

SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES

If he sleeps too close
to a green plant, he
dreams what he heard
a wet-nurse whisper
to his mother in Rovno:
you shouldn't let the boy
sleep in a room full
of plants - merciless,
they'll lean over a child,
suck air from its throat.

The story bothers him.
And though he's learned
much about picosecond
lifetime intermediates
in photosynthesis, and
that there's manganese
at the end of the chain
making oxygen, the only
way he remembers
what plants breathe, is
that they are the other.

A friend, Mechele, tried
to grow a sunflower
in the camp. One hungry
day (they were all hungry
in 1944) he tore off all
the leaves, put them in
the thin potato skin soup.

And they are the other,
the lush, alive, the green.
He wonders: is there
something to the dream —
in steady state there's
never much CO₂ in air.

In Israel they taught him
survival techniques
in the desert. Even
grimmiest wilderness
had bushes, there is dew.
So you sleep near a plant,

spread a plastic sheet

around it. Wake early
(it's difficult, the cool
time is when you finally
sleep), shake the dew off.
If you have no plastic,
he was told you must
put your lips on the stalk.

Or find a succulent, don't
be afraid, bite into it.
As if he could forget
his first memory, at two,
the rhubarb stalk's green
shading to red, the red
of the Buchenwald sun
over Weimar, his
mouth burning, sister's
warm arms, before the war.