

Public Sector Poetry Journal

Telling Stories about Education, Health and Social Care



Issue 2 - Spring 2022

Public Sector Poetry Journal



Edited by Casey Bailey and
Korrin Smith-Whitehouse

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*Great poetry is always written by somebody straining to go beyond
what he can do*

-Stephen Spender
As quoted in *The New York Times* (26 March 1961)



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About Us

Public Sector Poetry Journal is a literary journal based in Northamptonshire, UK. The journal is funded by *Arts Council, England* and supported by the *University of Northampton*.

The journal's aim is to give voice to public sector workers in Education, Health and the Social Care sectors. Poems provide an insight into these sectors and shine a light on the frustrations, challenges, concerns and joys of those working in them.

We aim to connect those working in Health, Education and Social Care who also poet, introducing poets to each other's work and creating a new platform for a new audience.

We are privileged, humbled and extremely grateful for every single poem submitted to us. Every poem submitted will contribute to a growing body of data about the sector; we will use ethnographic poetry to research the lived experiences of public sector workers.

Public Sector Poetry Journal aims to highlight issues facing public sector workers through poetry and advocate for change and improvement in the public sector, using poetry as a form of activism.

Foreword

When I was first asked to play a role in editing an edition of *Public Sector Poetry Journal*, I strongly considered saying no. This was not a reflection of what I thought of the concept of the journal, but of the realities of being a poet who works in the public sector. Where would I find the time? Then I thought about the fact that I am often asked where I find the time, and I often say that when it is important, you make the time.

This is important. In industries that are often seen as those where you go to do an important job, but not a well-paid one, and in an art form that is called for at the most grand of occasions but never rewarded with the largest fee, it is important that, as a minimum, we have our voices heard, and I was not going to miss my opportunity to be part of that. I am grateful that Korrin reached out and feel privileged to have read the stunning poetry that we have received.

Working in the public sector can be a treasure chest in the middle of a minefield on a day-to-day basis, knowing that the wins can be beyond compare, but always conscious of the potential

pitfalls. Personally, I have always found poetry to be the perfect companion, allowing me to capture moments and suspend them in time; to process them, to share them and to really live in them.

The poems that we selected for this journal encapsulate that feeling for me - in the stark reality shared in Faye Marshall's *Youth and death* and in the sharp humour cutting through Laura Lewis-Waters' *Friday Period Four* and everything in between. These poems will bring you sadness and joy and will give a reflection of a world that can often be overlooked. For me to have the privilege of reading this work, somebody had to find the time and headspace to write it and pluck up the courage to send it. I want to thank everyone who sent poetry for this edition. You have reminded me of the beauty in the connection between poetry and what we do for work; you have reminded me of something I have been guilty of forgetting about: the real, human stories that live behind the mask of public sector work.

Much love and respect,
Casey x

Contributors

Will Pittam was born in Wolverhampton and grew up in Staffordshire. He has worked as an English teacher in Further Education and as an LSA/Learning Mentor in secondary schools. He currently lives in London. His work has appeared in *The Manchester Review*, *Bare Fiction*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Moth*, and *Fawn Press anthology Elements: Natural and The Supernatural*. He currently lives in London.

Rachael Li Ming Chong is a mathematics teacher, working in a London secondary school. She is currently a finalist for the *Let Teachers Shine Awards 2022*. She is a commended poet in the *Verve Poetry Festival Competition 2021* and a winner of the *Poetry Archive's Word View 2021* competition. Her writing has been published in various online platforms and anthologies, including *Poetry for Good*, the *Royal Society of Literature*, *Where We Find Ourselves* (Arachne Press, 2021), *Words from the Brink* (Arachne Press, 2021) and *Beginnings* (Verve Poetry Press, 2022).

Loo Toni is an emerging writer and teacher and lives in West Sussex. She has worked as a teacher in Peckham, Lewisham, Croydon and West Sussex, and also writes poetry and audio drama. Loo is currently also a nursery practitioner, and believes passionately in the Reggio Emilio approach summed up in the poem by Loris Malaguzzi, *The 100 Languages*. She has a special interest in neurodiversity and in promoting the rights of children to have a happy life.

Rob Walton is from Scunthorpe, and now lives in Whitley Bay. From Wednesday to Friday he works as a primary school teacher in Newcastle upon Tyne. On days when he is not in school, he writes poems, flash fictions and short stories for adults and children, and his work has appeared in various anthologies and magazines. *Arachne Press* published his debut poetry collection, *This Poem Here*, in March 2021. He has also written scripts and columns for *Scunthorpe United's matchday magazine*.

