

From Hong Kong to Toronto: musings from travelling during COVID-19

thevarsity.ca/2020/09/15/from-hong-kong-to-toronto-musings-from-travelling-during-covid-19

By Nathan Ching

September 15, 2020



Airport workers taking a break from their essential duties. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

Our generation's memories of this summer under lockdown may eventually fade, but as I travelled from Hong Kong to Toronto during Hong Kong's third wave of COVID-19, I couldn't help but feel the ever-so-strong forces of history working against our favour.

These are my memories from travelling during a once-in-a-century pandemic.

As I roamed around an empty airport after bidding farewell to my parents, I retraced my summer in my mind.

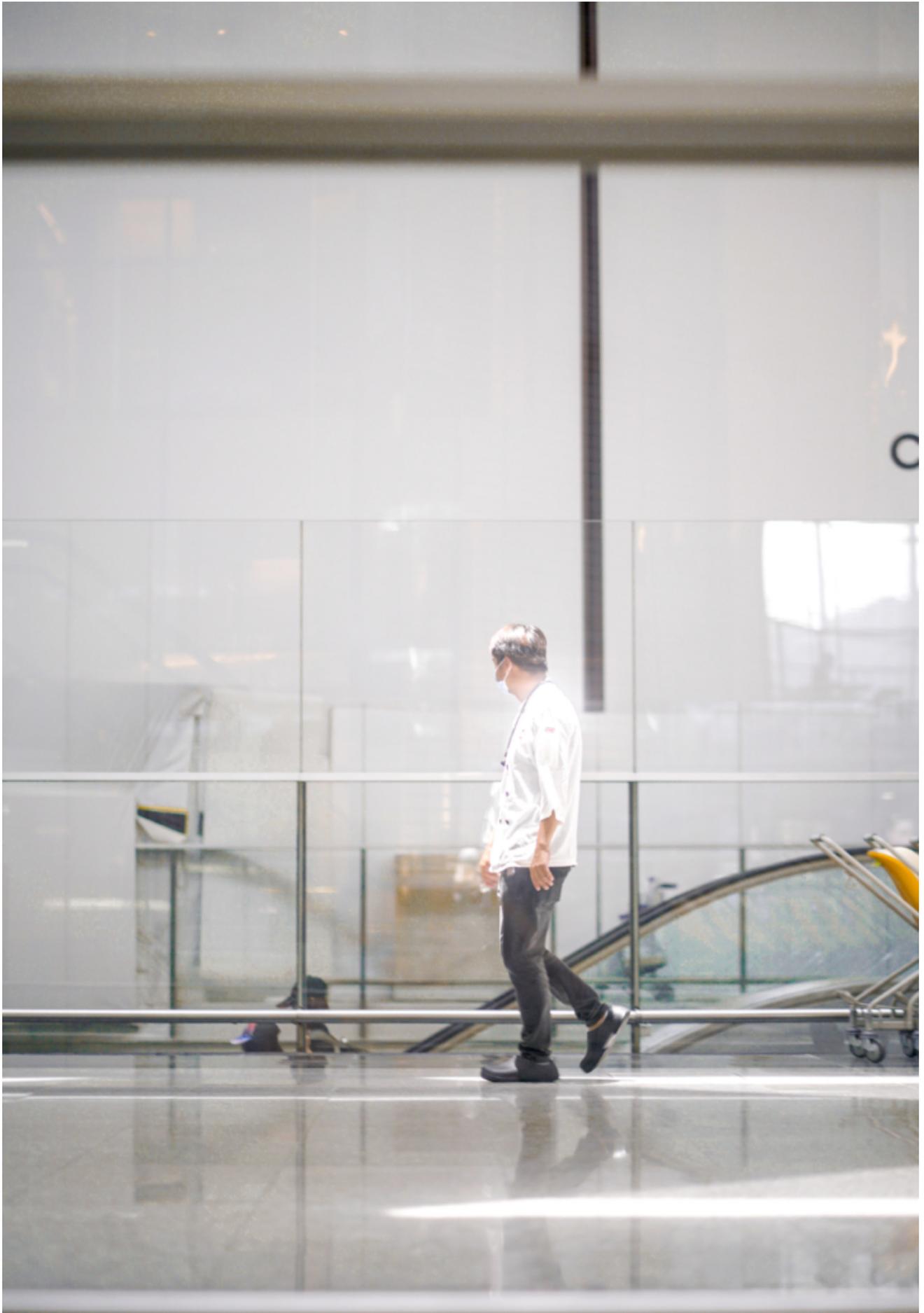




How essential are monorail crowd controllers when there is no crowd at the airport to control? NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

During my time in lockdown, I spent an obscene amount of time on YouTube. I also learned two new words.

