

The crack

by Mathew Paust

It was about six inches long and a quarter inch wide, as I recall. I never measured it. It is lucid in my mind's eye, black and mysterious from absent light despite the distance of nearly seven decades. It had a vaginal shape now that I think of it, wider in the center and tapering toward each end. It was in the floor, a separation between two floorboards near if not directly in the doorway between our living and dining rooms.

It served my imagination well, from toddlerhood on up. I remember wondering what lay beneath — a creature's den, secret chamber, China? I put my mouth to it and said hello hello hello. I marked pieces of paper with messages and pushed them into the slot and returned later to see if they'd come back. They never did, but I'd have pooped my pants if they had. Our flashlight couldn't reach the depth of the darkness. I could get only the tip of my finger through. Just enough to feel the cooler air. Just as well to keep the mystery.

I carried it into my nighttime dreams. The only one I remember lasted into later years. I would chase my passive-aggressive father, calling after him as he slipped away through the crack.

