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We post articles and updates from our award winners and other desert-inspired content.
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Note from:

EMF Board Member Ryann Savino

Ryann Savino with Ken Sleight

The first river trip I ever did in Southeastern Utah, I didn't even think to pack a map. I was a junior in college, with twelve other friends, and had no real idea of what I was getting myself into. I had a copy of Ellen Meloy's, 'Raven's Exile,' stashed in my duffle bag that in turn was nestled in a black trash bag. A "dry bag" was a foreign concept.

Fast forward four years and I find myself standing atop a grey eighteen-foot rubber raft, feet balanced as many, many, dry bags get tossed to me to be strapped and secured --we've got big rapids today in the Grand Canyon.

How a smalltown girl from Northern California now finds herself nestled in the river community of the Colorado Plateau, is only something I can be grateful for. In spring I work with Canyonlands Field Institute, an environmental ed non-profit, where last April I took fourth graders down Ruby Horsethief Canyons and we followed mountain lion tracks up a sandy wash. Come summer, I find my home with Colorado River and Trail Expeditions, where i've learned to row a boat through Desolation and Gray Canyons. Ellen's words wander from my lips, hands hugging oars, "De solare, to make lonely. Yet never do I find loneliness in Desolation."

Then there is fall and winter. In 'Raven's Exile,' Ellen has a chapter called, "Travels with Seldom Seen;" I read it that first river trip in Utah. Seldom Seen, or Ken Sleight, was Ellen's dear friend and a river and environmental legend in this nook of our country. Those who know him are endeared to him, his smile contagious and his stories mapping the place I have come to call home.

So now, as the wind blows the beginnings of the first winter storm through Moab, I find myself eager to make the drive up to the mountains where I work with Ken most days --archiving his astounding collection of photos, slides, maps, and letters. And some days we write, working on his memoir that is forty years in the making.

The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

November 2016

Kendra Atleework

2016 Winner of the Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

by Don Snow & Edie Lush

Kendra Atleework first encountered Ellen Meloy when she was searching for 'desert writers' on the internet early in her graduate program. After ordering *Anthology of Turquoise* from the Library she carried the book with her as she visited the worst-impacted cities of the California drought in 2014. "It felt like Ellen's voice was with me."

Kendra completed her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of Minnesota in May and since then has been dividing her time between Minnesota and her home of Bishop, California. Bishop, with five inches of rain a year, ranks as the third driest town in the U.S. "There's great productive tension between living in a flat, wet state and travelling to the desert," she said. "Being able to go back there thanks to the Ellen Meloy Fund award is helpful, as is missing it when I'm back in Minnesota."

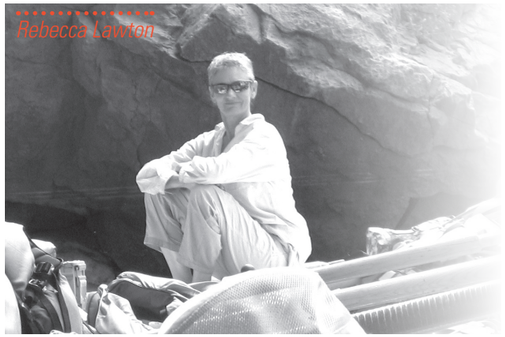
The Owens Valley landscape Atleework writes about was the scene of one of the most infamous water transfers of the twentieth century, when, in 1913, the city of Los Angeles approriated most of the Owens River and began funneling its water 233 miles through a pipeline to feed L.A. The city's action formed the basis for the 1974 film *Chinatown.*

Atleework's memoir is, in part, a reflection on the legacy left by the water transfer, which remains in effect today.

"This used to be an agricultural valley, a desert oasis," she writes, "but after Los Angeles began piping the water away, the fields died; the cottonwoods planted as windbreaks fell and still lie silvery and dry on the valley floor, for there is not enough moisture here to allow even decay."

Kendra Atleework

But as Atleework notes, her book project encompasses a wide range of subjects beyond the legacy of lost water. "My manuscript concerns human and non-human life in Owens Valley," Atleework said, noting that many of her interests touch on the history and pre-history of her home. "I'm visiting sites where historical events occurred, such as the now-dry Owens Lake, which once buoyed steamboats carrying silver ore." Owens Lake, also the site of an 1863 massacre where the U.S. Army killed thirty-five Paiute Indians, had been drained by the city of Los Angeles by 1923. Atleework intends next to perform research on the Paiute people, the valley's original inhabitants, whose story is still part of the life ways and human economies of the valley. She wants her memoir to be a compendium of place across time, with its range of focus stretching from the bristlecone pine forests of Sierra Nevada ridgetops to the scalding floor of the Owens basin.



