



# Field Surveys and Demons: A Review of “Salient: A Poem” by Elizabeth T Gray Jr.

**BOOK REVIEW**

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**VIRGINIA TECH.**  
PUBLISHING

## **ABSTRACT**

A review by Fergus Smith of “Salient: a Poem” by Elizabeth T Gray Jr. 1849 words. Elizabeth T Gray Jr., 2020, “Salient: a Poem”, New Directions, New York, ISBN 9780811229241, \$16.95.

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## **KEYWORDS:**

First World War; Poetry; Review;  
Ypres; Passchendaele

## **TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Smith, F. (2021). Field Surveys and Demons: A Review of “Salient: A Poem” by Elizabeth T Gray Jr. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(1), pp. 186–189. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.252>

While serving as an officer in the British Army, I spent four happy years in Catterick Garrison, an underused training base in the blustery North Yorkshire moors. I loved the easy access to good fishing and the picturesque villages in which I bought my first house. Years later, to absorb the armoured units relocated from Germany after a strategic defence review, the Garrison expanded at an incredible pace to become one of the largest in Europe. The major roads were rerouted, housing estates and shopping centres erected, and new barracks plonked on what had once been wafting wheat fields. If I go there now, the ageing satnav in my car doesn't recognise the roads. The cursor arrow cuts bravely across what it thinks is open terrain. The line of oak trees that once marked a turning have been cut down and replaced by a garage. It's only once I get to the shabby retail outlets known as the "White Shops" that I recognise where I am.

*Salient* is an extended poem about this experience, the search for a semblance of certainty we could call knowledge. In this case, it's about understanding the third battle of Ypres in the First World War, otherwise known as Passchendaele. Even though there are 73 entries, it's not a standard collection. The poems and readings are in a specific order and need to be taken in sequence. This storytelling structure allows you to absorb the setting in progressively more detail. The first section concerns military life; the second, the nature of weaponry; the third, the challenges of intelligence gathering and so on. One senses tension mounting as the readings shift towards the infantry experience, the mud, the incessant rain, and the destructive power of mines. It concludes with a section of reflection.

Passchendaele encapsulated the worst aspects of attritional warfare. First seized in 1914 by the Germans, the villages were recovered, lost, recovered, lost again, and what was left of them finally captured in November 1917 by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions. The terrain was low lying and gently sloping, so any elevated feature became vital ground. The campaign had limited political support and went ahead with minimal planning and logistics. Unseasonal rain reduced copses, roads, fields, and villages to sucking swamps. There were over 500,000 German and Allied casualties, and almost 90,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers have never been found. Their remains were absorbed by the earth.

When one thinks of the soldier poets of the First World War – Sassoon, Graves, Owen, and so on—one gets drawn into portrayals of dismemberment, gas, rotten leadership. A hundred years later, and a civilian, Gray has to take a more subtle approach. She researched her subject thoroughly; walking through fields to make sense of the battlefield maps, reading the artillery manuals, and pouring over the incident

reports. Rather than seeking to answer the question, *how was it?* she asks us to consider *how can we know?*

The chronological storyline provides a framework against which we can stick established facts: this happened, that happened. Layered on top of this, writerly practices create a haunting and memorable effect: startling points of view, obscure philosophical comparisons, the absence of any attempt to conceal the author's lack of military experience, and the artful interlacing of sensory detail.

The choices around narrative viewpoint demonstrate the author's skill as a storyteller. In "Looking for the War" she writes as a military historian trying to understand the data. She is profoundly aware of the voyeuristic nature of her inquiry. "In The Soft Parts of the Body" is a piece of verbal advice given by a battlefield surgeon to a clinician newly arrived at the Dressing Station. "Night: Shell-Hole" is from the point of view of a terrified soldier hiding in the mud below a corpse. On the following page, "Night: Bedroom", is a wonderfully corresponding voice from the soldier's wife. She too is hiding below the body of another and is also afraid.

In "Taking Refuge" (page 9), Gray becomes a ghostly conductor instructing a bugler how to play "The Last Post" at the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing.

When you play the first notes visualize  
that from here to the heights of the circled hills  
The Missing  
can hear and that when the notes reach them  
they stop what they are doing,  
come to attention, and turn  
towards the sound.

Gray does not pretend to be a soldier. Her poems are as much about seeking to understand soldiering as about war itself. She employs a dispassionate positionality and, in so doing, finds an odd beauty in the stark military reports, the service manuals that she gleefully parodies, and the cold mechanics of killing. "How a Mark VII Trench Mortar Fuse is Like Love" recalls "The Naming of the Parts" by Henry Reed, but Gray brings the light reflecting off the "detonator socket, which is made of brass" into our lives so that we find, stamped on the hearts of our loved ones, "the length of the delay, the lot number, the initials of the loader" (page 21).

