Shifting Diction in Iris Jamahl Dunkle's *Gold Passage*

Whenever a writer faces the page, she has hundreds, even thousands of choices before her. One of the most immediate choices revolves around diction, or word choice. Nothing mind-blowing about that.

Everyone knows that the English language has many roots. Two of the main roots are Anglo Saxon and Latin. Anglo Saxon words are usually short and chunky. Latinate words are usually multisyllabic. So, for instance, one can either “spit” (Anglo Saxon) or “expectorate” (Latinate). One can be either “wise” or “judicious.” A meal can be “tasty” or “delectable.” One can either be “smart” or “intelligent.” The writer gets to choose between “low” and “high” diction with almost every stroke of the key.

When the laws of this country were being codified, lawyers used both Latinate and Anglo Saxon words, presumably just to make sure that everyone was on the same page. Thus phrases like “all intents and purposes” and “last will and testament” are sprinkled through the pages of law books. What's the difference between an intent and a purpose? Nada. A will and a testament? Again, nada.

In a similar vein, I like that someone “translated” the song “Row row row your boat” into more latinate words, like so:

Propel propel propel your craft

placidly down the solution.

Ecstatic ecstatic ecstatic ecstatic,

existence is but an illusion.

“Life is but a dream” is the classic example of Anglo Saxon word choices. “Existence is but an illusion” is the perfect illustration of Latinate word choices.

So... what does this have to do with excellent writing?

Consider Robert Herrick's “Upon Julia’s Clothes” (1648):

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,

Then, then, methinks how sweetly flows

The liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see

That brave vibration each way free,

Oh how that glittering taketh me!

So... which word stands out? “Liquefaction,” of course.

A change in diction can give a word emphasis, as though it were in bold or italics*.* If every last word in the poem were Latinate, then there'd be no emphasis at all. Would this poem be as famous if Herrick had written, “the *rippling* of her clothes” (the closest Anglo Saxon equivalent I can come up with)? Heck no.

So when I read the poem “Dinosaur” in Iris Jamahl Dunkle's *Gold Passage,* I take note of the simplicity of the language. The diction remains low for the most part, which is how I like my poems. But then, when the time is right, it elevates just a touch for the sake of emphasis and rhythm. “Metronome,” though not the most highfalutin of words, is a few steps up from the language surrounding. It draws attention to itself, just because of the slight change of diction. But that's not all the word does. It also latches itself to the words following it. The phrase “metronome of feet” lets the reader feel the “tick-tock-tick-tock-tick” of syllables, so that the words actually illustrate what they say. I can repeat “metronome of feet” over and over again and be a pretty happy reader, simply because I like the rhythm of the words and the way they roll off my tongue. The combination of the rhythm and the change in diction absolutely make this line, and make this poem. The author's deftness in shifting diction makes this book.