Rebecca Lawton

Ten Years On

by Rebecca Lawton—Winner of 2006 EMF Award

Traditional wisdom: "If you want to feel rich, just count the things you have that money can't buy." My greatest wealth resides in the owls' calls in the spring, the cougar who stealth-walks through a nearby preserve, the salmon who battle back to their headwaters, the undammed rivers running high and muddy, the sky bursting with stars on a summer night in wilderness.

(continued on page 3)

The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

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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by Ellen Meloy

Be Bold

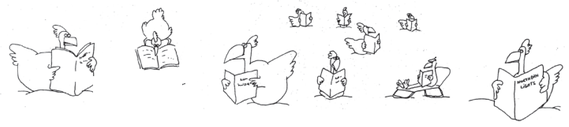
The recent U.S. election brought to mind the aftermath of the 2001 election—the closest presidential election in the history of the United States when just 537 votes, separated George W. Bush and Al Gore in the decisive state, Florida. The United States Supreme Court eventually ended the recounts in a contentious 5–4 decision in Bush v. Gore on December 12, 2000, effectively awarding Florida's votes to Bush and granting him the victory.

Shortly after the election Ellen Meloy penned a piece in the *Northern Lights* magazine for their Winter 2001 issue—written around the theme: Be Bold. We wanted to reprint an excerpt here.

Ellen Meloy

"The resources available to us for benign access to each other, for vaulting the mere blue air that separates us, are few but powerful: language, image, and experience," writes Toni Morrison in her essay, "Strangers." More than others, it is said, artists have the capacity to seal themselves away in a private world, to retreat into a forest of mental forms which most ordinary humans cannot penetrate, there to explore all that it means to be human. Without an unwavering fidelity to humanity—to language, image, experience—the creative process is bankrupt of its fire.

Once we wake up, throw the writers' kibbles into the compost, and stop working in our pajamas all day; when, as a friend of mine advised, we put on our fleece neck gaiters to hide the claw marks we gave ourselves over the last election; when we realize that the profound questions of existence cannot be easily settled, we will be free to go out and do kind, practical things. You are right, Mr. Not Afraid of Insects, it is time to put the brain fevers to good use and elevate my status as a loose coconut. It is time to reset the answering machine to "I can't come to the phone, I'm out committing acts of aggressive beneficence" instead of a resounding NO, shrieky and desperate, followed by pathetic sobs.



I am not the only one who wore Keds and watched King of Hearts ten times. I am no better than all the other selfish blood-suckers who, in middle age, have let the tenor of their impending demise distract from dissent. We are a thousand voices, in Whitman's vision, voices like and unlike our own. Each of us finds in love and life great squalls of the heart, and this grand and tender fellowship of emotion calms us. Most of us would gladly stop conversing in bumper stickers and start talking to one another about remapping the world with our better selves, sending across the blue air a gesture as light and sure as a spider's thread. And there in the transformation of something rigid into something supple, we might begin to see the notion of expansion.

Why are we drawn to the odd things that we love? Like poetry and bowling, moonlit salt pans and romantic grief. Or ants. Billions of them. Abruptly startled, their little ant hands raised mid-aim and suddenly very, very empty.

Ceal Klingler

Winner of the 2016 Special Recognition Grant for Writing on Water

by Edie Lush

The winner of the 2016 Special Recognition Grant for Writing on Water lives in the Owens Valley, where—as she writes"borders and rules flow into each other. National sacrifice zones look back over their shoulders at National Parks; creationists who believe the earth is 6,000 years old attend school with Paiutes whose ancestors have lived in the valley nearly twice that long; the Sierra Nevada mountains herd clouds away from the western Great Basin and Mojave deserts, but snowmelt and rain seep down and through the mountains' eastern slopes to be cupped in the "deserts" below."

Klingler's diverse background includes stints as an intern for the Mars-lunar colony Man-Systems division at Johnson Space Center, a webmaster, a copy editor, and a field biologist. She spends her time now "at the confluence of the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains and the western Great Basin and Mojave deserts" exploring and writing about the natural world around her.

Klingler used the Ellen Meloy Fund Special Recognition Grant to run the length of the Amargosa River—a 185 mile long, mostly underground river that connects desert wetlands like "dewdrops on a spider's web" from Nevada to California. The river and nearby springs provide refuge for most of the surrounding desert's bird and butterfly species and almost all of its pupfishes. In some places the river travels under dry sand or thick mud; in other places she ran through cobblestones the size of small skulls. "In fact, it's not that runnable, but it's an amazing place to visit," Klingler tells me. Along the way, she volunteered in a marsh restoration project to help the endemic Amargosa vole, one of the most endangered mammals in North America.

