

Digging

by Eric Ellis

When I still dug holes in the yard with my hands
hoping I could get to China,
I was afraid to go to Hell.
The hole I dug was enjambed
between the garage and a tall, wooden fence.
A girl who dug with me said,
“If you’re bad, you go to H-E-double-hockey-sticks.”
“Hell?” I said, but she lifted
a finger to my lips and shushed the sin from my mouth.
Almost a whole two feet deep,
the soil at the bottom became moist and cool.
How could there be a Hell under this?
I had no knowledge of tectonics or cores,
magma or pedology.
I had only this hole in the ground,
this black-wood fence which loomed over me as though bearing
down,
and this sweet-mouthed girl who never missed Sunday school.
What did I know of Hell?
When her parents discovered our plans
to reach China by the end of the summer,
I reluctantly undid my fruitless labor.
Scooping the dirt back in—
my nonarthritic hands, delicate and void of wrinkles—
I wondered if Satan was sad
Or if God was happy
That I was refilling the hole.