The Planners

SUMMARY

The speaker describes the way that the people in charge of an unnamed country's development put up carefully designed buildings until every square inch of land is carefully mapped out, every possible arrangement considered. Every building is lined up neatly beside a street, and those streets are designed so that they overlap at precise spots. All these roads and buildings are connected by meticulously planned bridges. The urban planners just keep on building. Meanwhile, the speaker says, the ocean pulls away from the shore and the heavens give up completely.

These people, the speaker goes on, remove all the little flaws that history has left behind, destroying anything that isn't perfect as neatly as a dentist pulls teeth. They fill the holes with sparkling, ritzy new buildings, making the country seem to have an immaculate smile. The speaker compares all this shiny perfection to being medicated into numbness, or losing one's memory, or being spellbound, and adds that the people in charge of designing the country have the resources to make this process of forgetting so painless that the citizens will feel like the past never happened. All this construction cuts through the remains of what once existed on this land.

All this progress might look shiny and perfect, the speaker concludes, but it doesn't have any real soul or art, no red blood that would allow the speaker to write poetry about it. The speaker can't feel any emotion in the planner's perfectly calculated plans for the future.

THEMES

THE COST OF MODERNITY

"The Planners" presents a bleak view of modernization. The "Planners" of the poem's title ceaselessly build up an unnamed country (likely inspired by Boey's native Singapore) with mathematical precision, eliminating all marks of human imperfection in the process. Though these designs are technically "perfect," the speaker finds such rigid conformity disturbing; in the process of making everything sleeker and more efficient, these planners have effectively erased the country's past and, with it, the inhabitants' sense of who they are. The cost of all these gleaming skyscrapers and hanging bridges, the poem implies, is the country's very soul.

On the surface, it would seem that technological improvements are a good thing and that the country is being enriched by all this planning. The speaker says that "all spaces are [...] filled with permutations of possibilities," implying that the people in charge of updating the "buildings" and "roads" have considered every conceivable option and have chosen the one with the most potential. The speaker also says that "buildings are in alignment with the roads," and that the "roads [...] meet at desired points." In other words, everything is designed impeccably; not a single thing is out of place.

But there's something about all this modernization that's making the speaker uneasy; it's all *too* seamless and controlled, ruthlessly stripped of humanity. The speaker says that this new world comes together "in the grace of mathematics." In other words, the country's progress is a result of coldly precise calculations rather than organic growth. And while the "Planners" have "erase[d] the flaws" and "blemishes of the past," without these the country feels artificial, like a sculpted "row" of "perfect[ly]" glimmering "teeth."

Rather than being unique and individual, that is, these changes have an unnatural and unsettling uniformity—one that bears no marks of the human beings who have long lived there. Indeed, it's not just that the country *looks* different; these rapid, coldly mechanical changes are obliterating the country's history. The planners drill "right through / the fossils of the last century," the speaker says, carelessly destroying the past and with it the foundations of residents' identity.

This process should be painful: the planners' "dental dexterity" evokes not only the surgical precision of a dentist removing an unsightly tooth, but also the sterility and discomfort linked with dentist visits. Yet the speaker implies that the planners have "the means"—money, propaganda, and so forth—to hypnotize residents into thinking that is all just inevitable progress. The country is like a smile in which "[a]ll gaps are plugged / with gleaming gold," implying that the promise of luxury and comfort work like an anesthetic, numbing people to their pain. In erasing the past, the planners have also effectively *rewritten* history, creating a collective "amnesia" so that people don't even feel the loss of their old ways of life.

And while the speaker remains skeptical about these "blueprints" for never-ending modernization, they, too, are ultimately unable to fully grieve the loss of their country's "past"—everything is changing far too quickly. The speaker says their "heart would not bleed / poetry. Not a single drop." This implies that the cost of all this rapid, profit-driven "improvement" is the loss of human feeling. Eventually, such "progress" will dull humanity's ability to feel and make meaning out of its existence, causing its very "heart" to wither.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

HUMAN PROGRESS VS. NATURE

In addition to illustrating the human cost of urbanization, "The Planners" also portrays the toll that this process takes on the earth itself. In their endless, unchecked quest for perfection, profit, and efficiency, the poem's "planners" are destroying the natural world.