Neil Coote has worked in secondary education for 10 years in many different roles, and is currently Head of Geography at a secondary school in Northampton. Neil enjoys challenging the brilliant minds of every type of student and tries to encourage creative thinking wherever he can, trying to remember that growth can be sideways and curved as well as upwards and making it his daily mission to help students realise their own individual potential. Whenever the opportunity arises to breathe, Neil reflects on how lucky he is.

Anna Cole is an English teacher, poet and mum from Bradford, West Yorkshire. Anna decided that, after years of teaching poetry in school and encouraging her students to write and perform poetry, she should really put her 'money where her mouth was' and get her poems out of the secret notebook, into the world and in front of some actual audiences. Anna has performed at various poetry nights in West Yorkshire, *Shambala Festival* and, most nerve wracking of all, at the popular slam events she runs in her school.

Laura Lewis-Waters is a mum, teacher and research student from Warwickshire. Having studied Literature, History, Creative Writing and Volcanology and after living on three continents, she is now finally settled teaching English at secondary school and researching verbatim and map poetry for a PhD. Her poetry has recently been published in *The Mechanics Institute Review*, *Public Sector Poetry Journal* and *Street Cake Magazine*.

Faye Marshall is a Clinical Nurse Specialist working in Palliative Care at *Leeds Teaching Hospital's Trust*. She began writing creatively during the summer of 2021. Her writing is informed by her diverse career in nursing, where she has worked across the healthcare sector, including acute medicine and hospital care, oncology, community nursing and the hospice sector.

Dami Okhiria is a junior doctor, a published poet and a spoken word artist based in South Yorkshire. She has won numerous poetry slams and is currently the *Hammer and Tongue Cambridge Slam Champion*. She writes about her experiences in life and medicine.

Ella Walsworth-Bell has worked as a paediatric speech therapist for the NHS for eighteen years within Cornwall and currently works for a mental health team with young people and their families who are in crisis. She is the mother of a teenage son who has autism and OCD; her writing explores disability and acceptance, otherness and parenthood.

Matthew Paul lives in Rotherham and has worked in local government since April Fool's Day 1992 and leads on school place planning for three local authorities. Matthew's poetry collection, *The Evening Entertainment*, was published by *Eyewear* in 2017, and his two collections of haiku – *The Regulars* and *The Lammas Lands* - were published by *Snapshot Press* in 2006 and 2015. Matthew has recently had poems published in *Bad Lilies*, *The Friday Poem*, *The High Window* and *The North*, and he regularly reviews poetry pamphlets for *Sphinx*.

Elizabeth Osmond is a consultant neonatologist working in a busy regional intensive care unit in Bristol. She cares for critically unwell infants and their families. In recent years, she has started writing poetry as a creative outlet for processing and understanding her work as a clinician. She won third prize in the *Hippocrates Prize for Poetry 2021*.

Vic Leeson is a poet, psychotherapist and activist from Rotherham, South Yorkshire. Until 2019, Vic worked as a school counsellor in both primary and secondary schools, but ultimately felt forced to leave the profession due to the compromises she experienced, both for herself and the children she was supporting. Vic now works as a therapist in private practice and is also Poet-in-Residence for *Counsellors Together UK*, a campaign group tackling the prevalence of unpaid work within mental health professions.

Charlotte Ansell lives in Rochester and works for the NHS as a Child & Adolescent Psychotherapist in *CAMHS*. Her third poetry collection *Deluge*, published by *Flipped Eye*, was a 2019 *Poetry Book Society* winter recommendation. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry Review*, *Mslexia*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Prole*, *Algebra of Owls* and various anthologies. She was a recipient of a *Royal Society of Literature - Literature Matters Award* in 2020 with fellow poet Janett Plummer, and is a member of *Malika's Poetry Kitchen Collective*.

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The Horticulture Boys

Will Pittam

are difficult, I'm told. & it's true:
they fight, tread mud through the corridor,
flat-out refuse to write.

& I have struggled,
since coming back from America,

with the GCSE curriculum, the lack
of affordable rent, & these boys,

thirty-strong, storming in, each week,
laughing, swearing. One saying,

I hate English.

