Fencemaker

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John Fence straightens up and lets his post-hole digging tool fall to the ground. Deciding that now is as good a time as any for lunch, he turns away from the arrow-straight row of posts he is stretching across the rocky, desertlike Arizona soil and moves towards a weathered old Chevy pickup parked a few fenceposts back up the row. The easy grace of Fence’s movements, the uprightness of his body, and most of all, the color of his skin show that he is of pure, or nearly pure, American Indian stock. There is no trace of emotion or weakness on him; had he been born three hundred years earlier, he would have been mighty among his people. As it is . . .

John Fence lifts a brown paper bag from the ragged truck seat, and moves around to the side that is most away from the sun—it seems to come from every direction in this territory—and drops easily onto the ground, into the little shade the body of the truck has to offer. He pulls a thick sandwich from the sack, and wryly wonders what Sitting Bull would have thought of Oscar Mayer Bologna. Of course when he was born his name was not John Fence; he took that name when he thought he had earned it, in the tradition of his ancestors. They did not take a name until they had earned one by cunning or strength or skill, and then the name had meaning, which is more than John Fence could say for white men’s names. Fence cannot deny, however, that the old order has been replaced by the new, so his name is a compromise. John Fence.

He does not loaf once he has finished, but returns immediately to work. He wipes his hands off on the faded tee-shirt with its cheerfully obscene slogan, picks up his tool, and starts a new post-hole. The hardness of the sun-baked ground does not seem to slow him down; what he does, he does well . . . “You need a fence put up, but you don’t want to pay a whole work crew?” The cattle farmers would say, “Get that injun feller, John Fence. It’s like home to him out there. The heat, it don’t bother them injuns like it does us. He don’t even come in for lunch, works from sunup till night. That fella can build a fence just as good as a crew, and he works cheap.” This might sound like a compliment, but John Fence knows better. He listens to the farmers (just because a man does not talk doesn’t mean he does not listen) and he knows that they could just as well be talking about a breed of cattle or brand of tool. The tone would be the same. To the cattle farmers, John Fence is just another tool, and John Fence knows this. But he does not care. When the earth turned on the Indian people, she took the white man as her favorite, and left the Indian at her mercy. John Fence is reconciled with this, for he knows there is no help for it.
John Fence furiously rams the digging blades into the rocklike soil. The amount of damage he does is startling; it is as if he hated the very soil. He knows it was inevitable that the white man would become nature's favorite child, because he was nature's youngest child. Like all youngest, the white man was treated most benevolently by his mother; like all youngest, he returns his mother the least respect. This pleased John Fence. Having been mistreated by mother earth, he enjoys the knowledge that she is getting a taste of her own medicine.

John Fence thinks to himself that tomorrow he will finish setting up the posts, in two more days he will have the barbed wire strung across the posts, and he will return to the farmer who owns the ranch and be paid. Then he will drive to the nearest crossroads big enough to have a dingy bar, a cheap hotel, and an available woman. When all he has left are his clothes and truck and tools, he will take on another job in another dusty county, perhaps another dusty state. Like his forefathers, John Fence has no home, but roams across the midwest quietly going about his business. Unlike his forefathers, however, his business consists of scarring the land, of stretching barriers across it so that it is no longer wild and free and beautiful, but owned and abused, like Fence and his people. John Fence knows that there is a certain irony in this, that he is doing to mother earth what she did to him, that he is a tool against nature to those nature used as a tool against him. He understands that his life is useless and insignificant, yet still there is something that makes him go on.

He rams the tool into the ground with every ounce of strength in his body, and sparks almost seem to fly from the very dirt. And the something is HATE.