The poem shows the way human beings are at odds with their environment, trying to control and "perfect" it rather than letting it be. Instead of allowing natural spaces to just exist as they have throughout most of history, humans "grid[]" them and "fill[]" them with "permutations of possibilities." People feel the need to exert control over every inch of land in order to make it into something useful and/or profitable.

What's more, the speaker emphasizes that there's no end to this ceaseless planning: human beings "build and will not stop." In the face of such relentless urbanization, nature itself seems to simply give up: the ocean "draws back" and "the skies surrender." Literally, this likely refers to the way that people push back shorelines for new construction, erect skyscrapers, fly in airplanes, create pollution, etc. But in personifying nature, the poem emphasizes that all this so-called progress is in direct confrontation with the earth.

And as nature seems to disappear in every direction, "[t]he drilling goes right through / the fossils of last century." On the one hand, this refers to the way that modernization erases humanity's past. But this also might subtly allude to humanity's reliance on fossil fuels, which has directly contributed to climate change. In any case, the poem links human progress with destruction on a personal and global scale.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-9
- Lines 21-23

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

They plan. They ...
... permutations of possibilities.

"The Planners" begins with the speaker describing the city planners in charge of developing an unnamed country. The speaker says,

> **They** plan. **They** build. All spaces are gridded,

Anaphora on the word "They" immediately emphasizes the importance of these unseen planners. The speaker doesn't say who "they" are exactly, only that they are out there "gridd[ing]" the country—that is, breaking it up into uniform squares. Whoever they are, they treat the speaker's homeland like a math problem, an equation to be solved through careful calculations.

The caesurae created by the periods after "plan" and "build" give the poem a methodical feeling right off the bat. The stop-and-start pace, combined with technical language such as "gridded," mimics the planners' unemotional, orderly approach to their developments. Already, the reader gets the sense that the speaker might not be too excited about these planners' visions of order and perfection.

Even their many "permutations of possibilities"—that is, all the different versions of new cities they envision—seem a little sinister. These words suggest that the planners are determined to make the most of every inch of land. There's no room for free space or organic growth in their vision of the speaker's country.

LINES 3-6

The buildings are ...
... grace of mathematics.

The speaker goes on to describe the effect of all this careful planning, saying that "buildings" and "roads" are lined up just so and that streets intersect "at desired points." In other words, everything has been thought of in advance; the planners have designed everything so that it is ideally functional and convenient. Nothing has been left out or forgotten.

All the different parts of the country are "linked by bridges" that "hang / in the grace of mathematics." In other words, everything is perfectly balanced because the planners worked it all out ahead of time. Nothing was left up to chance or human error.

Enjambment across lines 3-6 emphasizes the "grace" the speaker is describing:

> [...] in alignment with the **roads**
> **which** meet at desired **points**
> **linked** by bridges all **hang**
> **in** the grace of mathematics.

Yet notice the odd syntax in line 5:

> linked by bridges all hang

Grammatically, there is something off here. If the poet had written "linked by bridges **that** all hang," then the reader could be certain that it is the "bridges" that are doing the "hang[ing]." Instead, "all hang" might refer to the "bridges," or to everything the speaker has described: the "bridges" and "roads" and "buildings," and the people who use them. Maybe there's something a little sinister about the idea that "all hang"

together in calculated precision: hanging, after all, can mean an execution! This exquisite mathematical perfection might be *deadening*.

LINES 7-9

They build and ...
... the skies surrender.

The speaker doesn't just have a problem with the mathematical soullessness of the planners' designs, but with the fact that the planners "will not stop" building. In the face of such endless growth, the speaker says,

> Even the sea draws back
> and the skies surrender.

Note the soft, sibilant /s/ sounds, which highlight the quiet of nature as compared to the noisy demolition and construction of the human world. All the planners' so-called progress is causing nature to retreat: the sea and sky "surrender" as if they were soldiers in a war being waged between humans and the earth.

By personifying nature in a poem where the human world feels so robotic and "mathematic[al]," the poem perhaps suggests that people's humanity is tied up with their environment, and that to destroy the natural world is to destroy what is natural in human beings as well. In any case, the poem suggests that endless expansion is at odds with nature.

The "surrender" of nature also highlights the speaker's helplessness. If "[e]ven the sea" can't escape the planners, how can the speaker hope to change anything? All the speaker can do is stand by and watch.

