When the poet writes “All is silver”, I agree — in some way, this whole poem is silver, this whole poem is encapsulated in what that word evokes. Not just in the metal silver, or in the color — but in the sound of the word, in the way it slips off your tongue.

Silver is a hard word to catch: it doesn’t have the weight, the pull, of a word like ‘net’ — which lands in your mouth and rests there. Like water, silver slides out of your mouth and the alien combination of “v” and “l” making is spasm a little — like a ripple. To me this poem builds on all those impressions hidden in the word — it makes me think of shiver, and sliver and scales — it makes me think of quicksilver and the metallic smell of blood. It doesn’t make me think of the stillness of old silver cast into boxes or jewellery — it makes me think of the sudden, shocking glimmer of the sun hitting a fish swimming right by your leg. The use of words such as translucent, principal and icy — seem to echo each other in that pointedness, maybe because they contain those particular sounds of ‘i’ and ‘s’.

I think it’s important the way these words are layered in time — the way the images of the cold and the silver and the iridescent slowly accumulate in the groves of the way you think about the poem. Like soup that takes hours to simmer, to accumulate flavours from the ingredients slowly added to it, this poem takes in a wide panning shot of the Fishhouses, and as it builds the image, something distinct about the fishhouses emerges. And what emerges has all these qualities from the words — like the sharpness of the scene — made more obvious in the coldness that keeps coming up, in the way some of the poems line suddenly reach out further
than the rest, in the “Strike” of the the Lucky strike they smoke. But coupling this sharpness is something almost lethal and yet, strangely luminous.

These words that echo back to silver give an impression of a cold, sharp edge — cutting through something ambivalent surrounding him, and his conversations about the populations of herring and codfish. Like the smell of codfish in the air or the water that is “cold and dark and absolutely clear,” that is “element bearable to no mortal,” — this whole poem paints the Fishhouses a place that is intensely present and overwhelmingly bare.

And in that intensity, this poem seems to be experiencing a slicing motion — the way cold air stabs your skin. There are elements to the poem — like the blade which has been dulled, and the old men and everything getting worn — that make it heavy, in both feeling and sound. But it is the constant breaking through — of the seal from under the water, or the wild jagged rocks, or the “icily free” water — instances where you can feel the sharpness of the act or the experience in sharp contrast to the more gentle tones of fishing and contemplation, and old men working endlessly on nets and fish scales.

And these moments — this whole place — seems to be tied together in those sharp lines emerging — in the sudden points of light and violence. Because in the repetition of these sounds in words which seem to call back to each other, I see a kind of cold severity that forces the poet awake — that pushes through the droning lines, through the stillness of the fishhouses.