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*Viral Dialectics*

*Holly Haggarty  
Lakehead University*

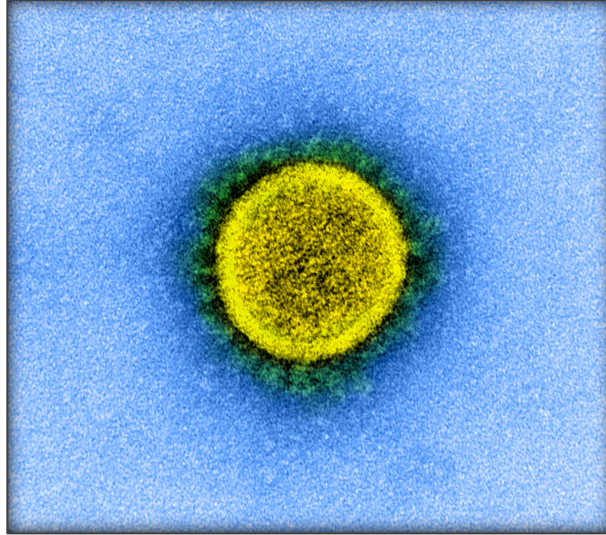


What to make of that virus that emerged in 2019, and so greatly took over our lives for several years? I think of the virus as a weed, an invasive growth that can take over lawns, gardens, greenspaces—a dandelion, for example.

The dandelion, like many weeds, is actually quite beautiful. The many-rayed bright yellow flowers seem to exuberantly revive the spring (which comes so late here in boreal Canada). And viruses, as visualized by the aid of electron microscopy, are also attractive, as may be seen in the following image, captured by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), where the coronavirus looks like a wool-felted sun-flower bathing in a sponge-painted sky.<sup>1</sup>

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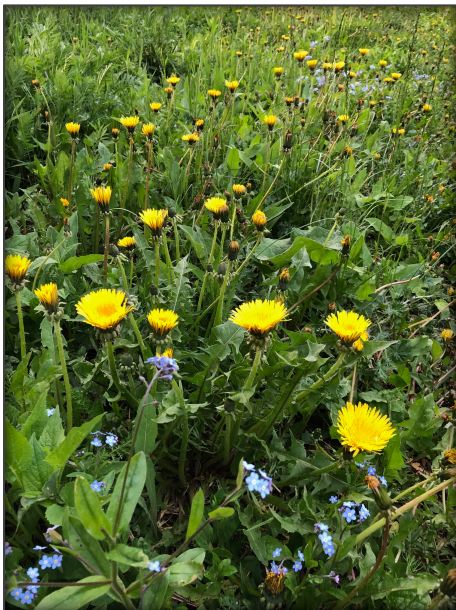
<sup>1</sup> With stunning results, many other viruses have been imaged and catalogued by the [NIAID](#), as well as by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) and the [Protein Data Bank](#). See also the work of Sameshima et al. (2017), linking the beauty of the human papilloma virus to wellbeing.



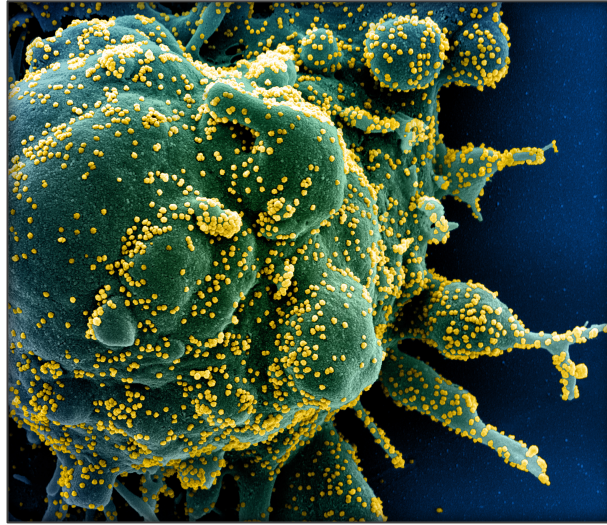
Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. Transmission electron micrograph, colour-enhanced.  
Credit: [NIAID](#), available under CC BY 2.0 licence.