LINES 10-14

They erase the ...
... with gleaming gold.

In the second stanza, the speaker goes on to say that in the process of building new things, the planners also get rid of all the "blemishes of the past"—that is, the errors of history and the wear and tear of time. While this might seem like a good thing, the speaker is alarmed by the "dental dexterity" with which the planners go around "knock[ing] off / useless blocks." The sharp combination of assonance and consonance here evokes sweeping force, as if the planners destroy old structures with no thought of what they might mean to the people who use them.

In other words, there is something rather clinical about the "dental dexterity" with which these unnamed people are reshaping the speaker's "country." They are as fast, efficient, and emotionless as a dentist pulling teeth.

The speaker expands this dental metaphor, saying,

> All gaps are plugged
> with gleaming gold.

In other words, the fallen buildings are replaced with rich, shiny new ones, like rotten teeth being replaced with gold fillings. But notice the /g/ alliteration and consonance. These hard, guttural /g/ sounds evoke the feeling of being gagged or choked—or, indeed, having one's mouth "plugged"! In other words, gold isn't just proof that the city is being beautified by all this construction. It also suggests that the people with the most money and resources are the ones who get to decide the country's fate, and everyone else just has to shut up and accept it.

Gold thus symbolizes the country's wealth and prosperity, but also the greed and corruption of the people shaping the landscape. The country might appear improved on the surface, but there's something ugly going on behind the scenes.

LINES 15-17

The country wears ...
... Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis.

The poem continues its extended metaphor of dentistry: the speaker says that the redeveloped country seems to have "perfect rows / of shining teeth." On the one hand, this image suggests symmetry, functionality, and beauty. On the other hand, all those gleaming teeth sound pretty sinister: teeth bite!

The personification of the country adds to this unease. The country doesn't just *have* straight, clean "teeth"—it "*wears*" them. This implies that this "perfect[ion]" is somehow false, a disguise.

The speaker hints at the dangers of such a disguise in the following line:

> Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis.

Asyndeton here singles each of these words out, inviting readers to think about how each is related to the others:

- "Anaesthesia" is the numbing of pain for a surgical procedure—and therefore fits in with the dentistry metaphor. The planners are numbing the citizens to the pain of loss.
- What comes next is more alarming: "amnesia." That is, with all the pain of "the past" erased by shiny new development, the citizens lose their memory of their history.
- And without their memory of the past, they become "hypno[tized]"—spellbound, suggestible, and easy to control. They lose the ability to think or act for themselves.

In other words, these improvements to the country are meant to distract its citizens from who they are and where they've

been.

LINES 18-23

They have the ...
... of last century.

The second half of the second stanza is made up mostly of end-stopped lines, giving the poem a flat, matter-of-fact tone:

> They have the **means.**
> They have it all so it will not **hurt,**
> so history is new **again.**
> The piling will not **stop.**

These declarative lines make the speaker sound numb with shock over what the planners are doing. This fits right in with what the poem says about the people in power "hav[ing] it all so it will not hurt." Robbed of their pain, the people of this country can only stand helplessly by, watching their home undergo rapid changes they didn't necessarily choose.

The speaker's anaphora on the words "They have" in the lines above also echoes the endless uniform development the speaker describes. These repetitions suggest that the planners' "piling" and "drilling" will continue until there's nothing of the country's history left.

The planners even "drill[]" into "the fossils of last century," suggesting that they are cutting deeper and deeper into the earth. Perhaps this image calls to mind the way that urbanized countries rely on toxic fossil fuels, yet another way that endless greed and expansion have hurt the earth.

Of course, this cutting through the ancient remains of "centur[ies]" past is also further proof that the planners want to rid the citizens of their memory of "history." If the citizens of this country believe everything is "new again," they will be much easier to control.

LINES 24-27

But my heart ...
... our past's tomorrow.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker refers to their own feelings directly for the first time, describing their inability to "bleed / poetry" in a shiny, ahistorical country. In other words, amid all these rapid changes, the speaker can't connect with the deep emotion that allows them to write—or to fully grieve what is happening to their country.

Poetry often makes meaning or music out of difficult experiences or helps writers to resist authority and oppression. If the speaker can't even "bleed / poetry," then perhaps that suggests that they feel utterly helpless and hopeless, like nothing they do will have any effect on the changes happening around them. Their grief stifles their creativity, and they can't stop the planners from reshaping the country.