I know, I say. You've told me that before.

But then you see them work the grounds,
all teenaged spindle

cutting & curing, planting & pruning,

green coats hanging like the roofs of shelters,
hooded faces pinched against the rain.

Their teacher explains how to plant
herbaceous borders, & they bow

before the soil, cupping prayer bowl of roots,
of transplanted white flowers.

I see them in a dream:
a green procession, far from

their *struggles with comprehension*

carving a path through a country
I've come to loath,

robed in those big green coats,
lighting the road between

the Maths & English blocks,
like green flames.

They call me down from my high window. The clock
tower chimes. The summer night turns the fields
& horses purple,

& I see they've dug a hole beside the ash tree
where once I wept from stress,

&, silently, they lead me.

Transplant me.

Carefully press the soil
around my ankles.



Perimeter Expressions

Rachael Li Ming Chong

If you are who I think you are
you are the one I was told to keep an eye on
after an observation where we cut up
paper rectangles to learn
about perimeter expressions.
Lobbing scraps of paper
the moment I turn my back
then immediate head down smile hands up
when my attention realigns in your direction.
You displayed 'classic under the radar
behaviour' - I was ashamed
to be told my version of you
needed to be tempered.

If you've done what I think you've done
your footsteps span

a limited area
 like the shape you cut out
 waved around and brightly exclaimed
*there's a distance of four 'x's
 and eight 'y's 'round this one.*
 And that middle margin
 you disliked drawing to save
 space in your book - suspended
 mid-line. Algebra's variables
 dissolve into zeroes.

I conjure up previous lessons
 like everyone else in the canteen
 our eyes cast on over-bleached tiles
 scanning the learning objectives
 the key words the questions
 haunted by anything missed
 that could've diagnosed
 the draw of the glint
 chosen
 in place of all those futures.
 You tried to return
 to the sanctity of our gates, after.
 In your Year 7 exercise book
 (the one divided

sullenly into middle margins)
 there is a comment
 my handwriting
 praising you for recalling
 skills from prior lessons
 so fluently. I moved you
 to a higher set shortly after.
 Flick through and see
 those subsequent pages
 empty
 in celebration
 of the space where you make

 your next mark.

Part/Part/Whole

Loo Toni

Part, part, whole.
 Kids are the tiny part,
 Teachers are the other part,
 The Government is the whole.

Part, part, whole.
 Joy is the tiny part,
 Sadness is the major part,
 Teaching is the whole.

Part, part, whole.
 Prison is the whole,
 I mean, school is the hole,
 Exhaustion is the part,
 Anxiety is the whole.

Part, part, whole.
 Children are in a hole,
 Happiness has no part,
 Does *Ofsted* want to part,
 The head from the body,
 The childhood from the children,
 Joy from the whole?

Dawning

Rob Walton

She comes through to my classroom
to check the sunrise in there.

It keeps her going through the day.
Those colours. That dawning.

She checks classrooms facing
this way that way

for the best perspective.
The fillip. The hope.

She logged on in the dark.
She'll go home in the dark

but thinking of the sunrise in the morning
and which window is best to view it

and how to point the children
in that direction.

will keep her going.

I know though

Neil Coote

Your hoops aren't my shape sir,
 I can throw them behind my back and catch them though
 I can spin them on the tip of my limbs though
 I can split them into two and link them back together though,
 I can though

Your hats aren't my size sir,
 I can fold them in half and restyle them though
 I can spin them like a plate and keep it going for 26 minutes
 though
 I can launch them perfectly straight for miles like a Frisbee
 though,
 I can though

Your hurdles aren't my height sir,
 I can limbo under them though
 I can walk them like a tightrope with my eyes closed on my
 tiptoes though
 I can loop continuously upside-down around and around them
 though,
 I can though

I know,
 I'm not allowed to put that in my mark book though
 Although,
 I know you though,

I know.

