

David Walker¹ (1785–1830)

Free to travel, he still couldn't be shown how lucky he was: *They strip and beat and drag us about like rattlesnakes*. Home on Brattle Street, he took in the sign on the door of the slop shop. All day at the counter—white caps, ale-stained pea coats. Compass: needles, eloquent as tuning forks, shivered, pointing north. Evenings, the ceiling fan sputtered like a second pulse. *Oh Heaven! I am full!!! I can hardly move my pen!!!*

On the faith of an eye-wink, pamphlets were stuffed into trouser pockets. Pamphlets transported in the coat linings of itinerant seamen, jackets ringwormed with salt traded drunkenly to pursers in the Carolinas, pamphlets ripped out, read aloud: *Men of colour, who are also of sense*. Outrage. Incredulity. Uproar in state legislatures.

We are the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began. The jewelled canaries in the lecture halls tittered, pressed his dark hand between their gloves. Every half-step was no step at all. Every morning, the man on the corner strung a fresh bunch of boots from his shoulders. "I'm happy!" he said. "I never want to live any better or happier than when I can get a-plenty of boots and shoes to clean!"

A second edition. A third. The abolitionist press is *perfectly appalled*. *Humanity, kindness and the fear of the Lord does not consist in protecting devils*. A month—his person (is that all?) found face-down in the doorway at Brattle Street, his frame slighter than friends remembered.

Banneker¹

What did he do except lie under a pear tree, wrapped in a great cloak, and meditate on the heavenly bodies? *Venerable*, the good people of Baltimore whispered, shocked and more than a little afraid. After all it was said

1. Benjamin Banneker (1731–1806), first black man to devise an almanac and predict a solar eclipse accurately, was also appointed to the com-

he took to strong drink. Why else would he stay out under the stars all night and why hadn't he married?

But who would want him! Neither Ethiopian nor English, neither lucky nor crazy, a capacious bird humming as he peened in his mind another enflamed letter to President Jefferson²—he imagined the reply, polite and rhetorical. Those who had been to Philadelphia reported the statue of Benjamin Franklin before the library

his very size and likeness. A wife? No, thank you. At dawn he milked the cows, then went inside and put on a pot to stew while he slept. The clock he whittled as a boy still ran.³ Neighbors woke him up with warm bread and quilts. At nightfall he took out

his rifle—a white-maned figure stalking the darkened breast of the Union—and shot at the stars, and by chance one went out. Had he killed? *I assure thee, my dear Sir!* Lowering his eyes to fields sweet with the rot of spring, he could see a government's domed city rising from the morass and spreading in a spiral of lights...

Rita Dove

2. After hearing that Jefferson doubted the mental capacity of black people, Banneker wrote him a letter that invoked ideals of human equality and asked for Jefferson's help in the abolition of slav-

3. The first all-wood clock ever made in America, which Banneker carved as an experiment after studying only a common pocketwatch.