**16-19 Creative – First Place**

**Natalie Perman, Withington Girls’ School: 'do you remember' in response to 'Do You Speak Persian?'**

**do you remember?**

*in response to Kaveh Akbar’s ‘Do You Speak Persian?’*

my great grandmother spent years

peeling cabbages

boiling broth that steamed the house

white with grief.

when she arrived in america

the streets breathed smoke and

people cut words like steak

which dripped raw blood into

cavernous mouths:

swallowing words like food.

she couldn’t speak their language

but she began to copy sounds

of foreign laughter like the clink of wine glasses

*and* and *that* and *what* and *how* in cracks

of pavement in new york.

she forgot how to pronounce the

sounds of her childhood

so she spoke only yiddish:

she had idioms about onions

bought *tchotchke* for

the neighbour’s children

and then her own.

my grandmother says

she was a little *meshuggeneh*

(although she was *mishpucha*, family, of course)

she never recovered from travelling

alone to the united states at age 13

knowing her family were dead.

when she shaved horseradish for pesach

and the walls would sweat with

the sharp smell

but her eyes were always dry

she said to my mother

that it was her tongue-

her tongue which crawled out of her mouth

and made strange sounds

verbs and vowels that tasted

sour

since she lost her tongue

she couldn’t remember

who she was

anymore

words like

peeled *kroyt*

down the drain.

**Reflective commentary:**

Kaveh Akbar’s poem ‘Do You Speak Persian’ begins and ends with night; I decided to begin and end with cabbages, one of the few words I know in Yiddish (*kroyt*). Akbar’s poem intertwines language with his heritage as Persian, I intertwined mine as an Ashkenazi Jew with equally faltering knowledge of the language of my family, which oscillated between Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

In Akbar’s poem we are invited to lose ourselves in the Persian language, without knowledge of the phrases he uses. As such, I decided to tell the story of my great-grandmother, who lost part of her identity when she forgot how to speak her native tongue, Russian, and took on another, English. Akbar’s image of swallowing words moved me to focus on my great-grandmother’s life through the imagery of food, cabbages and the kitchen.

I left my Yiddish unexplained as Akbar left his Persian, although the words are quite well-known, as are Akbar’s Persian phrases: “*Delam barat tang shodeh*”, I miss you, and “*Shab bekheir*”, good night.

In Akbar’s poem I sensed the urgency of the need to hold onto words before we lose them, to treasure words, to take care of them. Akbar’s exploration of the struggle of language, being an immigrant or “other” in a new place and learning a new language yet forgetting your own, represented in the beautiful futility of a star travelling light years only to “die in the back of an eye” seemed to me to express grief, longing, loss, hopelessness, but also the need to reconnect and find new meanings. This poem serves as an ode to my great-grandmother and her search for language but also an ode to grief, and the people whose words get lost in their lives.