EMILY GROSHOLZ

The Dissolution of the Rainbow

“By an extraordinary combination of circumstances, the theory of colors has been drawn into the province and before the tribunal of the mathematician, a tribunal to which it cannot be said to be amendable.”

Goethe, The Theory of Colors

A cut-glass chandelier dangled above
The desk where Newton read and wrote:
All morning spectral dragons fought,
Mocked him and made love
Across the white wall opposite,
Flashed their blue and sea-green scales, the fur
Of tiny fires, a glittering red eyelight.
Then one day they suddenly
Fled, and no longer were.

Rising in impatience, strangely lit
By reason, the philosopher undid
Prism by prism the trembling chandelier
To run her now constrained and broken
Offspring through a maze of barriers.
The light went through its paces
But the dragons disappeared.
What remained Sir Isaac quantified,
Teaching Nature not to sing
Her sweeter variations, but in one
Low tone, geometry, to answer him.

Although white light is manifold,
A mixture, so he found, of different rays,
Each ray could be identified
In essence with its angle of refraction:
This was the only origin of colors,
Color then reduced to numbering.
The dragons lapsed to silence, mortified,
Curled up and dry as worms a child
Might question in the fire
Of curiosity and leave behind.

When Newton set his prism work aside,
He wiped his hands, and wrote on creamy paper
Long and elegant formulae,
A shadow of the sensuous retained
In his illuminating study,
Even that much immaterial.
Yet he sometimes noticed, later on,
How his sines and cosines lay
Across the paper like dark skeletons
Of dragon, couchant, rampant as the full
Proud curve of the integral.