

The Dark Room: Steve Fuger

He was there because she knew he was. The air black and heavy and dank. The pervading sense of a body, alive. Despite the blackouts she could make out the shape in the bed, and the table, where she placed the lidded mug. She touched him, 'Soup', she said, and helped him to sitting, propped with pillows. She felt for his hands and fitted the mug into them. She steadied it at its base as he raised it to his mouth and drank.

She stayed a while; it was all she could do. Offering to comb his hair, to clean his teeth, elicited fury. Her triumph was that he now consented once a week to be guided to the windowless bathroom. She'd peel off the pyjamas, unchanged for a week, and help him into the warm water. No soap, no aromatics. He had eventually agreed to salts.

While he soaked away the week's sweat and body oils, she drew back the blackouts and opened the window wide, onto tranquil parkland. She stripped the bed including the underlay. Dusted, vacuumed, and turned the mattress before remaking it, closing the window and the blackouts. Sometimes she left a miniscule gap between the curtains. He never noticed.

With him back in bed, she sat on the upright wooden chair, keeping him silent company, she watching the flickering refraction of light passing through the leaves of the tree outside, through her gap onto the wall opposite.

A gurgle from the bed alarmed her, he'd never made a sound before. His voice when it came was soft and clear. 'Please bring me A3 paper. Masking tape. Pencil. HB.'

She did, the next day. He got out of bed and moved the wooden chair to the wall, where the light from her secret gap spilled on to it. He taped a sheet of paper over the refraction. And began tracing the image. The tree, exquisite and delicate, upside down.

He taped another sheet to the wall alongside and said, 'Please alter your pinhole.' She did and again he traced the image, intricate in detail, of the meandering path through the park, shimmering water and overhanging branch. He handed them to her. She turned them up the right way. 'You should sign them', she said.

He took the drawings back; she sensed a glimmer of a smile cross his face. He inverted them and signed, *Camera Obscura*.