



FEU FOLLET

Florian Mussgnug Liz Ridcal

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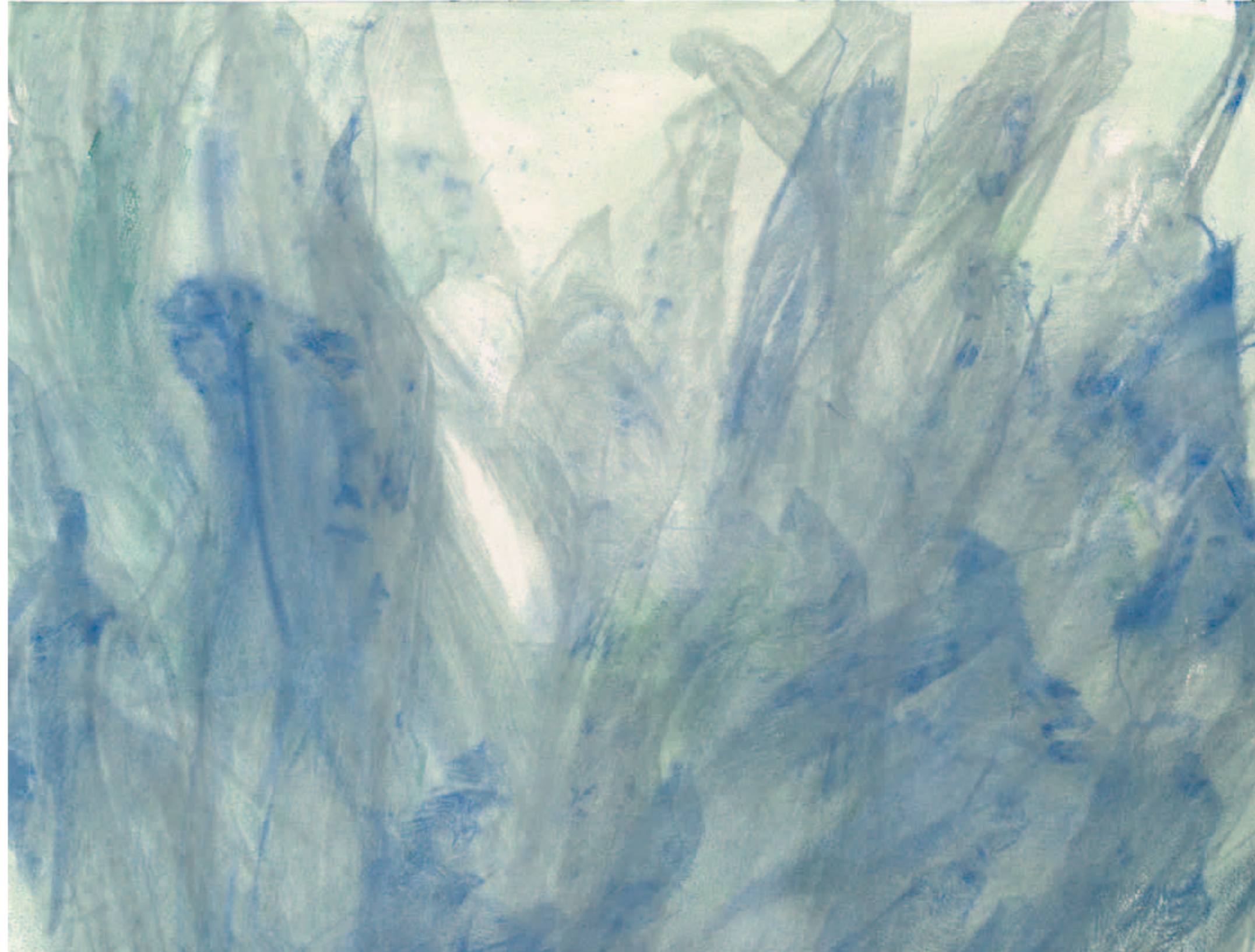
Florian Mussnug

Liz Rideal

*A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;
And some thro' wavering lights and shadows broke,
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.*

The Lotos-eaters

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1832



If you travel the Via Appia from Rome to the Southern port of Brindisi, you will cross the Pontine Marshes. In the old days, this was a region of foul-smelling swamps, extending for miles from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Volscian Mountains. Paul of Tarsus is said to have rested here, and Julius Caesar, as Plutarch writes, dreamt of a mighty army that would drain and cultivate the pestilential wetlands.