Taking Maria Outside

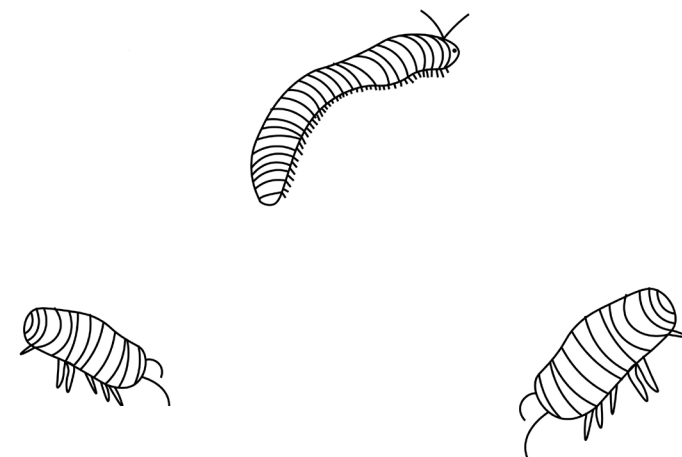
Anna Cole

Sometimes, Thursday afternoons, I can take Maria's class
outside

I say outside

I mean a wild finger of deep wood
that winds around the back of the art block
and drops into a piece of hollow ground
and sends its leaves and rocks and long grasses
along the edge and into the heart of our mad city places

I take Maria there and we peel back a thick slice of bark
off a fallen tree and watch the woodlice crawling
and there she speaks more words to me than in four whole
months of teaching
she likes to watch the woodlice move and she likes to feel the
light and shade
and press her small hand to the wood and rub the dirt with her
shoes



and she's forgot the Slovak word for insect
but she knows the one for tree and
though we both keep quiet about the secret language of her
people
the weak spring sun translates a moments ease between us

and in that bright clearing place
we talk about the crawling bugs for five whole holy minutes
before its time to turn back
head inside.



Friday Period Four

Laura Lewis-Waters

On Friday afternoons
we ignore the phones
pack up our belongings
and scatter –
to the back of dark classrooms
where we bury our heads
among KitKat wrappers
and screwed up paper balls
of someone's hard work.

If we keep still enough
they won't see us
through the frosted glass
and if we tap keys quietly
they won't hear us
and drag us away
to distant parts of the school

to teach Pythagoras, Photosynthesis
or anything else
we are not qualified to teach.

We turn off our emails
when the pleas start to arrive
"still need cover period 4"
and cower –
as the harsh clack of heels
burns our throats
we turn a blind eye to the
"urgent need cover".

We are not bad people
we've done our time
time and again
we remember the time our time
was promised back to us again.
We do want to help others, but
we also need time to do our job.
We are not bad people
we are English teachers
and we have learnt
to hide in shadows.

Youth and death

Faye Marshall

Youth and death,

Should not share a room.

An ache answers as promptly as a sharply dressed bellhop,
sitting somewhere far deeper, than the deepest point of your
chest.

Fragile as temper, strong as old leather.

In the measurement.

In the instilled doubt.

A transcendental equation of time over choices, to the power
of pain, that no radicals can resolve.

"I suppose you get used to this, in your job?"

She said to me.

"No," I replied with my eyes and my mouth.

I never do.

My favourite love poem

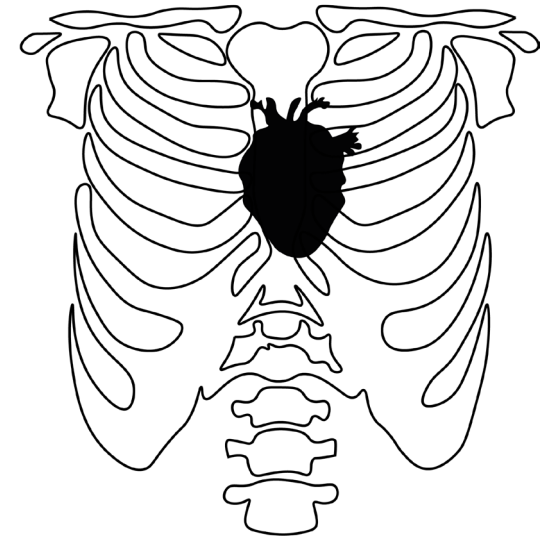
Dami Okhiria

The 5th intercostal space
Mid clavicular line

There it is...
Bea ting. Bea ting.
Though I cannot squeeze
Or taste it
I can feel, it's electricity
In my fingertips

Beating
And I know
This.
Is where love lives

And since muscle
Can contract
Without life
So I know
Love persists
In death



Statement

Ella Walsworth-Bell

Name of person with legal responsibility

i'm Eric's mum. this is his dad. we hold him when he's hurting

Eric doesn't like school, doesn't want to go to school

we know. a sun is a dying star: flaring, fading

Parents views and aspirations

light soars across galaxies

Struggles to communicate with others

and yet, he is bright. he eclipses us

In line with his diagnosis of Autism

we cry, sometimes. in the dark of night, we cry

When calm and regulated, he can enjoy some social contact

we love him, rise to hug him. he shoves us away. it hurts

Can experience prolonged periods of extreme distress

slice into us with butchers blades, surgeons knives: sharpness
is all

there are no health needs

our son is strong.

a statutory social care assessment is about to be started

fuck you. fuck you all to hell and back.

