

The crawl space

You were thrilled to enter the crawl space, but also frightened. There was a chance of snakes.

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue



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When I was five years old our mom and dad had an addition built onto our old brick house so that our grandmother could come live with us. She was mom's mom. She was dignified and brooked no nonsense. The addition was designed just for grandma and it contained one bedroom and one bathroom and one chair and one television. It was not a public space and you did not enter without permission and if you were a ruffian you did not enter at all. I was a ruffian and entered only on high holy days.

Because it was an addition it had no basement or cellar and was perched slightly above ground just in case of floods. Because the addition was slightly above ground there was a crawl space underneath. The crawl space was maybe 18 inches high and accessible only through a tiny door above our dad's workbench in our basement. An enterprising boy could climb up on dad's workbench and pick his way around tools and nails and glue and paint and bolts and screws and splits and shims of wood and climb through the tiny door into the silent dusty sandy velvet dark of the crawl space. You were frightened when you entered the crawl space. There was a chance of snakes. Where we lived there were water snakes and ribbon snakes and milk snakes and worm snakes and green snakes and black snakes.

But you were also thrilled to enter the crawl space. It was warm. It was sandy. It was the most absolutely silent place ever. You could not hear commands or complaints

or accusations or imprecations or insinuations or character assassinations. You could not hear ragging and razzing and teasing and tattling. You could sprawl there in the dark for as long as you wanted or until another brother appeared at the window and begged for his turn in the crawl space. Whenever a brother was missing and presumed lost he was in the crawl space.

There were days when I might have been in the crawl space for an hour. There was no time in the crawl space. You could not fall asleep in the crawl space because there was a chance of snakes but you could enter a state of wonder or concentration or suspended animation. An enterprising boy could crawl around the perimeter of the crawl space and map it out in his mind and calculate volume and acreage but we never did so for fear of spiders and snakes and itinerant scorpions. It was a good place to be sad. It was a good place to weep. It was a good place to lick your wounds. It was a good place to go calm down and consider your feeble options. The rest of the house was for contemplating the past and pondering the future but the crawl space was for being in the crawl space. You had no zits and bad manners in the crawl space. You didn't have to ask permission to be in the crawl space. No one could eject or escort you from the crawl space. You were never late or lax or lazy in the crawl space. There were no glowers or grimaces in the crawl space, no gloom, no recriminations, no expectations. In the crawl space you were invisible and it was curiously pleasant to occasionally be invisible. We spend so much time being present that sometimes it is a pleasure to be absent. If a brother appeared at the tiny door and begged for his turn you gave him his turn. That was the rule. You would crawl toward the tiny door, and reverse yourself, and flail your legs carefully so as not to disturb dad's stuff, and descend, and then boost the next brother into the crawl space. Sometimes a brother would indicate that he needed help emerging by waving a hand silently from the tiny door. Silence was the rule with the crawl space.

To this day I can see my brothers' small hands waving soundlessly against the dark of the tiny door. If you saw a brother's hand you would climb up on the workbench and hoist him down and then jump down and leave the crawl space to the shy quiet wary courteous snakes who never bothered us and we never bothered them.