The first was 'kenopsia' — a noun describing the forlorn atmosphere of a place that is usually bustling with people but is now abandoned.

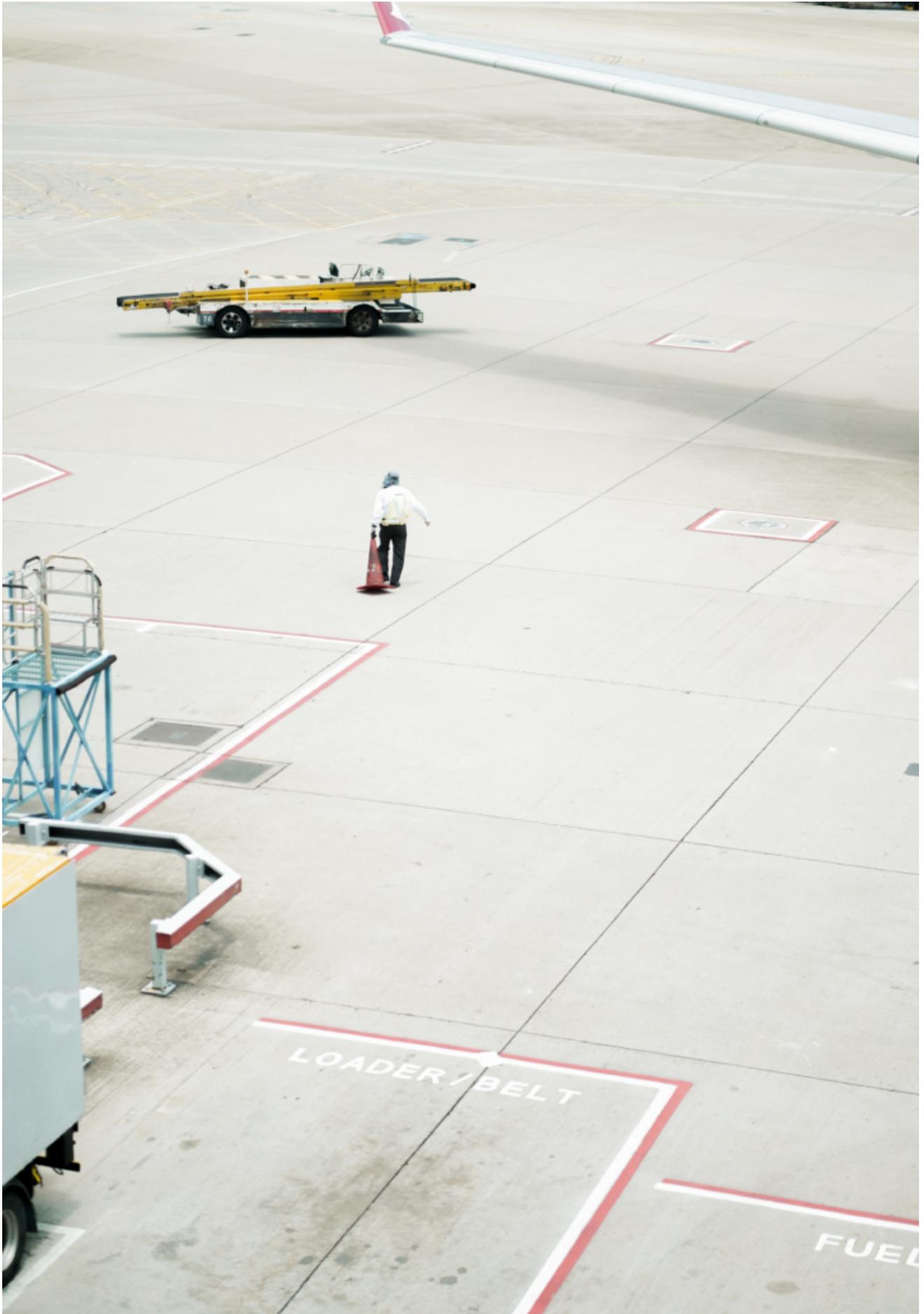




What was it about this summer of kenopsia that scared me? NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

The eeriness of kenopsia isn't from silence itself — it's from the disturbing absence of noise. When a mall is empty and the music keeps playing, something's wrong. Your brain knows that.

