

*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.

First published in *The Kenyon Review*, also appeared in *The Stars of Earth, New and Selected Poems* by Emily Grosholz (World Galaxy Press, 2017)