly was that of a man who was rumored to have lived on the land—just camping out in the desert someplace, it was said—in an area near the parcel we ultimately bought. But the follow-up questions I asked of the old timers led nowhere. No one knew who the man was or why he had been out here or where exactly he had

camped. One neighbor claimed that the man’s campfire had eventually drawn attention from the sheriff, who traced the smoke plume to the man’s camp and moved him off the land. Another neighbor swore, instead, that the man had simply vanished, like a ghost.

A few years after purchasing our land, we designed and built a passive-solar, wood-heated home, which we occupied about the time of our first daughter’s first birthday. I didn’t think any more about the mysterious camper than I did about the crashed plane or the pet elephant, and I discovered no evidence to corroborate any of these local legends. In those first two years, I tramped several thousand miles in the nearby hills and canyons, until I felt I had found every juniper stump and packrat midden, every erratic boulder and red tail hunting perch within ten miles of home. I knew where the pronghorn moved and where the ravens nested, which arroyos were too snaky in summer and which were wind-protected in winter.

Then, during the early spring of our third year out here, I was walking on our property when I decided to take shelter from a biting wind that was driving a late season snow. I clambered down a rocky slope about a quarter mile from the house and got down on all fours to crawl into a copse of junipers that was too dense to be entered upright. After creeping eight or ten feet through the dirt, I discovered an opening in the center of the stand—a small, clear area that was ringed by an impenetrable halo of tangled trees. Suddenly, I realized what I had stumbled upon. In the center of the small clearing was a perfect circle of blackened rocks that had once been a fire pit, and next to it was a tidy pile of short juniper logs that looked as if they had been stacked that morning. Dangling from the higher boughs were strands of old cordage, which had at one time tethered a canvas tarp that was now half buried in the duff along with what appeared to be a timeworn bedroll. Beneath one of the trees was a small mountain of beer bottles, which I recognized from my youth as having contained Miller High Life—clear bottles from the dark days so long before the microbrew revolution that Miller could be called “the champagne of beers.”

The most surprising item in this remarkable, wild digs was

(continued on page 5)

