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[Granta 140: State of Mind | The Online Edition](#) [Fiction](#) 14th September 2017

‘People think they’re destroying, but it’s hard work, nearly impossible; building is easy, illusory but easy.’

An excerpt from Claudio Magris’ latest novel, *Blameless*, translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel.

## Blameless

[Claudio Magris](#)

*Translated from Italian by Anne Milano Appel*

*From notebook no. 78, note dated May 18, 1947 – Don’t throw your pearls to swine. What can they – those people, the others, the ones on the Purge Commission as well – understand about our lives back then in those sewers beneath the Old Town, in that darkness – our youth in the dark . . . It’s true, I always loved the dark. Even later, during the war, those blackouts in the city during air-raids, the rustling in the shadows, you’re aware of people scurrying like rats through cellars to get to the bomb shelters as quickly as possible. We ran toward the nearest one, the tunnel on Via Catullo, entering the black mouth that was like that of a big cannon . . . I’ve looked into thousands of rifle and pistol barrels, mortars, culverins, torpedo launchers. The mystery of dark eyes, keen eyesight is trained to look into the dark; just think of that cat down there, in those tunnels, that we found when we explored the underground passages beneath Old Town, under the Jesuit church.*

We would make our way down there by sneaking into a barely visible opening next to the church. It’s not hard to slide through the shaft. Right away the air is damp, dust coats the hands and face with grime. A broken exhaust pipe, who knows when, spewed out the sewage of a latrine; now, congealed, the feces seem like relics. Who knows if that ancient sludge came from a reverend father or from a thief thrown in the slammer. Piero lights the way with his flashlight, a flicker of shadow on a wall darts away like a mouse. Maybe it really was a mouse; he too, down there, felt safe before Piero turned on his light.

Down there you see very little, but you do see something, and you yourself are not seen. It’s nice to think that up above no one knows about us exploring the depths. We are invisible, elusive, silent larvae, moles that keep digging and might one day bring down the school, the prisons, the church with its high altar.

Poldy sits on the stone seat; he’s wearing a red cap, the one he pulls on when it’s snowing up there. Stretched out in the dampish tub, we confess heresies and impure thoughts. Poldy waves a bone he found on the ground; he says it’s a piece of a woman’s pelvis, who knows what throbbed in there. I masturbate, but I stop before the other two notice. The centuries-old debris is infused with cum. ‘I confess that I adore the Serpent biting its tail, joining the past to the future, I believe

in the eternity of everything that exists, which weapons, guns, tanks, bombs and men delude themselves that they are destroying. *Anathema sit!*' Poldy shouts and hits me with a stick.

Eternity, a big garbage dump in which nothing is lost; the shiny foil chocolate wrapper and the leg or head of the doll that my mother bought from Popel must still be there. I like everything, any piece of whatever. In fact, I especially like pieces, things that are broken; the toy soldiers sometimes broke too, when Poldy and I against Piero or Piero and Poldy against me or Piero and I against Poldy – that's right, we'd been friends since we were children – played at the Battle of Verdun and pelted each other with them; they broke, of course, and every once in a while we would even get hit in the face with one, it's easy to make mistakes. I put the plump face back on the doll and an arm as well, I suspect it was Piero who broke them off, but I'm not sure – then she disappeared, she must have ended up in the garbage, but I'd like to find them, they must be down there, the crumpled shiny foil and that bruised, rosy-colored doll's arm . . .

Blind as moles down there. And even up above. Did I ever see what there was, or rather what there wasn't, between my parents? That dull look in my mother's eyes – I see it now, but then I didn't, I thought her eyes always looked the same, like a pair of glasses. When my father, having finished reading the newspaper – he read it at the table, taciturn and angry if one of us spoke – got up and went into the bedroom and she followed him in silence, with a different expression, and other, different eyes – but how could I have seen? I was a mole, I could see better in the dark, in those underground tunnels, than above, than at home. But it's the moles who create a revolution, as I also told the Purge Commission, so they'd see that I too read my Marx after they made such a fuss about that library of German books that I saved in '45. Almost all of them Nazi, of course, even *Mein Kampf*, what else would you expect them to have at the library of the Italian-German Association in those years where I would go to borrow books, the works of Lenin or some rabbi? Marx instead was at my uncle Giuseppe's house, it came from the Casa del Popolo, destroyed by the *squadristi*, the Fascist action squads.