In classical thought, the marshes swarmed with naiads, presiding over every stream, brook and pond and celebrating the world's mysterious harmonies. The Greek word *eleionomai* ('inhabitants of the marshes') does not distinguish between human, animal and spirit life. Some swamp dwellers, it is said, had the power to lure the young and to seduce them with their great beauty.



Nineteenth-century visitors were drawn to the stygian mysteries concealed behind Italy's luminous beauty. Stendhal feared the pitiless brigands of Terracina. Washington Irving was haunted by the image of a young woman in white, crossing the marshes alone, on horseback. And Hans Cristian Andersen cried tears of joy and relief, when, after a long journey through the wetlands, he finally beheld the sea.

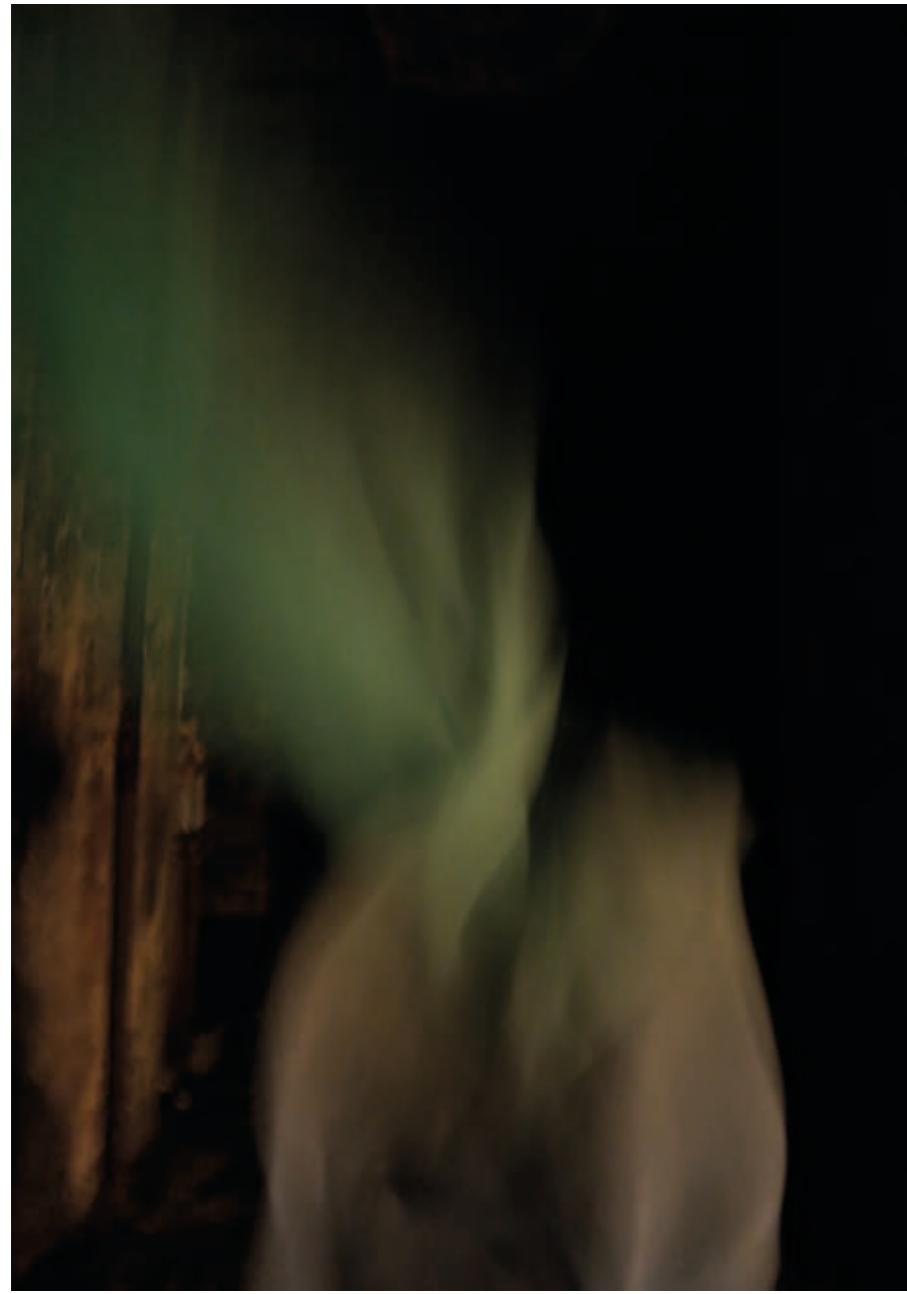
'The unhealthy, marshy places of the north are easily identified by their frightening appearance', remarks Madame de Staël in *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807), 'but in the more fatal regions of the south, with nature retaining its deceptive serenity, travelers are deluded'. Tourists were advised by the French writer not to fall asleep as they crossed the Pontine Marshes – 'for sleep there is the veritable harbinger of death'.