When your life is constantly busy and filled with people, the sudden emptiness imposed by COVID-19 creates a void. Although the music has kept playing around me, nothing feels right.

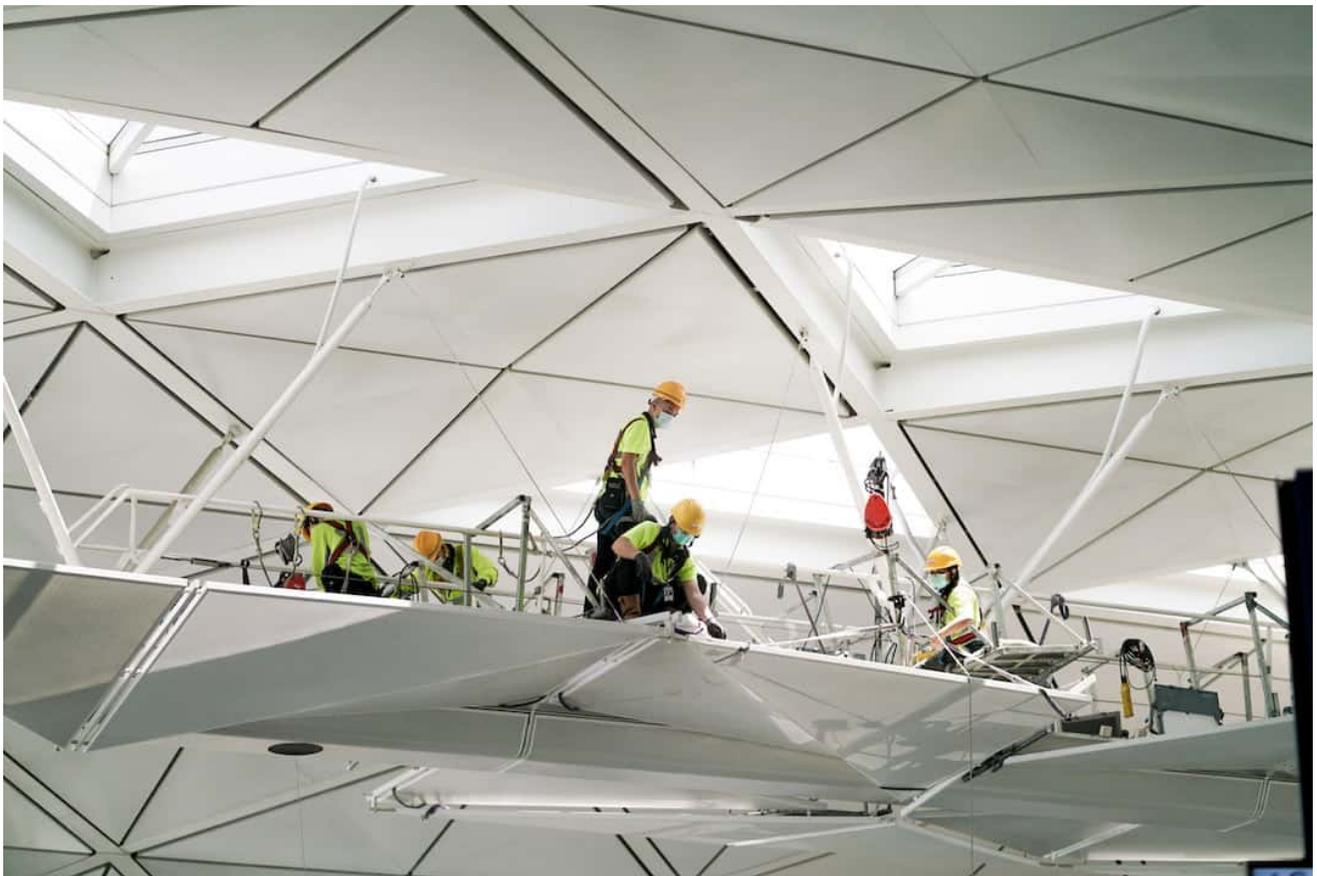




How has your summer been? NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

A lot of friends have told me that this summer felt surreal to them. There were lovely blue skies outside and summer winds blowing in from their balconies, yet they couldn't take a step out of the house to enjoy the weather.