Moles, as I was saying, not eagles. The latter show off high above, wings spread like banners; gonfalons and red flags, but if a sniper shoots them down with the first shot, boom boom boom, the torn kite plummets to the ground, the plane crashes, not even the black box can tell how it happened, I think it repeats the lies they put in it, like a parrot. Moles on the other hand, blind stupid dogged, keep digging, gnawing away until the paving finally gives way, the main floor of History collapses with a terrible racket, and ends up amid the detritus of the sewers and tunnels, maybe even while a nice reception is being held and the *podestà*, standing below the portraits of the Duce and the king, is recognizing a *balilla* and a *piccola italiana*, the boy and girl who performed best in the parade.

I wanted to dig right underneath the *podestà*'s chair, we had even bought some stronger pickaxes, because after the Red Room the underground passage ended and there were still several meters to go to reach the area under Town Hall; down there everything was decayed and damp and we could have made it, but Poldy said no, it was too risky, and this that and the other – the truth is that the Wiesensteins were related to the Salems, they often marry among cousins, and sitting in that chair above us was Enrico Paolo Salem, *el podestà picòn*, the 'pickax mayor,' the one who wanted to gut the Old Town for the greater glory of the city, Italy and the Fascist Party, not realizing how long and complicated destruction is. People think they're destroying, but it's hard work, nearly impossible; building is easy, illusory but easy.

A gentleman like few others, moreover: the *podestà* who had outshined any other in keeping Trieste clean, owner of the insurance company Vita Salem, decorated with the Croix de Guerre by the Duke of Aosta during the First World War, advisor to the Adriatic Insurance Company, vice president of the Banca Commerciale Triestina, member of the National Fascist Party since 1921, and in 1938 petitioner for recognition of not belonging to the Jewish race. The certificate

of baptism that he belatedly revealed is perhaps a little dubious, but in any case he was the son of a goy, a charming singer who certainly did not don a wig like a Yiddish Mamele, given the beautiful hair she had, which, along with her extraordinary voice, had caused a stir as the tresses of the Africana or Norma. The five million crowns left by his grandfather Isach Enrico, since his father, Vittorio, had died before him, had also passed on to the future *podestà*, who introduced the racial laws in a black shirt. So Poldy didn't want us to dig that hole and pull the *podestà*'s seat out from under him, though maybe the mayor would have been happy, that way he wouldn't have had to raise his butt out of that chair in August 1938 . . .

There's a passageway, in the Old Town tunnels that we go down to, which is called, or which we called, the Cat's Tunnel, because it is practically obstructed by the mummy of a cat, a carcass that must have been there since God knows when. The eyes of the cat in the tunnel are blank. When I saw them I thought for a moment that I had torn them out and I remembered the doll, maybe she's down there too, somewhere, without eyes.

The *tapetum lucidum*, in the posterior of the cat's eye, is formed of cells that reflect and break up light, enabling keen night vision. I bet that cat could see very well down there, in the dark passage leading to the underground chamber, when the narrow slit of its pupil widened to a circle and he, master of that darkness, slinked along the passageway which we had a hard time passing through. Poldy was right, but not for the reasons he said. It was a good thing we didn't demolish the ceiling of the cavern, which was the floor of the office in Town Hall. We would have caused the cavern, with its beautiful circular space, to collapse, and the tub, the stone table and the inquisitor's seat would have been destroyed, rubble exposed to the light of day.

History blinks eyes as blind as those of bats, the condemned man removes his hood and is blinder than before, dazzled by the stupid light. There's a photograph of the gutted Old Town, beams half sunk in mud, shattered, toilets overturned, obscene whitish corpses at the morgue, an intestine reduced to pulp.

It would have been too bad if we had destroyed the tunnel, which goes up San Giusto Hill, passing beneath the Jesuits, the old prisons. The cat's tunnel. I had to squeeze close to him, to that creature, because the passageway is low and narrow. The dampness mummified him. He's lying there, front legs outstretched. He stands guard at the entrance. A useless guard, like those stationed to keep watch over the entrances to the Underworld. Now everyone descends into hell, even by elevator, and comes out again. The cat's eye is dark too, a kind of empty, black hole. I wonder what his iris was like, blue-green, yellow . . . Death stopped him cold, like the lava of a volcano. Maybe a slight underground landslide surprised him in his sleep. During REM sleep a cat moves his eyes and ears, probably dreaming. I read that if you destroy a certain area of the medulla, a cat, during REM sleep, experiences small fits of rage (we could devote a small special section of the Museum to various kinds of interventions on the brain and spinal cord, treatment and destruction). It's possible he died while hissing furiously at someone, as he slept and dreamed.



The above is an excerpt from Claudio Magris' novel [Blameless](#), available now from [Yale University Press](#).