Much of Klingler's work centers around creatures of desert wetlands who are in considerable and constant danger of falling groundwater levels. She writes, "groundwater transforms from a bone-dry, indigestible word into a green invitation, as irresistible as meadows and cottonwoods growing in an otherwise hot and empty plain. Groundwater here smells like wild roses and peppery Anemopsis; it feels like the soft white clay beneath a broken salt crust; it sounds like a buzzing armada of ruby, emerald, and gold insects that evolved with and depend on a constant, reliable source of moisture in the ground rather than on fickle almost-raindrops fleeing from the direction of the sun."

"Absent groundwater leaves tracks, too, such as spadefoot toads hunkered down in sewage ponds. Air nearby tastes like something between blood and salt; fine dust on the surface acts like spilled flour in a windstorm. Missing groundwater looks like a tasteful buff-colored well-pumping station slipping its proboscis deep underground while sitting on top to hide the wound."

Winning the award, Klingler says, "reminds me that—while I might live almost like a hermit, writing for an audience of one —I can help tell the story of tiny desert creatures who live in constant, precipitous danger of climate change and the effects of human contact."

(above) Ceal face to face with a desert stink beetle (genus Eleodes, *of the darkling beetle/Tenebrionidae family)*

(continued from page 1)

Decades ago I realized that to continue to have these blessings to count, I'd have to work hard for their protection. Others would have to fall for them, too. Writers before me had expressed their adoration of nature using the art and craft of story, and their words helped seal my devotion. I chose that path, too—to join the tradition of women writing words for the wild.

When the Ellen Meloy Fund award letter reached my box ten years ago, I cried out with joy. My daughter, then fifteen, was with me. She was already in love with books and animals and camping and rivers; she'd also seen me work hard at my writing since her birth. When she asked, I explained that I'd just received a big YES vote from a respected group of people in Utah, a place she and I loved. That EMF-supported work went on to win a 2014 WILLA for original softcover fiction. Its greatest value, I feel, is that it tells the story of the Uintah Basin on the verge of the latest, transformational oil boom.

Since then, I've written and published several other books for the wild. Today I'm finishing a novel based on climate and water issues that I researched as a 2014–15 Fulbright Scholar at the University of Alberta. Again the work is in service to storytelling for natural wealth, those ever more endangered riches that the Ellen Meloy Fund supports so well.

The Youth Vote

by Don Snow

I've been blessed with the opportunity to teach at Whitman College for the past sixteen years. In Spring Semester of 2003, I brought Ellen to campus for a public reading and a series of class visits. Students loved her; some them then became her students in the final teaching adventure of her life in November 2004, when, on the night after teaching an outdoors writing workshop with twenty-one participants in Whitman College's renowned field program known as Semester in the West, Ellen died at her home in Bluff.

Her legacy lives on quite vibrantly here at Whitman. I teach her essays every semester in literature and creative writing classes, and every spring since 2010, I have offered an independent study for students who take me up on an interesting challenge: join a small group of peers to construct a "shadow awards committee" for the annual Desert Writers Fund award. The students read all of the applications of that particular year and come together once a week to discuss and debate. Now, mind you, this is all done anonymously: just as the official committee never sees the names of the applicants, neither do the students. We work with the merits and nothing but the merits, so help us Gaia.

By mid-March, my "indes" reach their decision independently of what the official Meloy committee is doing. In point of fact, I never share an iota of details related to how the actual committee is leaning. The students do it all on their own, with me acting only as a facilitator. It's a form of experiential learning, real-world style.

They sense and discuss the passion expressed by various applicants; they take careful note of the literary qualities of the writing under discussion; they think about Ellen's work (I start the inde by having them read some of her essays, though many of the students have already read her in my classes.) They soberly consider what they imagine to be the publication potential of various writers in the pool. They pick favorites, often savoring the humor, or imagination, or good taste of application essays they particularly admire. Mostly, they get a sense of what real writers are doing these days, in a lit world crowded with literary contests of many kinds.

I can't think of a better way to introduce Ellen to a rising generation, or to keep her legacy alive. As I'm often pointing out, writers—even great ones—mysteriously disappear. When I speak the names Loren Eiseley or Sigurd Olson, folks my age will nod in solemn appreciation, but twentysomethings draw blanks. The great maw of pop culture swallows all; and as anyone in academia can tell you, intellectual fads are no less common than apps and shoe styles. I don't want any shifting dunes to cover Ellen. I don't want her work left to future discovery by literary archaeologists. I want it kept as alive and fresh as it was the moment it appeared. If we've ever needed the beauty of her generous and inclusive genius, we surely need it now.

Don Snow

Insider's View:

The Independent Study at Whitman College

by Julianne Ballou

Growing up, my family migrated between the South and the West Coast, from Georgia, where I was born, to California, and then to Austin, TX, where, my father hoped, the best of Southern friendliness and Western ingenuity would meet. During vacations, we'd visit my father's family in Georgia, traveling from Rabun County—setting for the movie *Deliverance* and home of the Appalachian folk magazine *Firefox*—to Atlanta, and then down to Lee County in the southernmost quarter of the state. By the time I entered college, at Whitman, my regional identity was a haphazard, oddball collection of impressions: colorful beach towns and redwoods, boiled peanuts and white oaks, California liberalism and a complex, often bewildering (to me) Southern conservatism.

