**Poems by Dennis Brutus**

Poet Dennis Brutus was born in Zimbabwe while it was still the British colony of Rhodesia. He taught for many years in South Africa, where he fought against racism in sports. During the 1960s, Brutus was shot by a Johannesburg policeman and jailed for 18 months for political activities. The two poems below were written during this period of Brutus’s life.

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| **Nightsong: City** |  |
|  |  |
| Sleep well, my love, sleep well: | stuff with our fingers |
| the harbor lights glaze over restless docks, | the sugarless pap4 |
| police cars cockroach through the tunnel  streets. | into our mouths |
|  | then labour erect; |
| from the shanties1 creaking iron-sheets |  |
| violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed | form lines; |
| and fear is imminent2 as sound in the wind-  swung bell; | steel ourselves into fortitude5 |
|  | or accept an image of ourselves |
| the long day’s anger pants from sand and  rocks; | numb with resigned acceptance; |
| but for this breathing night at least, | the grizzled6 senior warder7 comments: |
| my land, my love, sleep well. | “Things like these |
|  | I have no time for; |
| **Poems About Prison** |  |
|  | they are worse than rats; |
| Cold | you can only shoot them.” |
|  |  |
| the clammy cement | Overhead |
| sucks our naked feet | the large frosty glitter of the stars |
|  | the Southern Cross8 flowering low; |
| a rheumy3 yellow bulb |  |
| lights a damp grey wall | the chains on our ankles |
|  | and wrists |
| the stubbled grass | that pair us together |
| wet with three o’clock dew | jangle |
| is black with glittery edges; |  |
| we sit on the concrete, | glitter. |
|  |  |
|  | We begin to move |
|  | awkwardly. |
| \_\_\_\_\_  1*shanties*: shacks  2*imminent*: existing within  3*rheumy*: watery; runny | \_\_\_\_\_  4*pap*: soft, flavorless food, usually for infants  5*fortitude*: inner strength; determination  6*grizzled*: old; experienced  7*warder*: guard  8*Southern* *cross*: a constellation in the southern  sky |

*Write your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.*

**Comprehension**

1. In “Nightsong: City,” who does the poet refer to as “my love”?
2. Briefly describe the prison in “Poems About Prison.”
3. List three things that “Poems About Prison” shows about life in a South African prison.

**Critical Thinking**

1. In “Nightsong: City,” how do you think the poet feels about South Africa?
2. Poets often used images, or word pictures, to add to the mood or meaning of a poem. How does Brutus use images of (a) insects in “Nightsong: City” and (b) light in “Poems About Prison”?
3. Explain the following lines from “Poems About Prison”: “steel ourselves into fortitude / or accept an image of ourselves / numb with resigned acceptance.” What is Brutus suggesting about the effects of this prison on the prisoners?
4. What do these poems show about the feelings of whites and blacks toward each other under apartheid?