Sometimes, the distance between what is known and unknown makes her sound ill-informed. "General Description of the Line" is about the positioning and concealment of defensive trenches. It finishes with the instruction that the front trench "can be swept with machine gun fire" (page 19), a statement timed for melodramatic effect. If I recall British military doctrine correctly, and the associated

principles of defence, mutually supporting trenches should always be able to fire on each other in case one is taken. But that's the point: warfare, especially one fought in this manner, is a gloriously wasteful exercise. Although we might understand some of the reasons, and some of the conditions, we can never know the full picture. The absurdity and carnage become buried beneath tarmacked roads and the abstruse language of doctrinal manuals.

To make sense of the brutality, Gray employs a technique drawn from social science research. She contrasts the buttoned-up formality of quotations with her own lyric poetry and references to the "Chöd" traditions of Buddhism. These Tibetan rites require practitioners to cut through any sense of self so that they may be released from their inherent arrogance. The implicit assumption is that by accepting fear, demons, and evil things, we free ourselves from their influence. As she explains in the introduction, the wrathful deities somehow "could be transformed into teachers and guardians" (page xiv). This comparison works beautifully at the imaginative level. One can easily see how offering one's body up to be devoured by evil could be contrasted with a battlefield in which mud and human viscera are efficiently blended by artillery fire. As another example, the readings are interspersed with references to protective Amulets. The first of these, "Amulet Against Madness", is overtly eastern in its referents. The following ones, such as "Amulet Against Ground Deities" and "Amulet Against Dismemberment", refer instead to the tools of war: a gas mask and field dressing respectively. The last of the series is rather unhappily titled: "Recognizing the Signs That an Amulet Has Failed."

Not all the Buddhist comparisons work for me. Since I don't know anything about "Gyalpo", "Machik Lapdrön", or "Bla", I have to Google them and this detracts from the reading experience. If readers are familiar with such traditions they will draw more from these poems than I did but, again, that's the point. How are we to understand the unknowable?

The act of knowing is equated throughout the work with the act of seeing, implying that what can be detected by the eye defines what can be understood. One might challenge this assertion from the perspective of the other senses but that is not to say that it does not make the point. We trust sight more than other senses and we fear what we cannot see. Repeated through the poems are references to maps, compass errors, surveys, dead ground, obstacles, concealment, camouflage, direction finding, and photo reconnaissance. Several poems are plays on the theme of "The Missing", and these are, for my money, among the strongest. They reflect the writer's playfulness with functional military terminology, the storyteller's creativity, and the historian's critical eye.

In "Periscope" (page 53), for example, we find a concise study of the relationship between sight, emotion, and memory:

The tiny area shown on the map flattens in the  
men's hands and its  
certainties begin to rub off.  
A lark is not concerned, and this helps.  
It is very cold, and memory, with bits of what  
happened floating just  
beneath the surface,  
has almost reached the top of their boots.

Another very effective technique is the presentation of a map at the beginning of the book, replete with lines showing the Allied advances "30 July to 26 November 1917" (page 4). From the initial, westernmost line, the salient gradually bulges ever eastward. On closer inspection of the scale, we note that even at its widest part the captured terrain is barely five miles and of questionable significance. Had it been important, it would have been retaken and held since 1914.

Towards the end of the book there is a second map of a much larger scale. Hand-drawn pencil marks show the unconnected forward limits of battalion and company positions. Behind one such arc, a studious adjutant has written the date. He might equally have written the time. The empty spaces between his jottings indicate ground that is not held and therefore open to exploitation by counterattack. Two pages later, a transcription of radio reports (page 71) from 6 November mentions:

6:49 a.m.      15 men seen working round the crest  
of Hill 55 at V.30.a NE of PASSCHENDAELE village.

Then, later:

8.05 a.m.      28<sup>th</sup> Battalion... reported they  
have gained all objectives and are consolidating.  
Casualties heavy.

It takes little imagination to picture the muddy fate of this first, courageous platoon, or how heavy the battlegroup casualties were.

This extended poem is about how we come to comprehend and understand an event of mass slaughter that took place for limited military or political effect. There is no answer. We are left guessing why and what it means. In fact, our western, liberal, democratic traditions do not enable us to understand our own question. We have to look East, to Buddhist doctrine, to find a model that in any way serves this purpose.

As with all poetry, it only takes a few lines of timeless writing for us to lift the description from one context and use it to inform another. There are many examples in this work, but the final poem, “At Gouberg Copse” (page 92), an incantation to the mother earth in which so many young men are buried, carries particular potency:

We buried more than the strength  
of the regiment on these terrible ridges.

Please hold us with unbiassed compassion.  
Hold with compassion the gods

and demons gathered here. Please stay here  
and grant your blessings.

As we face the task of understanding our most recent wars,  
this seems a very reasonable prayer to make.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

Fergus Smith is a PhD student in Creative Writing at the University of Keele, UK. He served as an officer in The Parachute Regiment for twelve years and has published three novels: “In the Shadow of the Mountain” (2013), “Sunrise in the Valley” (2016), and “Along the Swift River” (2019). He can be contacted on [fergus@fergusmith.com](mailto:fergus@fergusmith.com).

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**Submitted:** 13 April 2021    **Accepted:** 16 April 2021    **Published:** 27 May 2021

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