

Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz

Hermann Helmholtz said the problem facing
the scientist is this:
reduce a creek a kiss
a flaming coal from this random tracing

to some irreducible final text
dancing to the air
of the inverse square
and we're left with the question: what next?

But there's always another layer
above beyond below
the last answer: we know
the scientist and poet shape their prayer

with Newton and Frost who searched for order
instead of answers and found
such grace in number and sound
they glorify the spell of light on water

(from Night Watch on the Chesapeake,
U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1987)

Notes: Two of our children are scientists, and we've often talked about the similarities of science and poetry. I don't really know what an inverse square is, but I tried to write this poem in a very square and symmetrical shape; our kids were surprised I knew about Helmholtz, and I told them I was attracted because his name is a perfect trochaic iambic pentameter line.