This plan must be reviewed at least once a year

the flip side of the moon is black, circling the sun.

Accommodation Strategy

Matthew Paul

On the grey–black granite-effect worktop
in our floor’s disgusting kitchen sits

my ex-line-manager’s mug, packed with
chocolate-cake-crumbed knives.

SLT okayed the taking-down of walls
between the break-out space and the banks

of hot desks, enabling touchdown space
for ‘runners’, who work across localities.

I’m a designated ‘sitter’. I will have to buy
better headphones, and, to keep the smells

of ready meals and leftovers at bay, learn
how to breathe only through my mouth.

My office

Elizabeth Osmond

Although I wish it had
large Georgian windows
comfortable wing backed chairs
far reaching views
a piano in the corner
neat bookshelves

My office is small
windows almost opaque
like a preterm chest x ray
I look out over service ducts
through a layer of grey city dust

Rotating on stained swivel chairs
we debate physiology
turn over new ideas
On a bright summer day

radiators hum
climate inclement

I write guidelines and papers
among overflowing shelves
manikins lean over to watch me
a spine without limbs
a tiny preterm model
nestled in oxygen masks

We meet to discuss the growing
of doctors, as well as infants
who also need nourishment
and tender care.
There have been tears
and once
a slammed door

But more often: joy
laughter rings through the wall
interrupting work
Coffee with friends is rich
sharp

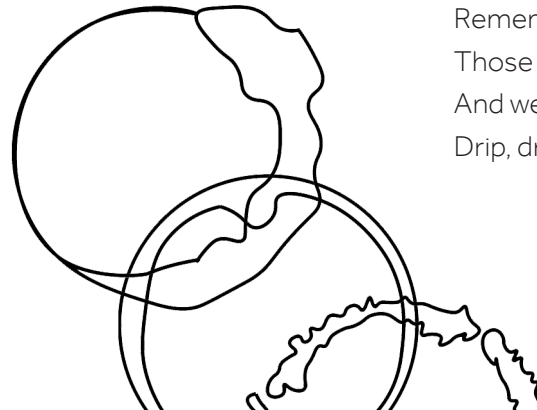
My happy wall
is filled with cards
and baby photos
From them, light shines
diminishing
those other discomforts



Mug

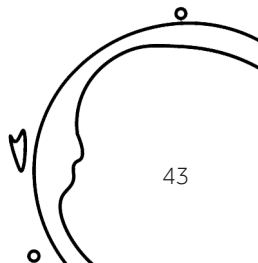
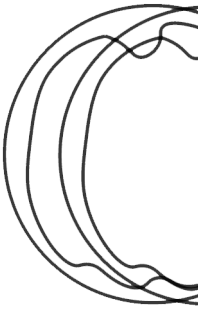
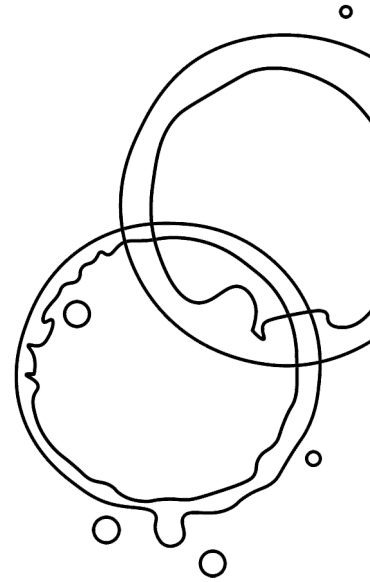
Vic Leeson

I look up
 See the brown shackles
 Of the caffeine rings
 Tighten their grip
 Notice the chip on the china lip
 As the tension
 Of holding on
 Feels too much
 Rusty metal concentric
 Circles constrict
 As outcome measures
 And CAMHS's referrals
 Shut the Emergency Exit
 Younger footsteps
 Come looking
 For value and safety
 They don't see me as



This daily fight
 Is consuming
 Leaving me energy-seeking
 Some youthful vitality
 That would motivate me
 To speak truths
 And dilute the fear
 Of being believed
 I need to be seen
 I need to
 Ditch the caffeine

I imagine years later
 We'll drink together
 I'll explain the concept of kintsugi
It's in the broken bits we find the beauty
 We'll nod knowingly
 Taking sips from our cups
 Remembering those rings,
 Those footsteps, those chips
 And we'll feel a different
 Drip, drip, drip.



