

KERRY JAMES EVANS

Quarantined

—after Pablo Neruda

April is the cruelest month.
Though, no dried tubers, no faux English
manners from a kid who left St. Louis
to practice poetry with fascists.

No, you won't find Eliot here.

I, too, left St. Louis,
but not before I bought and sold
a house, learned its neighborhoods
and hospitals, its segregated
healthcare—Delmar the modern-day
train tracks for a city where blood
still runs in the streets.

Stay!

Stay home and watch bodies
pile up in the morgue.
Stay and read reports of nurses

with bruised faces from spent,
overused facemasks, the ER line
trailing out the door,
while the death toll climbs
and the beds fill up. Stay
and watch the President dismiss
claims from his medical advisors,
then spread false information
to a populous already strained
by late-stage capitalist greed.

No, really, we'll be out of quarantine by Easter!

Stay.

Locked up and alone
behind an empty screen
wearing the same pajamas day after day,
the ones with the coffee stain,
the ripped side, the worn-out elastic.

Stay tuned!

Twitter's a never-ending scroll,
where markets fall into chaos,
where Congress scrambles to bail out the rich
and bribe the poor, while
New York, New Orleans, and Seattle
battle Chicago and San Francisco
for supplies from a President
who'd rather lead people to die
than keep them safe and at home,

who'd use a global pandemic
as an excuse to withhold
medical supplies from states
who've stood up to his red-faced tyranny.

Of course, there are always those who want lilacs,
who want the birds to bring us joy,
while our cities find God
wandering down streets
without a facemask, balloon
tied around her wrist.

She sighs,
and the global elite scramble.
Rigged elections. No mail-in ballots.
Conflict of interest? Fake news.

Please, stay.

My wife just walked into the room
and said, *Did you know there's a limit
to how loud a sound can get?* —which is
the only thing that makes sense
right now. Besides, we all know
there's no sense talking over a train.

Best to just let it pass.
So we sit in our homes. We sit.
We wait. *But it's only the flu,*
says the mother with two immunocompromised
children, who goes to a birthday party,
then returns carrying the virus,

whose brother calls it a hoax,
whose child, on spring break in Florida,
shotguns beers on the beach
flipping the bird to Apollo.

Stay.

Stay with me a little longer;
I haven't felt earth on my bare feet
since I was on a mountain in the Blue Ridge,
June, banjos burning in the sun,
fingerpicking gospel, bleached-out
bag chairs holding folks
from God-knows-where.

There I was, far from here,
and yet here I am,
on the other side of a screen door,
watching my neighbor
circle his already mown lawn
one more time, just to make sure
he gets it right. He tips back
a cold one, his sunburn red
as the hat on his head, and I stand here
staring, trying to remind myself
of that final commandment—to love him.
But how can I with all this blood
running in the streets?

Stay.

KERRY JAMES EVANS is the author of *Bangalore* (Copper Canyon). He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Walter E. Dakin Fellowship from Sewanee Writers' Conference, and his poems have appeared in *Agni*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, and other journals. For the past two years, he has taught at Tuskegee University, and he will join the MFA in Creative Writing faculty at Georgia College & State University this fall.