The draining of the Agro Pontino was considered one of Fascism's greatest triumphs. A vast system of canals, trenches and dikes was built, new cities erected, and over two thousand families moved in from Northern Italy. Propaganda newsreels of the period show aviators in uniforms, spraying insecticide on newly cultivated and parceled land, and the dictator himself, shirtless with a shovel in his hand, or threshing wheat at harvest time.

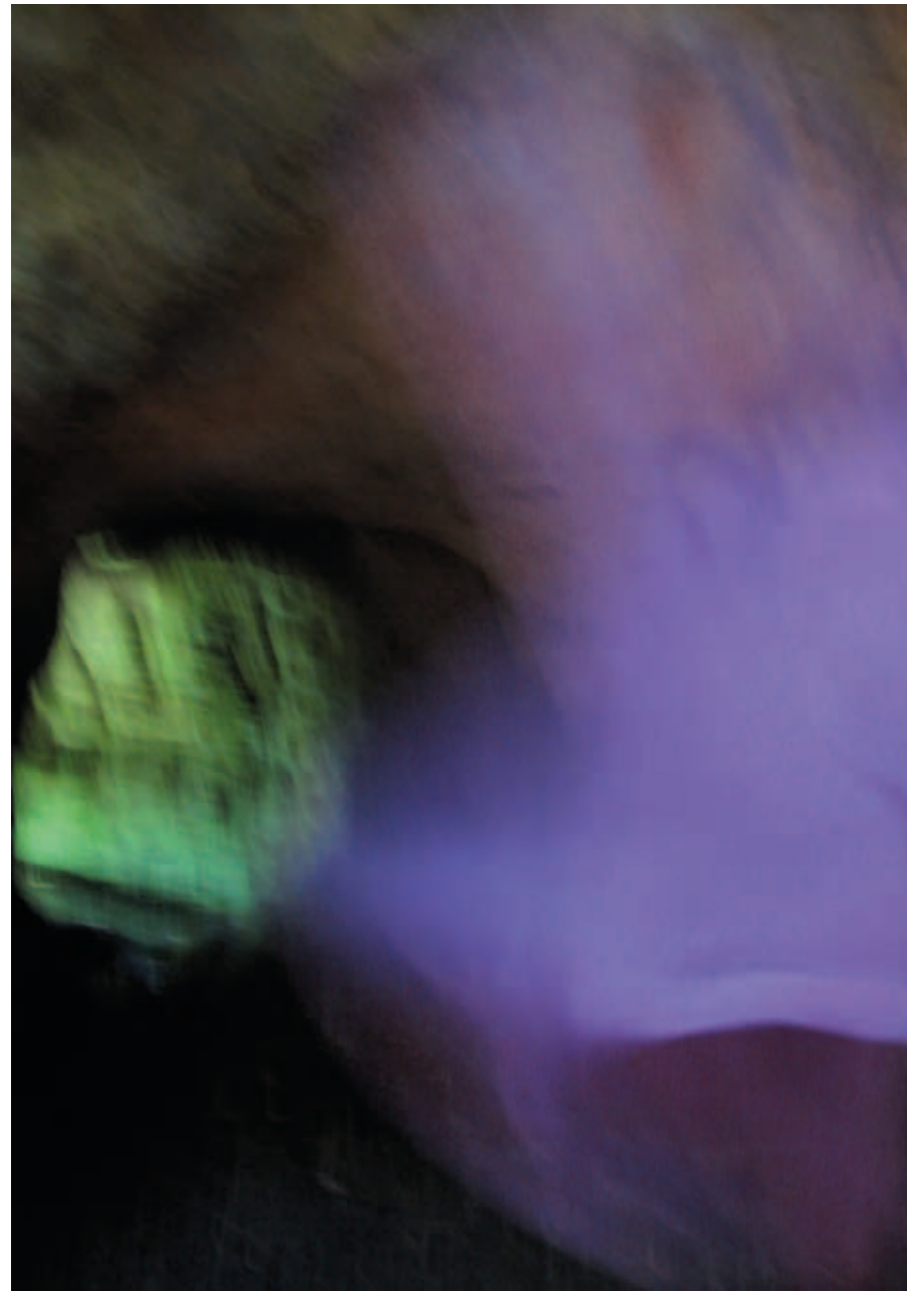
Mussolini's 'battle of the swamps' continues to be fought every day, as huge electrical pumps, put in place in 1934, pull millions of gallons of water out of the soggy ground and direct it towards the sea. If these pumps were turned off, the entire region would return to marshland in less than a week.