I welcome the yellow flowers of the dandelion. I pick them and put them in vases. I've collected the fresh leaves for tea, and I've added them to omelettes and lasagna. They taste like spinach. I admire the seed heads, their incredibly perfect and fragile geometry. When I was a kid, we would carefully collect the white-headed dandelions, as many as our age, and make wishes before "blowing them out".

My husband and neighbours say, yes, the dandelions start off pretty, and the seed heads are a marvel, but they sure make a mess of the lawn.



COVID-19 brought hardships and heartache to us all. I dreaded going out to buy groceries. I worried about my parents and in-laws. While I was immensely grateful for video-app Christmas and birthday parties, I felt like we were transmuting into digital beings. But once my family became my bubble, I appreciated the simple, quiet life the lockdown engendered. I enjoyed the focus and contemplation. I caught the virus twice, and got sick, although not more sick than after my COVID vaccinations, which sent me to bed every time with fevers and malaise.



Apoptotic Cell Heavily Infected With SARS-COV-2 Virus. Colourized scanning electron micrograph.  
Credit: [NIAID](#), available under CC BY 2.0 licence.

As I lay in bed, trying to work, but feeling too tired to do anything but surf, I found the above image of the virus. This time, the virus looks creepy and menacing, like plastic, robotic aphids encrusting an alien creature—which is actually a human cell, dying under the force of their invasion.

Can I still consider the virus as a weed—a *flower* growing where I don't want it? Yes, even a deadly flower can make me shift perspective. Just because we don't want a weed doesn't mean that we can eliminate it. We can try to eradicate dandelions off the lawn, but only to the harm of other organisms living there. Furthermore, bed surfing, I learnt that even if we could annihilate all viruses, we'd destroy the world in the effort. Because viruses are invisible to our eyes, it's easy to forget that they are part of the ecosystem, the evolution and balance of the world (Nuwer, 2020). Scientists estimate that about 8% of the human genome is comprised of viral elements, mostly inert, but sometimes active and valuable (Nuwer, 2020). Thankfully, we found some ways to deal with COVID-19, and as it abates to the status of an endemic disease, we can muse about what benefit or learning was gained from the pandemic.

In the following poem, I explore the phenomenon of the virus dialectically and poetically. Using the metaphor of a dandelion weed, I juxtapose contrasting perspectives in how we might see it. I find both beauty and horror, both creation and destruction, both life and death—all that is inescapable to being human.

*a weed is (just a flower) growing where you don't want it*

*think*

*of the virus as a weed—*

*as lion-toothed, reptilian aliens  
who've arrived by satellite  
from the vacuum of space to colonize—  
(deceptively)*

*(surreptitiously)*

*(stealthily)*

*beguiling with sweet nectars,  
intoxicating perfumes,  
they invade the very air  
we breathe—*

*(or sneeze or cough or wheeze)*

*then watch—  
the metastasis  
into spheres of perfect horror—*

for example, dandelions—

cheery yellow heads

proffer sunshine gratis,  
brighten lawns—

invite bees to nuzzle  
golden pollen—

listen as fields hum  
with expectations of heavenly honey—

then watch—

the metamorphosis  
into seed heads  
each frill-tipped hair  
spoked to a central cache—

like the fluffy coiffes of white-haired ladies  
who've won  
the old-age jackpot—  
rich beyond dreams,  
eager to give it all away,  
they toss up their dos,  
and all their hopes are born aloft  
by a hundred-fold fleet of  
replicate parachutes—

take it! take it! take it!—

*like the lair of the comic book predator—  
a career of vengeance machination  
culminates as germ warfare,  
which no mask or edict can resist—  
the only prospect for survival  
is locking down  
into an alternative universe  
of disembodied, pixelated bobble-heads  
that blink and chatter  
but never touch—*

*upon which the chimeric weeds  
abandon their rocket launchers,  
involute their pale, wormy limbs,  
satiated, self-satisfied—*

their mission complete,  
they fold their supplicating stems,  
sink their taproots deep  
into the dark of earth,  
and sing—

*thrum  
the dirge of death—*

of life—

## References

- Nuwer, R. (2020, June 17). *Why the world needs viruses to function*. BBC.  
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200617-what-if-all-viruses-disappeared>
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