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A Statement from the Defense

Erin McGraw

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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photo by matthew simmons

A Statement from the Defense

Erin McGraw

Because you promised to be with me even to the end of time. Because you told me to be still and know who you are. Because it was said you would lead me through the shadow of the valley of death and take away my fear, but I still have my fear. Because you promised me repose.

Because I have not been made new. Because I still reach for the glass every morning. Because you promised me joy. Because you make promises you don't keep.

Because when I ask where the rent money will come from, you say, "How glorious is the daybreak." When I remind you that my savings have dwindled to pennies, you say, "It is good that there is music." Because you expect me to be a mystic, but did not make me a mystic. I have clung to your promises until my hands ache. When the day comes that I open them, I am pretty sure I'll discover they are empty.

Because destruction might pave the way to salvation, but salvation can be destroyed again. You have lifted me up, as you promised. But salvation has set me swinging on a trapeze, looking for hands to clasp. Because those hands might come, and they might not. Because if I am left to fall, everyone will understand that being left breathless and broken on the tent floor was good for me. Because everything you do or don't do is good for me.

Because you promise to break and remake us when we go wrong, and because you have made us so that we don't want to be broken, and we often go wrong. Because last night I brought home a woman who smelled like olives and whose touch on my wrist made my arm feel electrified. Because I wanted to shout in gratitude that there was such a woman, you made her, and I met her. Because she went home with

me, and because we were shaking so hard when we touched each other that we both dropped our glasses--which held nothing but Sprite, a point you should appreciate.

Because she is married, which I knew right after she looked around the bar, then looked at me and said, "Neither one of us should be here."

I told her the truth: "I come here every night. If I can't sit in a bar, then I can't go to parties, and then I won't be able to go to restaurants. I won't be able to let people come to my apartment. Before long, I'll be curled up all alone, and then the only solution will be to come here."

"So it's all about choice?" she said.

"Mostly," I said.

"Then I am choosing to sit with you," she said. "Move over."

Because you created choice. Because life is an endless succession of choose, choose, choose, and eventually we're going to choose wrong, and then discover you waiting at the threshold of that wrong choice. Even till the end of time. Because your sure patience might be the most threatening promise ever made.

Because I've been alone so long--because I was supposed to be alone, and being alone was good for me. Because I have been purified by solitude. Because you also created a sense of humor, which has come in handy. Because I laughed when we dropped our glasses, and so did she. I laughed again when I pulled her against me, and she did not laugh then.

Because my thoughts run to her like water racing downhill. Because she is married. Because she sang along with the song on my radio, and knew every word. Because she knows how to sing harmony. Because when she was little, she had a dog named Skipper. Because she is married.

Because you are so elusive on some subjects, and so icily clear on others. Because your forgiveness comes with riders, like the contracts that used to come and that I pretended to read, but rarely get past the third "whereas." Because, you will say, you forgive any truly penitent heart, but that penance must nonetheless be enacted. Because I am not penitent. Because I want to call her. Now. And now.

Because her husband's name is Gary, and I have never met a Gary I didn't like. Because she did not want to tell me about the accident, but I kept asking until she told me. Because people can fall from rooftops while doing nothing more exceptional than cleaning gutters. Because home maintenance can create a man who does not remember his wife's name, but remembers how to fumble for her waist when she passes with a pile of laundry. Because at first she leaned into his grasp, thinking that his body might remember her even if his mouth could not produce her name. She leaned into him until she couldn't lean anymore. She did not tell me this. She fell silent, her hard gaze directed at the table and her mouth soft. Because you gave her a soft mouth.

Because comfort is sometimes offered, and is a kindness. Because my heart swelled at her sorrow. Because you gave me a heart that would do that.

Because I have entered a room with only one exit, a room you allowed me to find. Because I can see the future so clearly it might as well be my past. Because people who come together out of famished need gnaw each other to pieces. It will be no time before I resent her for my helplessness before her need, as she will resent me. Because you have made the journey from joy to weariness a trap-door drop, and because the early claims on us are the ones that endure. Because I am rushing toward my own sadness and hers, and I will not even slow my step.

Because you will be with me in my suffering. Because suffering is what you made us for. My heart will break and I will turn to you, because you are the only one to turn to. Because you made the rules. Because in the heartbreak I already feel, you will be saving me. I do not want to be saved. Because my desires do not matter. Because when the time comes, I will be looking for you, the last one I want to see.

Born and raised in Redondo Beach, California, Erin McGraw received her MFA at Indiana University and has lived in the Midwest ever since. Along with her husband, the poet Andrew Hudgins, she teaches at the Ohio State University and divides her time between Ohio and Tennessee.

Her newest novel, *The Seamstress of Hollywood Boulevard*, was published in August 2008, by Houghton-Mifflin. Before that she published *The Good Life* (stories), *The Baby Tree* (a novel), *Lies of the Saints* (stories), and a New York Times Notable Book for 1996), and *Bodies at Sea* (stories). Her short work has appeared in such magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *STORY*, *The Georgia Review*, and many others. A former Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she has received fellowships from the Ohio Arts Council and the corporations of MacDowell and Yaddo.

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