The worst part was that for university students, these four years are meant to be the time of our lives, the years we spend fooling around and searching for our identity. In contradiction to that, my friends felt that this summer was wasted. I remember whispering to myself, trying to convince myself that they were wrong.



Airport workers crowded on a single platform. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

I clutched my camera tighter. All of a sudden, there was this odd sense of quietness. The airport announcements felt distant. I was hit with the realization that I was travelling alone, surrounded by empty chairs and carts, with airplanes parked on the runway in the distance.

Never have I ever felt so alone, I thought, and was reminded of kenopsia.

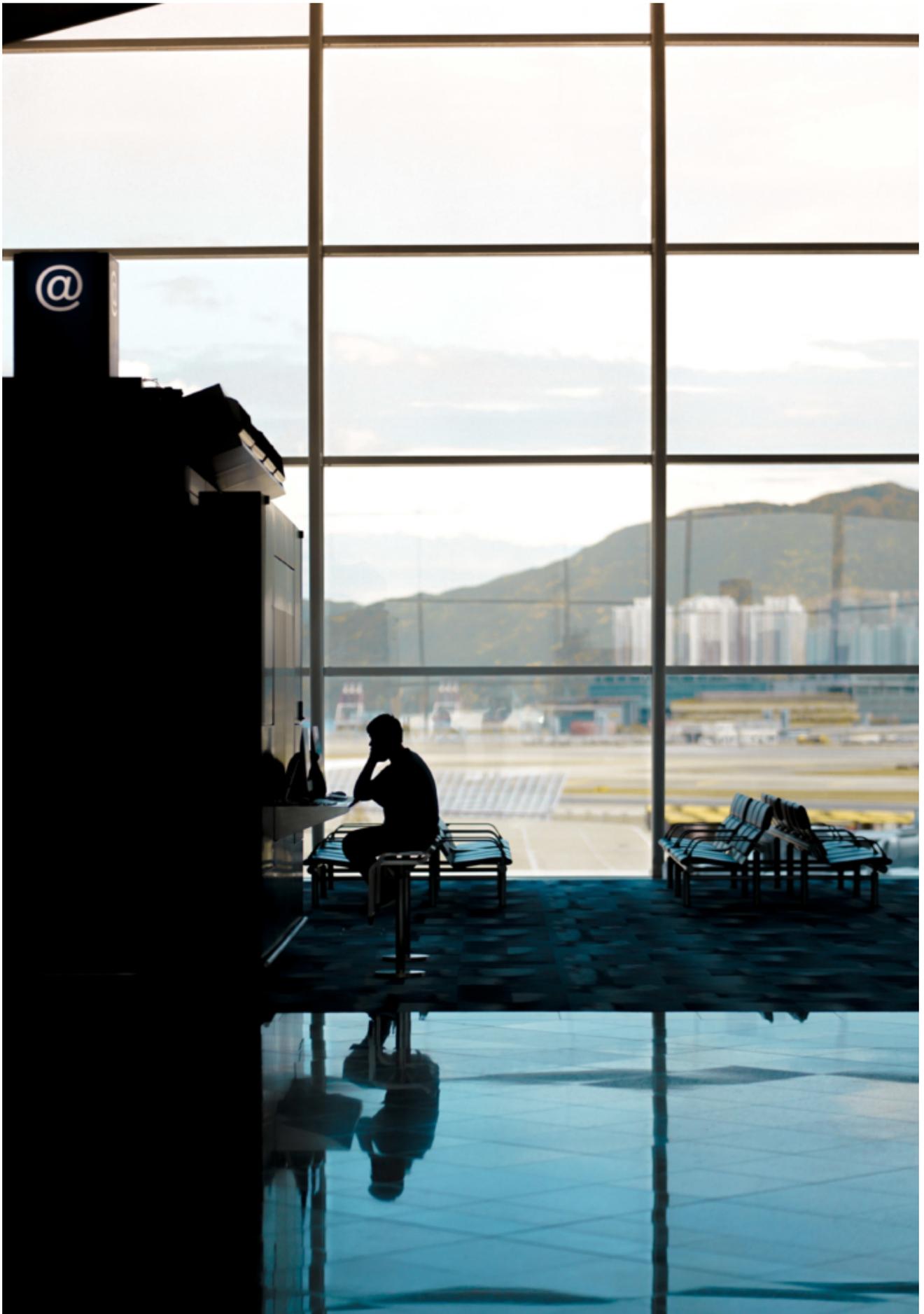
What happens when the traffic is gone, and you're left manning an empty airfield?