During my senior year, I enrolled in Don Snow's course on literature of the West and the South, hoping that reading works that "emanate from and reinforce an ethic and spirit of place" would help me better understand the complexities of the regions' histories, laws, traditions, and land and race issues than courses I'd taken on government and race theory. Wallace Stegner, William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy, James Welch, and others on the syllabus remapped more than half of the country for me. During the following semester, my map became richer as I read stories and essays by desert writers for an Independent Study with Don, at the end of which he invited me to serve as something like a guest reader for the 2010 EMF Desert Writers Award.

Reading has always grounded me, but the stories from that year made me especially alert to the ways that we change our communities, locales, and regions, and how they in turn mold us individually. Now back in Central Texas, whose shifting regional identity is creating hope in some and resistance in others, I rely more on those books and my ongoing work with the Fund to help me navigate this place. This is my home, and having claimed it as such, what are my responsibilities toward it?

Excerpt of Interview with 2011 EMF winner Craig Childs

The Skeleton Gets Up And Walks

by Leath Tonino

TONINO: Your last book was titled *Apocalyptic Planet: Field Guide to the Everending Earth.* What do you mean by "everending"?

CHILDS: I mean that the end is always happening. We think of apocalypse as a moment—a flash of light, then you're gone—but if we study the earth's history, we find that it's not one moment. It's actually a long process. In fact, it's hard to see where it begins or ends. Like right now: evidence indicates that we're experiencing the planet's sixth mass extinction—a period when the rate of extinction spikes and the diversity and abundance of life decrease. Each such extinction event takes hundreds of thousands of years to play out, and it's generally 5 to 8 million years before the previous levels of biodiversity return. So are we at the end or the beginning of a cycle? This could just be a temporary spike. The pattern could swerve in a different direction.

The earth—from core to atmosphere to magnetic field—is an organism. It's not a set of cogs and gears. It's a dynamic interplay of forces. Water goes many miles beneath the surface and lubricates the tectonic plates, which move and cause earthquakes and, over millions of years, send up mountain ranges. Everything is connected, like the membranes, muscles, and bones in a living creature. It's not a machine where, when something breaks, kaboom! you're done. We have this concept that we can break the planet. Yes, we are pouring poisons into the environment. Yes, the planet is absorbing our poisons. And yes, they are changing everything, from individual species to global systems. But unlike my car's transmission, which recently blew up and left me stranded on the side of the road, the earth doesn't just break.

When I look at the environment, I see a lot of problems, a lot of red flags. I see dynamics changing in ways that we can't predict. But this is not a dead planet, nor will it be anytime soon. If you want to see a dead planet, take a look at Mars. Maybe there's some hint of life there in a sliver of ice, but it's a far cry from what we've got on earth. This planet is alive and kicking. It can absorb impacts, extinctions, alterations of air and ocean currents. I don't mean to say the earth is just happily soaking up everything we heap upon it. It's a living organism, squirming and wriggling. But unlike an engine, it can repair itself.

Craig Childs

Courtesy of Trinity University Press *and* The Sun

Kendra Atleework at the Bluff Arts Festival

by Ann Walka

In October Kendra Atleework, the 2016 EMF Award Winner, read from S*weetwater; Life and Change in the Rain Shadow of the Sierra Nevada*, by a campfire along the San Juan River in Bluff, Utah. Kendra recalled one of her family's stories from the Owens Valley, site of the infamous Los Angeles water appropriation of 1913. One hundred and forty of Ellen's neighbors and admirers came to Storytelling by the River, an annual event at the Bluff Arts Festival, to hear Kendra and swap tales and songs. The next day Kendra taught a workshop on Writing from Research to an enthusiastic group of fellow writers.

Kendra Atleework

Mark Meloy, the Storytelling host, reports that 'Very much like Ellen, Kendra struck me as a uniquely western voice and as a talented writing teacher. Both women have great love of and long family pedigrees from the Sierras, Kendra's from the town of Bishop and a pioneer family in the Owens Valley. [Besides pursuing an academic career in Minnesota] Kendra and her husband Jonas intend to spend summers in Bishop and write about the Eastern Sierras. The monetary support by EMF helps them do just that. This outcome exactly fulfills our mission.

Since 2011 when writer Craig Childs took part in the Arts Festival sponsored by the little town where Mark and Ellen settled in the 1990's, it has become tradition to bring the EMF Award winners to the place Ellen called The Center of the Known Universe. The Bluff community delights in maintaining this connection with one of its favorite members.