

# 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)