The speaker says that they can't even manage "a single drop / to stain the blueprint" that these nameless planners have made for their country's future. The metaphor of a "blueprint," a technical plan for a building, again suggests the forethought that has gone into the planners' work. Their developments aren't evolving organically from mistakes made in "the past"; these planners aren't learning and growing in natural, human, organically "flaw[ed]" ways. Instead, they're using development to assert rigid, emotionless control. The speaker perhaps feels there is no place for a human "heart" in all this scheming. Under the reign of the planners, it's as if the country has lost its very soul.

SYMBOLS

GOLD

Gold is very often used as a symbol for wealth and prosperity, and in this poem it's no different. The speaker uses a metaphor to compare a "country" to a "row[]" of "teeth," saying that "[a]ll gaps are plugged / with gleaming gold." In other words, the country's old buildings are being torn out and rebuilt like rotten teeth replaced with gold fillings—that is, with something more beautiful, something which makes the country appear more glamorous.

At the same time, the idea that the country is being "plugged" with gold suggests that "gold" is being used to shut the populace up. This speaks to the way that people in power are able to do what they want without necessarily having ordinary people on board. With enough money, the image of gold suggests, powerful people can change the face of a country on a whim.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "All gaps are plugged / with gleaming gold."

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora to evoke the sheer relentlessness of the planners of the poem's title. The speaker begins the poem with anaphora that calls attention to these people's presence: "**They** plan. **They** build," the speaker says, the repetition of the word "They" emphasizing the power that these planners have. The speaker then uses parallel phrasing in lines 7 and 10:

> **They** build and will not stop.
> [...]
> **They** erase the flaws,

While spaced far enough apart that these lines might not sound like true anaphora, the return to the repetitive "They [verb]" formula reflects the idea that the planners "will not stop." "They" keep appearing in the poem, taking over its structure, in a way that mirrors their hold on the city itself.

Then, in lines 18-19, the poem uses anaphora to once again highlight the importance and relentlessness of these nameless planners:

> They have the means.
> They have it all so it will not hurt,

And in lines 21-22, the anaphora of the word "The," plus a return to the phrase "will not stop," creates a sense of building momentum:

> The piling will not stop.
> The drilling goes right through

The country will only continue on its path of endless self-improvement.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "They," "They"
- **Line 7:** "They"
- **Line 10:** "They"
- **Line 18:** "They have"
- **Line 19:** "They have"
- **Line 21:** "The"
- **Line 22:** "The"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds emphasis to certain words and phrases in this poem, and it also helps to bring the poem's images to life. In the second line, for instance, the speaker says that every "space[]" in the country seems to be "filled with permutations of possibilities." The alliteration here not only draws attention to this phrase but also *enacts* it: that second /p/ word is like a "permutation" or a "possibility" itself, showing the various directions the "planners" (another alliterative word!) can take.

Alliteration works similarly in lines 8-9, subtly mirroring what's being described. As the city expands,

> Even the sea draws back
> and the skies surrender.

The hushed, sibilant sounds evoke the quietness of nature in comparison to all this "build[ing]" and "drilling." Then, in line 12, the speaker says that the "planners" demolish the country's history "with dental dexterity." In other words, they are utterly precise—they know exactly what they are doing. The strong /d/ alliteration feels appropriately active and forceful here.

Later, the speaker says that any "gaps" in the country's metaphorical "teeth" are "plugged / with gleaming gold." The combination of firm, guttural /g/ alliteration and consonance might evoke the feeling of being gagged (especially when read aloud!).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "permutations," "possibilities"
- **Line 8:** "sea"
- **Line 9:** "skies," "surrender"
- **Line 12:** "dental," "dexterity"
- **Line 13:** "gaps"
- **Line 14:** "gleaming," "gold"
- **Line 17:** "Anaesthesia," "amnesia"
- **Line 19:** "hurt"
- **Line 20:** "history"

ASYNDETON

There's quite a bit of asyndeton in this poem, which lends certain lines a quick, smooth momentum that evokes the speed and ease with which the planners work. For example, in the first two lines, there is no coordinating conjunction between the clauses "All spaces are gridded" and "filled with permutations of possibilities." This quick jump from one phrase to the next reflects the way the planners do things; having mapped everything out, they can build and expand at alarming speeds.