A grounded airplane. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

With most non-essential travel halted, airplanes have been grounded for almost four months. It's odd that, while we're certain that someday these airplanes will take off again, right now they're just empty husks of an era on pause.

But the worst has yet to come, because the devil makes work out of idle hands, and what devil could hurt us more than the one inside of us?



What do you do when you're alone? NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

Another reason why quietness is scary is that it leaves us with only ourselves to fall back on.

The more you sit at your desk, thinking to yourself about yourself, the more things you'll unearth about yourself that you might not like.

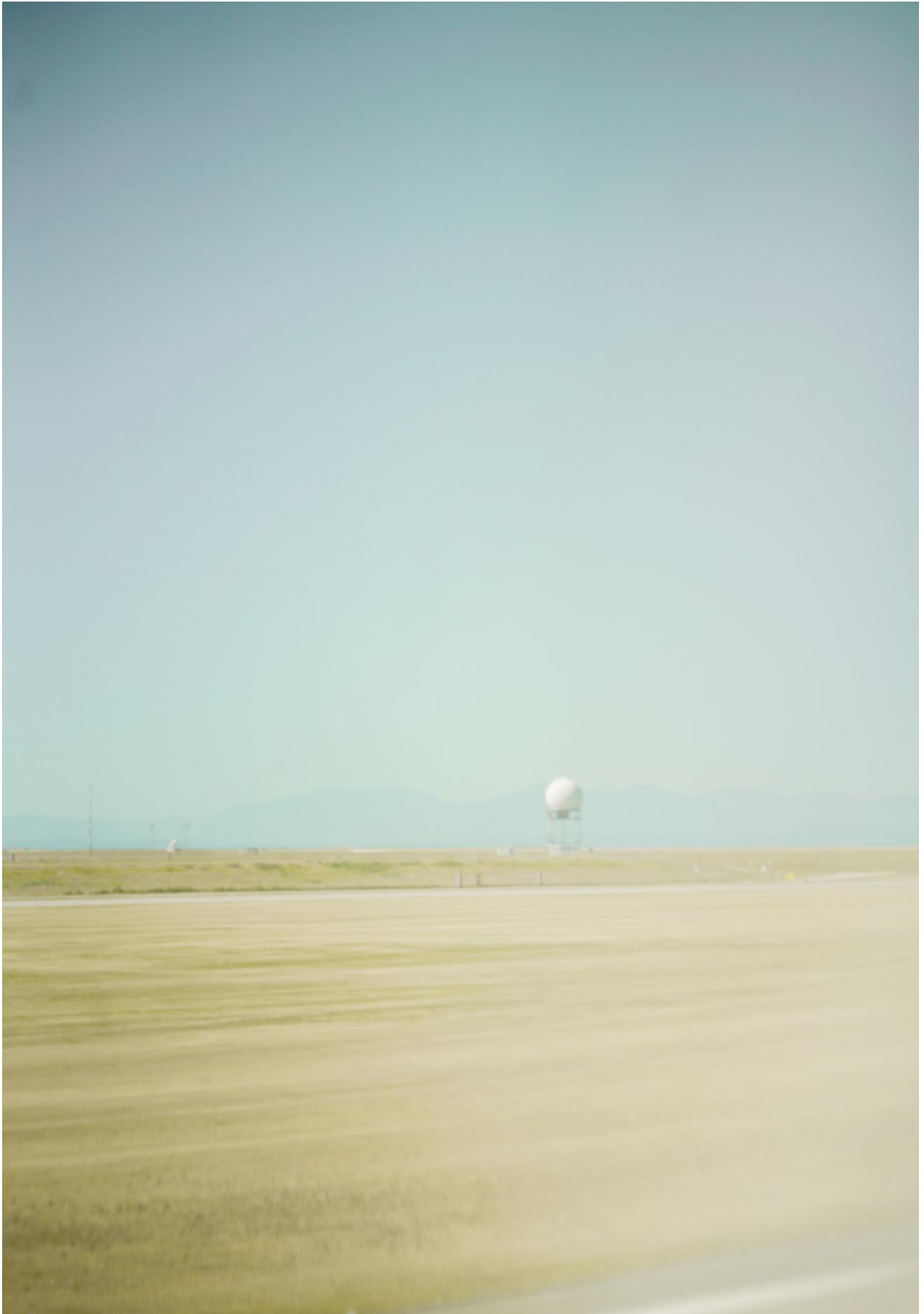
And that to me, is perhaps the scariest feeling of all.