I do not want to be the one to tell you

Charlotte Ansell

this door doesn't open
or that it might - for some,
within seven days,
otherwise let's say every five months
and yes we hold the keys
but they are rusty or broken,
no one will tell you
that getting in is not the answer you think,
that behind this door is another door
and another and another,
for every seventy or so of you,
there is one of us,
no one has arms that wide.

Let's say it's like that riddle,
the one with the two guards and the two doors,
where one guard is a liar and the other tells the truth,

one door leads to freedom, the other to death,
you have one question, just one
so you must guess the single thing that will help you pick
the door to freedom.
I want to tell you I am not the liar
and this is that door
but I'm not convinced

because sometimes
I cannot even remember your face
or why you are here.

Most days I am a wall
that only looks like a door,
or a staved in window,
the spattered glass on the floor
and I cannot be the one to tell you,
I cannot keep holding my hands out
when my hands are tied,
I cannot keep saying wait,
wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait,
when I know how risky that is.
I want nothing more than to let you in
but this house does not have the foundations
to hold you.

Career choice

Charlotte Ansell

Beyond the windows are hills
that look close enough to touch,
you wish you could but
you are trapped
with a child
who makes a cell of this benign space,
who is about to throw a metal car at your face -
you cannot use your hands as a shield
and risk the rebound.

Instead you stay poised and taut,
remember the last time, your split lip,
the shame of running through the corridors
after a small boy whose mind makes a horror
of this room, where the doll's house
looms in the corner,
hard plastic figures are imbued

with a life of their own,
not least the decapitated man
he has jammed behind the radiator.

When you were young and adults asked:
What do you want to be when you grow up?
you were never one to say astronaut,
trapeze artist, superhero, clown.
You longed for only one job;
Librarian. Custodian of all those dreams.

So now, in the presence of this five-year-old,
who furiously scribbles on his arms with green felt tip
fervently believing he is *The Hulk*
or loops Sellotape around his fingers
shooting the ring of it out as *Spider-Man*,
it occurs to you that somehow you became
the keeper of alternative realities after all,
just like books, no less necessary.

Notes, Acknowledgements, Thanks

Thank you to *Arts Council England* for funding this project and making *Public Sector Poetry Journal* possible.

Thank you also to the *University of Northampton* for promoting *Public Sector Poetry* and to *Writing East Midlands* for their interest in this project; their willingness to promote the journal was a fantastic support and enabled us to attract submissions from all over the East Midlands. Thank you.

Thanks to Daisie-Belle Downer at *BBC Radio Northampton* for all her support and enthusiasm too - she has really supported the project and promoted it widely throughout Northamptonshire.

A very big thank you to the wonderful Casey Bailey for his enthusiasm for *Public Sector Poetry*; Casey supported the project and agreed to guest edit before we had even started to collate Issue 1 so we are grateful for the confidence he showed in the project. Casey is a talented and busy poet and performer, as well as being a dedicated educator, so we are delighted he found time in his busy schedule to contribute to Issue 2. Thank you Casey for promoting the project so widely, enabling us to receive submissions from all over the U.K.

The fantastic illustrations for the magazine all come courtesy of Tabitha Dudley, and Louis Parkinson-Sykes has done a wonderful job of designing the journal too. Tabitha and Louis are undergraduate students from the Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology at the *University of Northampton*; thank you for your creativity and enthusiasm under tight deadlines.

Thank you to *Latitude Festival 2022* for their interest in the journal and for booking *Public Sector Poetry* this summer; you've provided a fantastic platform for our work - we are thrilled to be on the bill! Thank you!

Most importantly, thank you to every single person who trusted us with their poems; each poem was read and valued. We can't thank you enough for sharing your experiences with us.

Will Pittam

Faye Marshall

Rachael Li Ming Chong

Dami Okhiria

Loo Toni

Ella Walsworth-Bell

Rob Walton

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