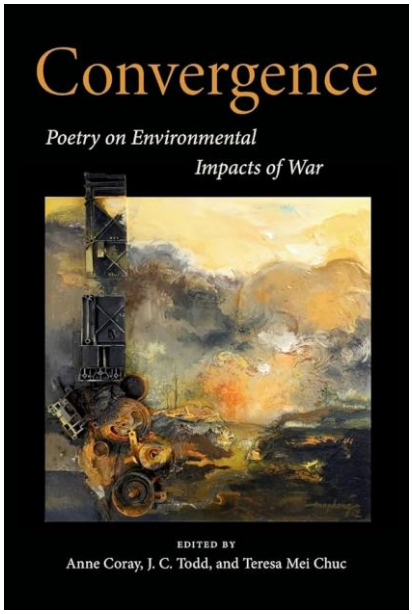
Book Review: "Anthem for Doomed Ecosystems: The Emergence of Eco-War Poetry". *Convergence. Poetry on Environmental Impacts of War*, ed. by Anne Coray, J.C. Todd and Teresa Mei Chuc, Oakland, Scarlet Tanager Books, 2026.

By Sarah Montin[1]



What happens when war and environmental catastrophe are no longer considered separately? Published in May 2026 and co-edited by poets Teresa Mei Chuc, Anne Coray, and J. C. Todd, *Convergence*, *Poetry on Environmental Impacts of War* responds by bringing together war poetry and ecopoetry in the first anthology of its kind. At a moment when armed conflict and ecological

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devastation are increasingly experienced as interconnected realities rather than discrete crises, this publication appears particularly timely and necessary.

Two years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Yale School of the Environment documented the ecological toll of the conflict, underscoring the extent to which environmental destruction has become intrinsic to modern warfare:

> In the two years since Russia launched its invasion, Ukraine has seen its forests burned, its rivers polluted, and its wildlife decimated… In total, the war has inflicted roughly $60 billion in environmental damage. Fires have burned 9,300 square miles, an area the size of Vermont […] According to the ministry, mines have been scattered across some 67,000 square miles, an area larger than Florida. […] In total, the war is responsible for the equivalent of 119 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions – more than the yearly output of the Netherlands – from military operations, forest fires, leaks from sabotaged gas pipelines, planes having to fly longer routes to avoid the conflict zone, and from efforts now and in the future to rebuild Ukraine (2024).

The report concluded that if the humanitarian disaster of the war was of primary importance, the disruption of ecological systems that accompanies it could no longer be set aside as a by-product of war but had to be envisaged as one of its enduring legacies – a topic which remains surprisingly absent from public debates as well as from literary and artistic responses to war. The idea that environmental destruction has been systematically set aside in evocations of conflict is what prompted poet and editor Teresa Mai Chuc to assemble this anthology:

> I was born in Sài Gòn, Việt Nam and fled my Vietnamese homeland in a boat with my mother and brother shortly after the American war. […] The war and its human impacts were tremendous. However, hardly mentioned was the impact on my motherland: the rainforests, the rivers, the land, the flora and fauna (2026).

The choice of the striking, single Latinate word "convergence" for the anthology's title serves to counteract the widely-used and euphemistic "collateral", often applied to environmental degradation in military context. Bringing to mind the French militant concept "*convergence des luttes*" ("the convergence of struggles"), the title invites us to adopt a non-human perspective as ecological and military crises converge. However, as Anne Coray warns in her introduction – "our intent in this anthology is not to minimize the

human toll of war but to expand the dialogue" (p. xv) –, the focus on environmental damage does not set aside the human devastation of war: it only seeks to amplify it by redirecting the reader's gaze. Quite understandably, the tradition of war writing has engaged almost exclusively with representing the human experience and cost of war, sidelining the environment, most often represented as an omnipresent but invisible backdrop to human suffering.

The invisibilisation of the non-human victims of war is, ultimately, what this anthology works to redress and repair. With a surprising epigraph poem by Thomas Hardy, *The Field of Waterloo*, the editors ground the anthology in the Anthropocene and remind the readers of the ecological losses inflicted on the "opprest green" (l.7) by the first mass-conflict of the industrial era: "Trodden and bruised to a miry tomb/ Are ears that have greened and will never be gold/ And flowers in the bud that will never bloom" (l.16-18). Two hundred years later, the same idea is more bitterly formulated in Pamela Uschuk's *Collateral Damage in Ukraine*: "Who speaks for animals as missiles/hiss and burst, lumps that burn/like dirty coal in poetry's heart?" (l.1-3). Her poem is an elegy for the non-human world destroyed by "the insistent insult of assault weapons" (l.33) – a line which is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's famously alliterative "stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (*Anthem for Doomed Youth*, l.3, p. 76) during the First World War. Whereas the British war poet accused an indifferent public of condemning his generation to die in the trenches, Pamela Uschuk laments here the unseen ecocide happening in Ukraine, a loss that goes largely unnoticed, let alone memorialized. The "dirty coal in poetry's heart" is also what forms the adamantine core of this anthology which repeatedly poses the same question: who speaks for the non-human victims of war, those without agency, voice, or memory?