“The beating of our hearts is the only sound” — lyrics from Tiffany’s “I Think We’re Alone Now.” NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY.

The other word I learned from the internet this summer was ‘anemoia.’

Anemoia is essentially nostalgia, which the Collins English Dictionary defines as “a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time.” The only difference between the two is that anemoia is filled with a longing for something we’ve never experienced.





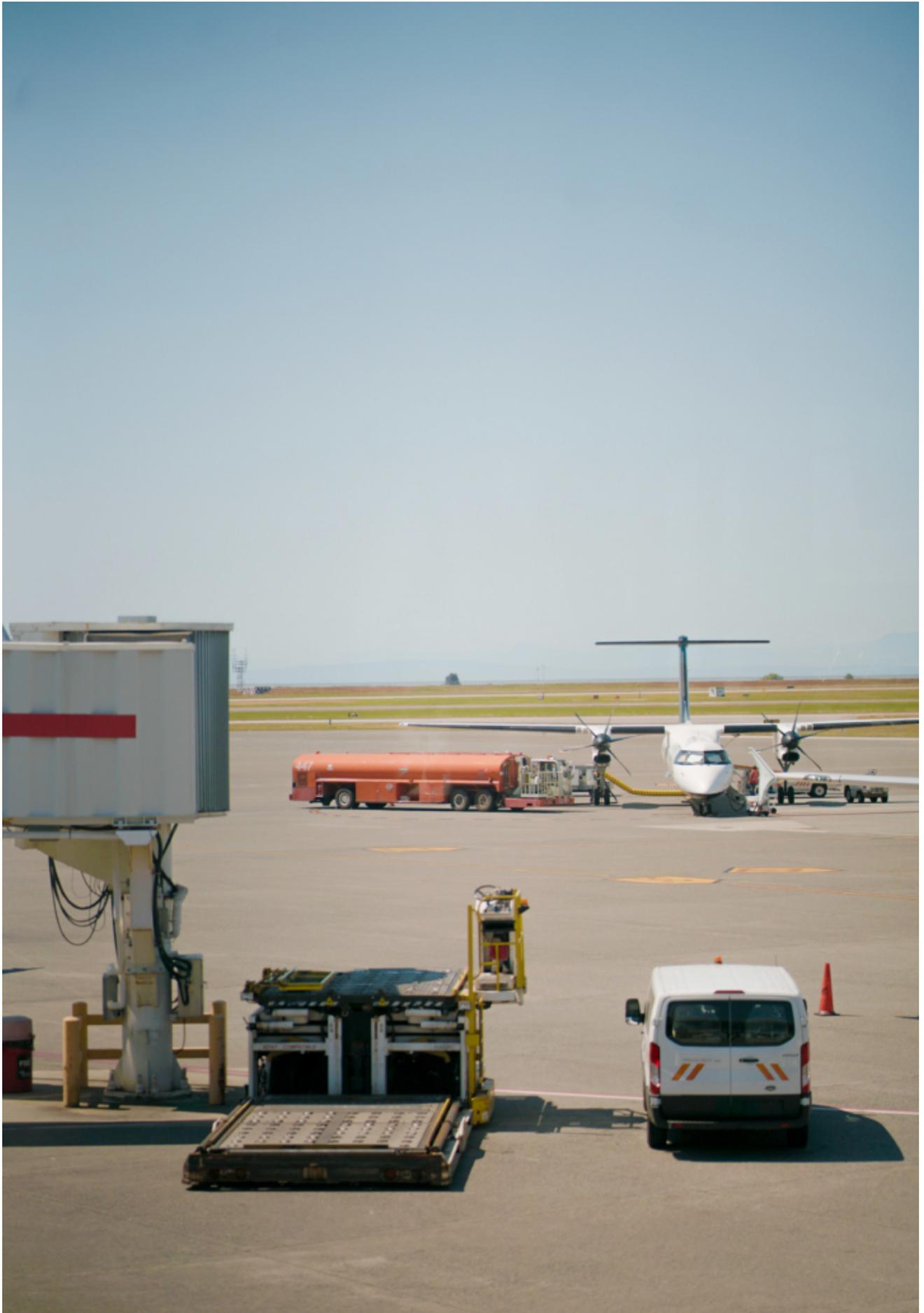
Why do we leave as fast as we come? NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