Asyndeton works similarly in lines 10-12:

> They erase the flaws,
> the blemishes of the past, knock off
> useless blocks with dental dexterity.

The lack of coordinating conjunctions between these clauses again hurries the poem along, evoking the very "dexterity," or skill, involved in all this demolition and construction. The planners aren't taking the time to stop and consider the human cost, or the cost to the natural world; they are mechanical in their work, moving quickly and efficiently.

The asyndeton in line 17, meanwhile, mirrors the effect that all this ruthless efficiency has on the populace: "Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis." The words quickly bombard readers, who might get the sense that people are simply overwhelmed, too distracted by all this seeming progress to really stop and think about the broader consequences of the planners' actions.

Asyndeton also reinforces the relationship between these three words. Each word here suggests something different: "anaesthesia" numbs pain, "amnesia" refers to memory loss, and "hypnosis" is a trance state in which people lose the ability to act of their own free will and are highly suggestible. The lack of coordinating conjunction suggests that these are all part of the

same plan: first the planners numb people to the pain of change; that numbness makes people forget what they're losing; and, having no strong tie to the past, people become more receptive to whatever "history" the planners decide to tell.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "All spaces are gridded, / filled with permutations of possibilities."
- **Lines 10-12:** "They erase the flaws, / the blemishes of the past, knock off / useless blocks with dental dexterity."
- **Line 17:** "Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis."
- **Lines 19-20:** "They have it all so it will not hurt, / so history is new again."

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies both nature and human civilization. In doing so, it dramatizes the conflict between these worlds, transforming them into two entities locked in a battle for dominance.

"The country wears perfect rows / of shining teeth," the speaker says, a metaphor for the way that the speaker's homeland has had all its flaws replaced by sterile, surface-level perfection. Teeth don't just smile: they bite, and there's thus something aggressive and sinister about a country proudly displaying its gleaming chompers. Indeed, the country bears its "perfect rows / of shining teeth" and

> Even the sea draws back
> and the skies surrender.

The country here is like an animal snarling at the sea and skies, reflecting the idea that so-called progress often comes at the cost of the earth itself.

By personifying the natural world, the speaker also implies that the planet isn't just a mindless resource made for human consumption. Instead, it's independent and vividly alive. The ocean "draws back" because human civilization is encroaching on its boundaries, and "the skies surrender" because they're being attacked. It's like human beings are waging outright war on the natural world.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Even the sea draws back / and the skies surrender."
- **Lines 15-16:** "The country wears perfect rows / of shining teeth."

METAPHOR

The poem uses metaphors to illustrate the cold, calculated quality of modern progress and the costs to both the human and natural world.

Most obviously, the speaker creates an extended metaphor comparing the urban development of their homeland to a "dental" procedure. Like a dentist, the poem suggests, the planners are performing a kind of cosmetic surgery on the country. They get rid of "the flaws" and "blemishes of the past," and they do it with "dexterity"—that is, skillfully, with speed and efficiency.

This might sound like a good thing; the speaker's home is like a newly "perfect" smile. Yet people don't typically look forward to going to the dentist. The metaphor thus imbues all this supposed progress with a sense of sinister discomfort. There's also something unnerving about these "rows / of shining teeth" that have been "plugged / with gleaming gold." The "gleaming gold" suggests a kind of attention-grabbing surface beauty meant to distract from what is really going on. The "flaws" were an important reminder of the past. Now there is no evidence of the country's "history." And without that evidence, the planners can make a "new" history however they see fit.

In response to this almost surgical extraction of their people's "past," the speaker observes that their "heart would not bleed / poetry." This metaphor seems to imply that even the ability to fully grieve these changes has been taken from the speaker.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "the skies surrender."
- **Lines 10-16:** "They erase the flaws, / the blemishes of the past, knock off / useless blocks with dental dexterity. / All gaps are plugged / with gleaming gold. / The country wears perfect rows / of shining teeth."
- **Lines 24-27:** "But my heart would not bleed / poetry. Not a single drop / to stain the blueprint / of our past's tomorrow."