It must be marvellous to behold the dancing radiance caused by the nearby passage of a shooting star, wrote Alessandro Volta in his letter *On the Inflammable Air from the Marshes* (1777). But how much more thrilling would it be to witness the rare, imponderable phenomenon commonly known as fuochi fatui?

Volta's enthusiasm led him into the swamps near Lago Maggiore and at Pietramala, in Northern Tuscany, where he set fire to vapours that for generations had been known as devil's lanterns. Like the unseen powers of the electromagnetic field, these enigmatic, radiant spirits became an exhilarating scientific mystery, their flaming amazement a promise of new depths of knowledge.



Natural methane deposits are formed underground, from the breakup of organic matter at high temperatures and pressures. The gas is emitted directly into the atmosphere during the production and transport of coal and oil. Methane is also produced by livestock and by the decay of organic waste in landfills and swamps.

In 1776, when Volta identified methane, the naturally occurring concentration of the gas in the Earth's atmosphere was approximately 0.7 parts per million. It has since risen by 150%. The world's climate has started to shift as a result of such atmospheric changes. Since the 1970s, each successive decade has been warmer than all previous recorded ones.

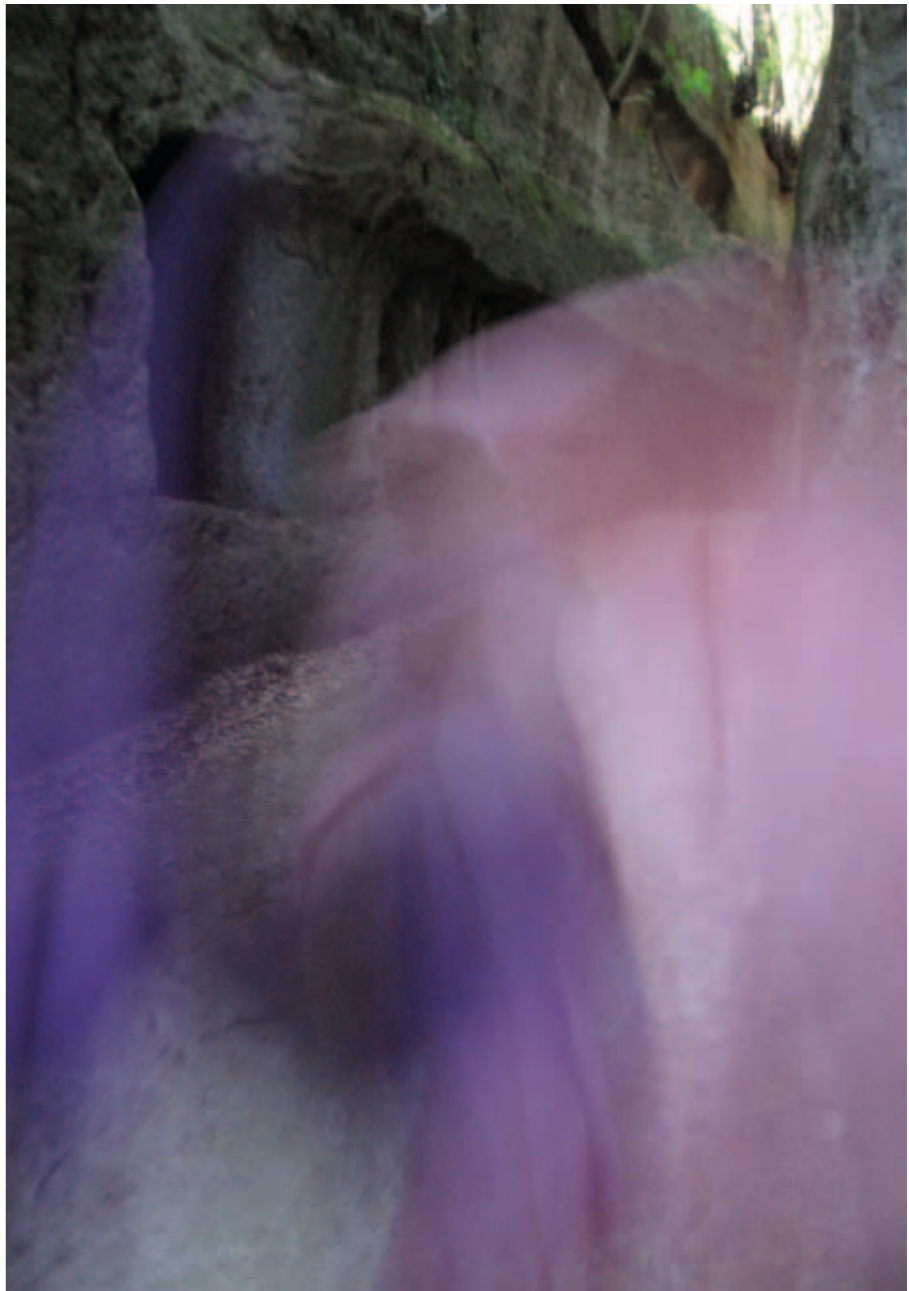


The dispersed, the derelict, the diffuse and the unformed: what will remain of us after the end of 'man'?

Ruins mark an encounter with the past and conjure images of an uncertain future. With a shudder, we awaken from the slumber of progressive time - the featureless, calendrical line across which history, supposedly, marches forward – and meet the intimate, interlocking temporalities of our emotions: nostalgia, regret, forecast, desire.