While humans forget some things easily, we tend to dwell on others, often for really stupid reasons. As rational as it seems to simply move on, in practice it's so much harder.

Nobody's going to miss wearing masks, or staying cooped up inside, or having to plan around uncertainty. And yet, will this be a summer that we'll forget or one we'll remember for years to come? Will 2020 become another line in a history book, or will this year be something we'll look back on, or even one we'll yearn to return to?

I'm guessing at this point you might ask, "Who'd ever want to return to this time?"

As scary as 2020 has been, it has been a very self-reflective summer for me. I was privileged enough to work with some friends on personal projects and, during online meetings, we managed to bond over mutual suffering. As my flight from Hong Kong to Canada took off, I couldn't believe the smile I had on my face reminiscing over this summer. It was almost irrational. I was scared, and I felt alone. Why was I smiling?

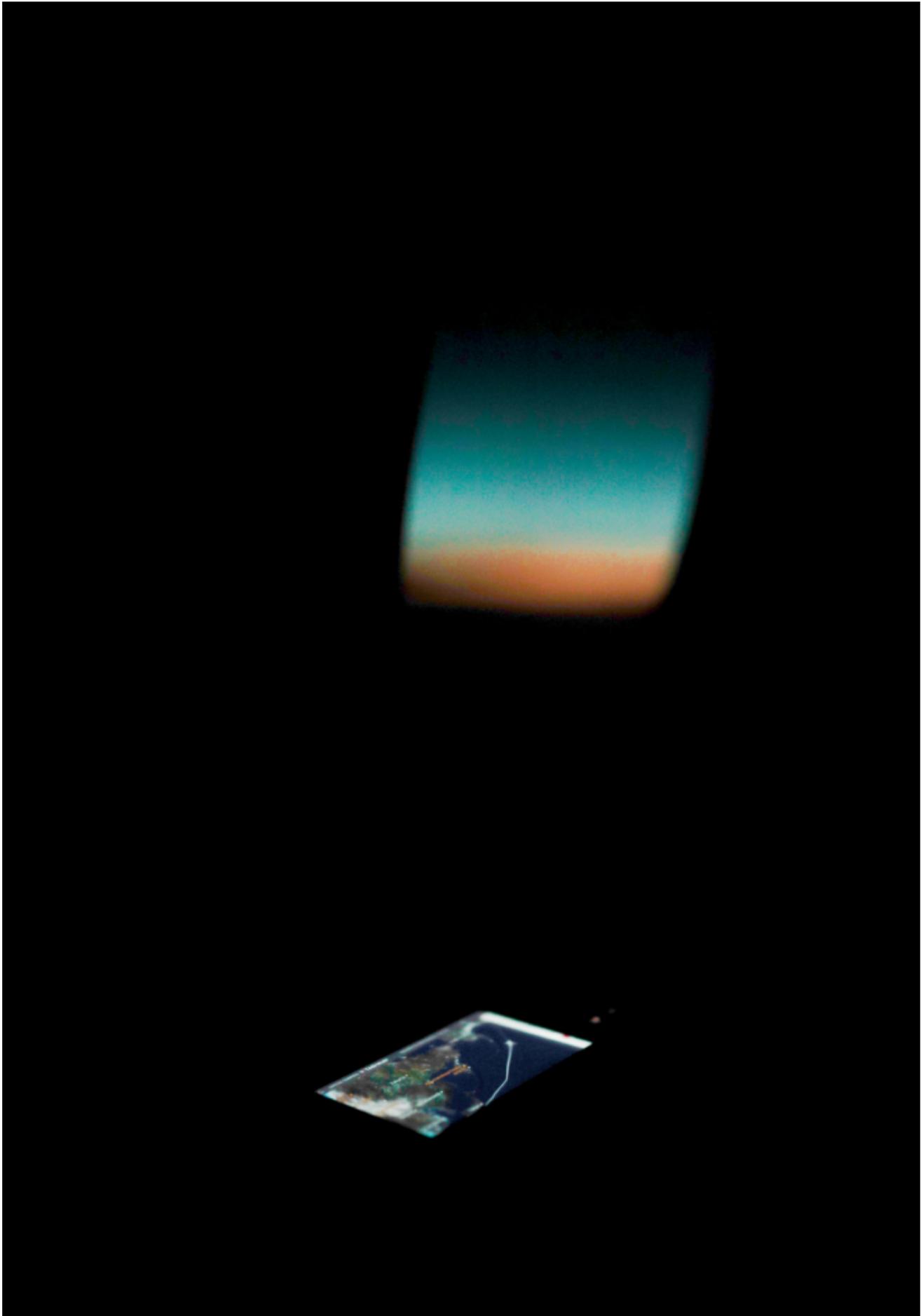




The airfield on a sunny day. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

Slowed and reverbed songs are a subgenre of music born on Youtube. By slowing songs down and adding in excessive space, the reverb creates a sense that you're enjoying a solo performance. Imagine having your favourite band all to yourself, playing your favourite song in a wide auditorium. All of a sudden, a popular song that others listen to belongs exclusively to you.

That's why I smiled, and why you should too.



On a red-eye flight over the Pacific Ocean. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

Anemoia and kenopsia are paradoxical by nature. Anemoia is the yearning to relive a non-existent memory, and kenopsia is the quietness in a usually busy place.

