

# Banneker

By Rita Dove

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  
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 penned in his mind  
another enflamed letter  
to President Jefferson—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. 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....

Notes:

Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), first black man to devise an almanac and predict a solar eclipse accurately, was also appointed to the commission that surveyed and laid out what is now Washington, D.C.

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The second African-American woman to be named Poet Laureate of the United States, and only the second to win a Pulitzer Prize for poetry (Thomas and Beulah, 1987), Rita Dove has achieved a great deal in her career. Her multi-layered poems dramatize the stories of individuals both living and dead against the backdrop of larger historical forces.

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