Stones, monuments and ruins do not speak, but we rely on their testimony. Moss on the lips of the living chokes speech, but the smooth, mossy surface of a forgotten gravestone calls out to the passing stranger, ready to reveal its sombre message.

Art has the ability to bring inanimate objects to life and to blur the boundary between dead and living. It speaks to us from the grave. It tempts us to imagine ourselves as eternally present, but places this dream in the fragile tomb of a material form.



No habrá una sola cosa que no sea
una nube [...]
Somos los que se van. La numerosa
nube que se deshace en el poniente
es nuestra imagen. Incesantemente
la rosa se convierte en otra rosa.
Eres nube. Eres mar, eres olvido.
Eres también aquello que has perdido.

*There is nothing that is not essentially
a cloud [...]
We are the ones who drift away. The host
of evening clouds dispersing in the west
is our very image. Without pause or rest
the rose changes into another rose.
And you are cloud, ocean, oblivion's mist.
And you are also all that you have lost.*

Nubes

Jorge Luis Borges, 1985



Italo Calvino, the author who invoked lightness as art's greatest attribute, compared literature to a game of shadows. Tracing the endless paths of a labyrinthine world, he wrote, we play hide-and-seek with the elusive, ineffable order of the universe.

Lightness, in both its luminous and its weightless aspects, may dazzle us. But the shadows it casts evoke startling effects in our flickering, penumbral world. The fascination of Calvino's game, then, derives from a distant light that plays on its unknown subjects, projecting, for us, their mere silhouettes.