This may have been a summer of regrets, but it's been a unique and special summer nonetheless. In a world where we're not as special as we may consider ourselves to be, we need to learn to grasp onto nothingness and create meaning with it. I craved an eventful summer. Instead, I got to know myself better and learned that I am never alone, even during this pandemic.



The people beneath the Vancouver sky. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

I distinctly remember my descent over Vancouver, from where I would catch a transfer flight to Toronto. It was like a scene from a movie; the soundtrack was *Everyday Life* by Coldplay.

I was scrolling through old photos — pictures of my parents and I on a hike, some of friends from when lockdown was lifted, and an intimate one with a person whom I was no longer seeing. Something in the corner of my eye caught my notice, and I looked out the window.

A single ocean freighter was forging its way through the waves. In the far distance, another ocean freighter was heading the opposite direction. I was mesmerized. Perhaps it was poetic irony or pathetic fallacy, but it was enough for me to pull my camera out and take a photo.

As we traverse this world, we carry a lot of emotional baggage with us; often, that makes us feel more alone than we really are. But that loneliness is what makes us want to seek real companionship — so we should learn to understand it.





Two ocean freighters passing one another in the waters surrounding Vancouver. NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY

Summer 2020 may go down in history for many reasons, including COVID-19, Hong Kong's National Security Law, and the Black Lives Matter movement, but our own unique experiences of the pandemic cannot and should not be forgotten. If you take a step back, maybe you'll realize that this was the summer you needed, or even secretly wanted.

As the world continues to dance to the tune of the pandemic, we need now more than ever to hold onto the comforting exclusivity of our own experiences.





A surgical mask dangles from a wire hanger slipped into the frame of a Toronto window.
NATHAN CHING/THE VARSITY