Spiked Cetus

Richard Donze, DO, MPH

When considering the virus (if otherwise unnamed the definite article modifier in the 2020s can only mean one) and stepping back briefly from managing masks munizations and meds maybe summon that sophomore American lit man-v-nature discussion around Melville's classic but imagine a different outcome after Starbuck (in the movie version you may have also watched in class as we did) says, to the effect, “Sure, he's a big whale, I get that, but we're whaling men, so let's have at him” and then instead of the Pequod going down that pin-cushioned cetacean spiked with spear-avir or harpoonimab at whom Ahab for hate's sake spit his last breath whirlpools below the great shroud of the sea and so many more besides Ishmael escape to tell thee.

Editor’s Note

Illness Metaphors and COVID-19

Rafael Campo, MA, MD

In her classic 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor*, literary critic Susan Sontag warned against the instinct to think of health and illness in adversarial terms: as nuking tumors, battling tuberculosis or AIDS, declaring war on cancer or illicit drugs. Such comparisons, she argued, risk casting the afflicted as blameworthy, enough so that they might even misbelieve they deserve the annihilation of mortal illness should they lose the fight. “Spiked Cetus” (cetus a sea monster or whale from Greek mythology) explodes such concerns, imagining medicine’s response to COVID-19 as the showdown between the whaling ship *Pequod* (captained by Ahab) and the fearsome Moby Dick. The headlong rush of unpunctuated lines and stanzas reprise the thrill of the novel's hunt, perhaps also evoking the frenzy in early-pandemic ERs to manage waves of breathless patients. Inventive reference to “harpoonimab” and the pointedly hyphenated “spear-/avir” conflates antiviral treatment with the instruments of death used in whaling. The poem's title sights the target, recalling electron micrographs of the coronavirus (magnified huge as a leviathan) bristling with spike proteins, and imagines the trophy, the defeated virion lanced with convalescent or monoclonal antibodies. In the end, the poem suggests that human ingenuity, even the brutally fanatical sort, can deliver us from nature's wrath: “...instead of the Pequod going/down...so many more besides/Ishmael escape to tell thee.” The poem seems gleeful as the penultimate stanza's swirl of language re-creates and defies the “whirlpool” of mortality. If Sontag were still with us, might she agree that triumphant metaphorical thinking, even when dark and obsessive, might still be used for good, to inspire us to survive?