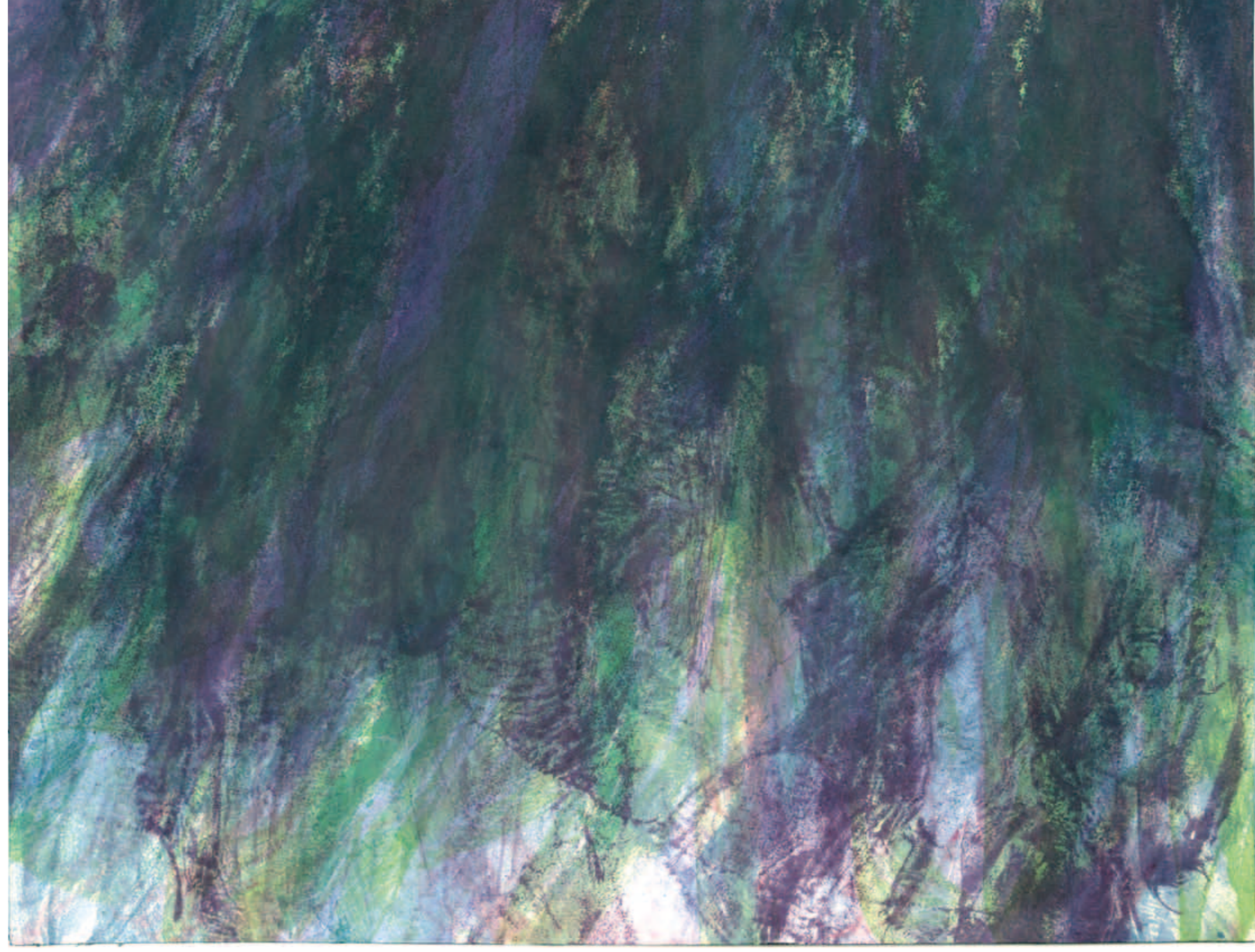
Ignis fatuus, feu follet, fuochi fatui: what is the true nature of the rare, flickering shapes that hover and blaze with delusive light? For those who beheld them with fear and wonder, they promised wealth or spelt doom, originated with providence or with the devil: 'errand lights' [Irrlichter], cursed to walk the Earth without rest, scheming to lead the wanderer astray.

Sightings are rarely reported today, perhaps as a result of the conversion of marshes to farmlands. The dreams and fears engendered by the subtle spirits, it appears, are now mostly figured by their absence.