ENJAMBMENT

Frequent enjambment, like asyndeton, lends the poem a sense of fluid momentum that evokes the speed and ease with which the planners change the speaker's homeland. Take lines 3-6, for example, which unfurl quickly and smoothly down the page as the speaker describes the mathematical perfection of the planners' design:

> The buildings are in alignment with the roads
> which meet at desired points
> linked by bridges all hang
> in the grace of mathematics.

Elsewhere, enjambment seems to enact what's being described, as in lines 13-14:

All gaps are plugged
with gleaming gold.

Thanks to enjambment, there's no "gap," no pause, between these lines themselves. And in lines 22-23, enjambment pushes readers "through" the line break just as the planners drill "through" those fossils:

The drilling goes right through
the fossils of last century.

Now, notice the contrast between these enjambed lines and line 7, which is firmly end-stopped:

They build and will not stop.

The short, declarative sentence feels all the more forceful coming on the heels of such fluid enjambment, both assured and defeated at once. The speaker isn't impressed by all this supposedly marvelous growth, but neither do they see any way to counteract it. The many end-stopped lines of the second stanza similarly evoke a sense of resignation and inevitability. Take lines 17-21:

Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis.
They have the means.
They have it all so it will not hurt,
so history is new again.
The piling will not stop.

All these end-stopped lines result in a kind of tonal flatness; the speaker seems unable to muster much emotion or energy in response to the powerful "means" of the people changing the "country." The flatness of the end-stopped lines contrasts with the energy of the enjambed lines and evokes the speaker's feelings of helplessness.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "roads / which"
- **Lines 4-5:** "points / linked"
- **Lines 5-6:** "hang / in"
- **Lines 8-9:** "back / and"
- **Lines 11-12:** "off / useless"
- **Lines 13-14:** "plugged / with"
- **Lines 15-16:** "rows / of"
- **Lines 22-23:** "through / the"
- **Lines 24-25:** "bleed / poetry"
- **Lines 25-26:** "drop / to"
- **Lines 26-27:** "blueprint / of"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura in a few spots to break up the smooth rhythm of lines. For instance, take a look at the first line:

They plan. They build. All spaces are gridded,

These pauses slow the line down, making it feel structured and methodical in a way that might evoke the planners' orderly, mathematical approach to changing the speaker's homeland. The line also feels rather flat, however, rather than exciting, loose, and fluid. Right off the bat, the speaker doesn't seem particularly enthused about all this planning and building.

Another arresting caesura pops up in line 25, between the words "poetry" and "Not." Consider how different the last stanza would feel if the speaker had instead written something like this: "But my heart would not bleed / a single drop of poetry." By breaking this phrase up, the speaker emphasizes the fact that they absolutely cannot create "poetry" in this sterile environment.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "plan. They," "build. All"
- **Line 11:** "past, knock"
- **Line 17:** "Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis."
- **Line 25:** "poetry. Not"

VOCABULARY

Gridded (Line 1) - Divided in a pattern of equal, parallel, criss-crossed roads.

Permutations (Line 2) - All of the ways in which something can be arranged.

Alignment (Line 3) - Being arranged neatly next to each other.

Desired points (Lines 3-4) - Just the right spots; the places where it makes the most sense for the "buildings" and "roads" to join.

Blemishes (Line 11) - Imperfections, flaws.

Dental dexterity (Lines 11-12) - The skill or agility of a dentist.

Plugged (Line 13) - Filled.

Gleaming (Line 14) - Shining or glimmering.

Anaesthesia (Line 17) - The process of medically numbing pain before dentistry or surgery.

Hypnosis (Line 17) - Being transfixed or spellbound.

Amnesia (Line 17) - Memory loss.

The means (Line 18) - The money or resources; the capacity or ability.

Piling (Line 21) - Stacking or accumulation.