From the Marcommanic Wars (167-180 BC) to the wars of colonization, through the First and the Second World War, conflicts in Pakistan, Kashmir, Korea, Sarajevo, Mozambique, Salvador, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War, the war in Ukraine and in Gaza, the anthology brings together the voices of 61 poets of different origins. If most of the poems were written in the last fifty years by civilian poets, a number of them are the work of (former) combatants, such as Sean McLain Brown's *First Snow* or Richard Levine's *If I Grow Too Old to Dream* – a text which unites bees and veterans in a Virgilian image warped by toxicity:

> Remembering nothing of home or the way
> there, the poisoned honeybee and the homeless

veteran wander aimlessly, until they drop. (1-3)

Alongside the disruption of pollination, the poems explore the manifold environmental impacts of military operations, from nuclear fallout to bombturbation, deforestation, water pollution, soil contamination and desiccation, as well as the "incidental takes" of endangered species during military training. Brian Turner's *Cuvier's Beaked Whales*, for instance, evokes the threat posed by submarine sonar pulses to whale populations, while Liza Wolff-Francis' *Dolphins of the Black Sea* addresses the thousands of dolphins dying as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. Teresa Mei Chuc's *Hundreds of Bombings a Day: A Ghazal* depicts an entire ecosystem under threat. A litany of heavy metals ("arsenic, mercury, lead, cadmium, chromium") functions as the refrain of this subverted ghazal for Gaza in which "olive trees, oranges, rats, fruit-bats, sunbirds" (l.5), as well as "animals and people, including children"(l.9), are victims of lethal contamination. In a similarly rhythmic chant, Gillian Clarke's *Lament* on the Gulf War formulates an elegy for the sea animals caught in the "funeral silk" (l.4) of oil spills and for the young soldiers caught in the "stink of anger" (l.18) and destruction. For other poets, emerging from the "black hole of loss" (p. 68) of human casualties is too difficult a task, and the poem announces itself as a failure from the onset, as Mariko Kitakubo and Deborah P Kolodji explain in their author's note. In their poem *Scarred* all that remains of Hiroshima is a severed haiku:

Echoes…
Birds who used to perch here
Long gone

Loss and the haunting absence of regeneration are the main themes of the collection, as the cover painting by Ann Pho, *There Was a Forest* (2020) suggests – ghosts of trees disappear behind grey and orange billows of smoke while a toxic green phosphorescence covers the ground. Jutting out of the frame, a collage of found materials evokes the encroachment of military machinery over natural environments. The same indelible scar, the ecological wound that cannot heal, forms the inspiration for Beatrice Szymkowiak's striking fragmented poems on the *zones rouges* of Northern France, forbidden zones still too damaged by bombing during the Great War for human habitation.

All in all, the ninety poems of the anthology succeed in forcefully bringing to our attention the extent of war's ecocidal impact by giving a voice and a place to non-human victims of conflict. The intent of the collection, as the subtitle explicitly suggest, is primarily to assemble these poems in a unique political and pedagogical gesture. The extra documentation, among which the postface by Rick Steiner (*Tallying the Costs: A Summary of Major Environmental Impacts of War*) and extensive class material (*Engage! Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts for Readers, Writers, Students and Teachers*) provided at the back of the book, aim both at educating the reader and encouraging them to reframe environmental issues within the current context of global conflict. Each poem in the anthology is accompanied by an author's note, specifying the geographical and historical context of the poem, as well as some of the poet's rhetorical choices. Such pedagogy does not always serve poetry well, and appears especially risky when, as is the case in this anthology, the presence of two prefaces (*On the poetry*, *On global consequences*) appears to oppose, or at the very least, separate, the poetic from the political. Yet the poems themselves resist or trouble this division: political engagement converges with a poetic apprehension of the natural world, and militant anger coexists with an exquisite attentiveness to the human and the non-human, expressed in unusual formal variations. *Convergence* succeeds in pioneering a politically urgent dialogue between war poetry and ecopoetry, bringing together political, ethical and aesthetic questions in a compelling and timely selection of poems. Reading this anthology opens our eyes to the devastating human and non-human entanglements of war, and reminds us, if need be, of the renewed importance of poets in destitute times.

References

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