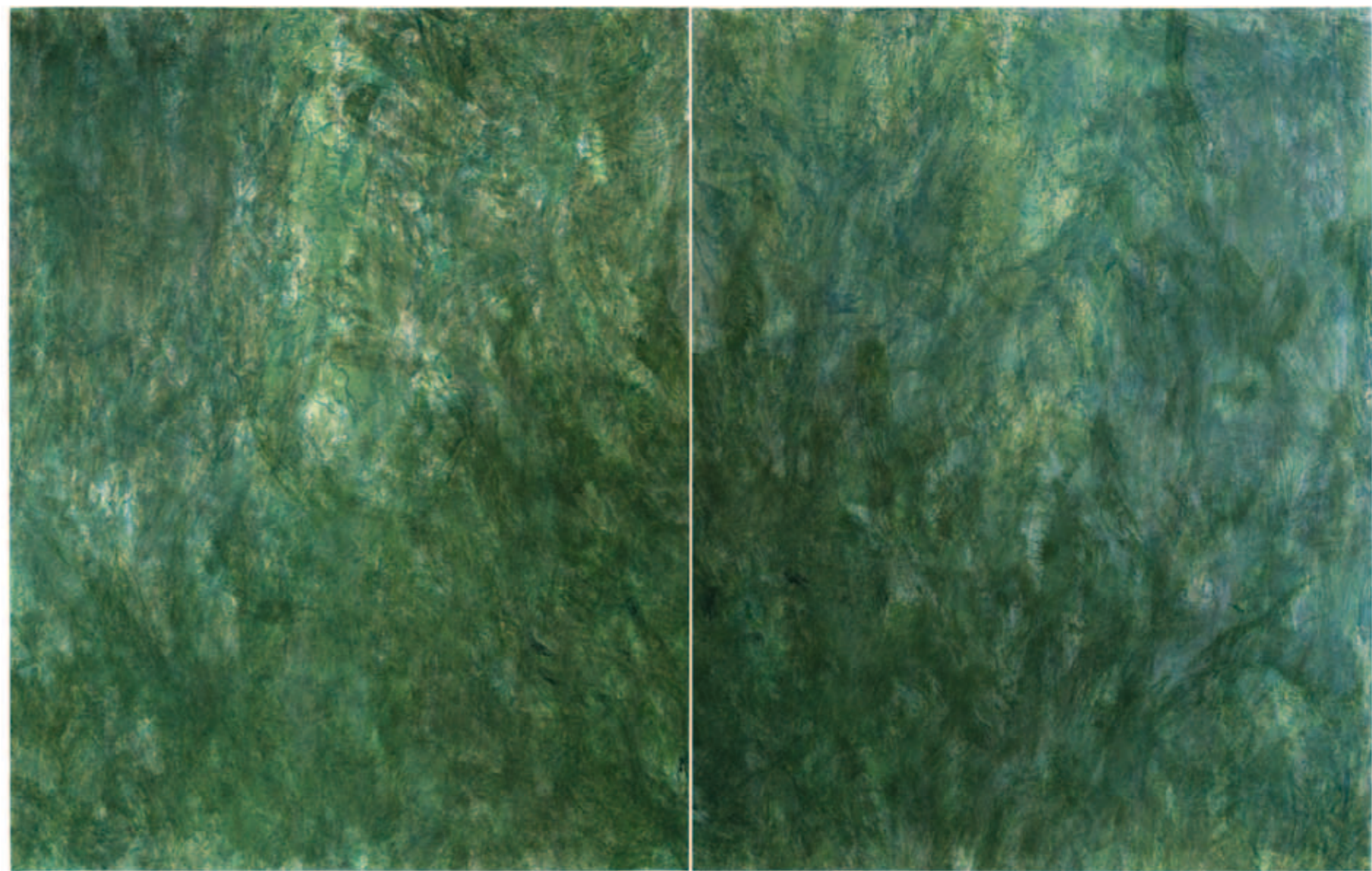
'Better an ignis fatuus--', writes Emily Dickinson, 'Than no illume at all--'.













Ma già le navi stavano scomparendo all'orizzonte
e io rimasi qui,
in questo nostro mondo pieno di responsabilità e
fuochi fatui.

*But already the ships were vanishing over the horizon
and I was left behind,
in this world of ours full of responsibilities and
will-'o-the-wisps.*

Il Visconte Dimezzato

Italo Calvino, 1952

This book records the process of comparing the research strategies employed by the disciplines of fine art and literature when responding to the ambiguous spirit world of ghosts. A collaborative process, whereby the boundaries between word and image are explored within the layered process of creating a permanent object. Pairing texts with images offers a way to encroach on subliminal visual responses and allows for implicit, syncopated negotiations between what is read and what is seen.

Non-figurative pictures deal with abstract notions, printed in tandem with the text they conjure atmosphere through colour; the evanescent, floating forms suggesting momentary meditative qualities. The aim is intangible, complex and fleeting. The images themselves recall nineteenth century portrait photography; when sitters moved during the process of portrait capture; their ghostly trail was caught on camera like a soft vapour. It offers an alternative viewing and interpretation of the possibilities of translation both visual and textual. Cultural parallels emerge in tandem with a human need for narrative.

We crave the story but the ghost denies us a reality.

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