

# Dead Reckoning III

By Yusef Komunyakaa

They work fingers to bone & borrow  
smudged paper, then make promises  
to family, unmerciful gods, the unborn.  
Some eat a favorite meal three times  
in a row. Others partake only a pinch  
of soil before boarding half-broken boats  
& rubber rafts — half of the young women  
big with life inside them, flesh & blood  
for daydreams of the Arabian nights,  
as makeshift charts & constellations  
work their way through war & rumors  
of war. The smugglers count their loot.  
Hard winds rattle gongs over sea salt  
till the rusty engines die, & cries alert  
mermaid sirens as pirated schooners  
adrift under a mute sky rock to & fro,  
& the fight goes out of the few alive.  
Their loved ones & friends, lost folk  
songs, mountains & valleys, all left  
behind. Searchlights spot the dead  
hugging the living, & draglines raise  
only those who were braver than us.  
The lucky ones stumble out of stupor,  
tried by raging water beneath black  
skies, listening to the albatross talk.

Source: *Poetry* (November 2017)



Yusef Komunyakaa's poems are rooted in his experiences as an African American growing up in rural Louisiana and his service in the Vietnam War. Influenced by the jazz music he loves as well as by people's everyday speech, his poetry has won a number of awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1994.

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