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)