Blueprint (Lines 26-27) - A technical plan or drawing for a building project.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Planners" is a free verse poem built from three stanzas of varying lengths. Its 27 lines are often short and clipped, evoking the stifling, rigid new landscape the speaker is describing. The poem's halting rhythms and frequent enjambments might also reflect the poem's themes, mimicking the ways in which perfectionistic new development can cut people off from emotion and humanity.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it does not use a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Even though this is the norm for much contemporary poetry, it's a little bit surprising that a poem describing a place that has been perfected by "the grace of mathematics" doesn't use some sort of strict rhythm. Perhaps the lack of meter here expresses the speaker's longing for the human "blemishes" of a city with history: by choosing irregular free verse, the speaker might be resisting the planners' perfectionism.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem does not use a rhyme scheme. The lack of rhyme here might reflect the poem's rejection of the rigidly "gridded" layout of the newly redeveloped country, highlighting the speaker's resistance to artificial planning and order.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an enemy of the unnamed "[p]lanners" who are changing the speaker's "country" into something unrecognizable. The speaker is clearly much more interested in the "flaws" and "blemishes of the past" than they are in new, "gleaming" skyscrapers. They think that their country's "history" matters, and that "eras[ing]" said history is bad for both people and the planet.

It's safe to say that the poem's speaker overlaps with Boey in significant ways. Boey left his native Singapore in 1997, disgusted with the country's politics and its rapid, profit-driven urbanization. In such a landscape, the poem hints, "poetry" might well feel out of the question.

SETTING

"The Planners" is set in a country undergoing rapid urbanization (most likely based on Boey's native Singapore). The speaker notes that, in this country, "[a]ll spaces are gridded," and "the roads" and "bridges all hang" in perfect "grace." This grace, however, isn't elegant or inspiring. Instead, it is rigidly "mathematic[al]": technically flawless, but soulless, too. There is something clinical and even sinister about the way the country's new buildings resemble "perfect rows / of shining teeth."

The poem's lack of specificity about where it is set suggests that all this "building," "piling," and "drilling" is resulting in a dangerously bland place. Modernity is robbing this country of its unique character, making it just like any other shiny modern city.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Boey Kim Cheng was born in Singapore in 1965, the year that the country became an independent republic. (Note that "Boey" is the poet's family name, not his given name; as a Chinese surname, it is written first.) At the age of 32, frustrated with the ways in which his country was changing, Boey emigrated to Australia. Displacement became a major theme in Boey's work: he first felt there was no place for him as a poet in Singapore, then felt like an outsider in his adopted country.

This sense of alienation has informed not only Boey's own writing, but also the ways in which he has gone on to support other writers. He has edited two collections of poetry from the Asian diaspora, and he co-founded *Mascara Literary Review*, the first Australian journal for Asian-Australian writers.

Boey wrote his first poems as a young man, during a mandatory period of service in the Singapore Armed Forces. He was initially inspired by writers like John Keats, T.S. Eliot, and Rainier Marie Rilke. After he moved to Australia, he found himself seeking out Asian poets, such as Singaporean poet Arthur Yap and Malaysian-Australian poet Ee Tiang Hong. He also returned to the great Chinese poets of the Tang dynasty, whose work he had been taught as a young child—particularly Du Fu, who he would go on to write about in *Gull Between Heaven and Earth*, a fictionalized biography.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since the 1950s, Singapore's population has grown swiftly, expanding from one million people in 1950 to nearly six million in 2021. During this period, Singapore has invested heavily in its infrastructure: things like the "buildings," "roads," and "bridges" the speaker mentions in the poem, but also public transport, water and electricity, public housing, schools, and hospitals. While the speaker of this poem is skeptical of all this rapid (and rigid) planning, many see Singapore's development into an urbanized country as a success story.

That being said, what the speaker is really grieving is the way that all these improvements might disconnect Singaporeans from their history, their understanding of who they are as a people. An example of this tension between past and present can be found in a recent debate over the reconstruction of

Bukit Brown cemetery into new housing. Such plans are a testament to the ways in which functionality (and profit) might be at odds with honoring "the past," and might eat away at the sense of cultural identity that comes with remembering "the flaws" and "blemishes" of "history."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sydney Review Interview — Read an interview in which Boey discusses his literary influences and describes how being a transnational poet has shaped his work. (https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/interview/interview-boey-kim-cheng/)
- Cerise Press Interview — Read an interview in which Boey discusses his inspirations and processes. (http://www.cerisepress.com/01/03/a-sense-of-questing-kim-cheng-boey-on-poetry/view-all)
- A Brief Biography — Read a biography of Boey from Poetry.sg, a resource for poets and poetry from Singapore. (http://www.poetry.sg/boey-kim-cheng-bio)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to "The Planners" read aloud by Rachel Lim. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf0K_oC-8kU)

HOW TO CITE

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