

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)