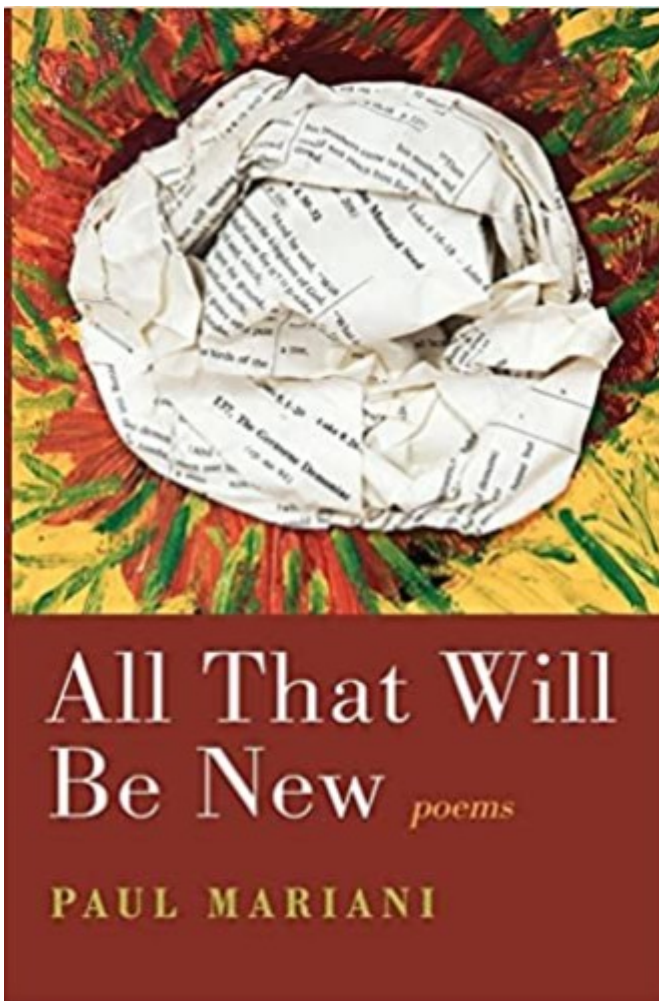


Paul Mariani seeks wisdom among the ghosts

The poet, now in his eighties, asks profound questions in a dazzling array of poems.

by [Philip C. Kolin](#) in the [August 10, 2022](#) issue

In Review



All That Will Be New

Poems

By Paul Mariani

Slant Books

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A distinguished man of letters, Paul Mariani gives us his ninth book of poems, which is perhaps his most compelling and most profound. One of his earlier volumes was entitled *Epitaphs for the Journey*, and now that journey is nearing its end as Mariani “raises unanswered questions you do not dare to ask” about how we “get to the other side . . . we are destined for.” In his early 80s, he acknowledges, “the sands in my own hourglass are nearly gone.”

The quintessential narrator, Mariani has many stories to tell of his long, fruitful life. Many of the “unanswered questions” he asks are found in this dazzling array of poems—elegiac, ekphrastic, panegyric, pastoral, lyrical, meditative—written in iambic pentameter, free verse, and even Dante’s terza rima. Just as powerfully diverse are the topics Mariani explores, from his ars poetica—painting—to nature in all its manifestations, from heroes like Harriet Tubman and Malcolm X to a catastrophe like COVID.

Not surprisingly, one of the first places Mariani raises questions is in his stunning handful of ekphrastic poems, where he helps readers see inside a painting (and often its artist’s life) but also shows how the painting reads us. Of Picasso’s *Guernica*, Mariani asks, “Pilgrim, what shall we make of all this.” In Georges de La Tour’s *Joseph the Carpenter*, Mariani shows how the mortal and divine coexist in love. “Out of the darkness behind the man who turns the augur into wood,” symbolizing a tau cross, we see the boy Jesus holding a candle that seems to pass “radiantly . . . through [his] outstretched hand.” This light radiates Jesus’ face as he helps Joseph, the protector and nurturer, a model of earthly obedience.

In Bastien-Lepage’s painting *Poor Fauvette*, the little girl reveals a “gaze” which elicits our sympathy, “before you too find yourself likewise turning away” in tears, as Mariani does when he runs into an old friend’s daughter after mass, her face masked but wounded by a “rift” with her brother.

Again, in “Wheat Fields Filled with Cypresses,” Mariani links Van Gogh’s “blue impastoed” sky with its “mottled clouds” to the “paint-daubed clouds” that Gerard Manley Hopkins saw in Dublin “with his own end coming on.” Mariani then connects these images in this minor masterpiece with the parable of the sower, emphasizing

how painter, poet-priest, and Mariani himself soldier down life's "darkening fields." Countering contemporary critics' view that Seurat's pointillist *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* was irreligious or tasteless, Mariani agrees with the artist that all is "floating here / as if frozen in eternity, coalescing in harmonies of endless dots," revealing "an Eden like nothing anyone has seen before."

But if Seurat shows us Eden, Picasso shows us hell. Here is Mariani's haunting first line: "Like war itself, the painting will swallow you." So do Mariani's descriptions of Picasso's apocalyptic images: a "howling Pieta," a Holy Ghost (dove) that "cries out in anguish," the gore of a "disembodied head," and a crumpled soldier, "his eyes askew in death." In the end, though, the last two ekphrastic poems, on Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew* and *Supper at Emmaus*, sum up the Christian hope and love that animates Mariani's canon. Like the apostles, we are summoned through Mariani's poems on Caravaggio, however shaken up we are "by what is really happening before our eyes."

Mariani seeks wisdom among his "beloved ghosts" too, including those generations of his family "who lie silently somewhere in my blood." There are also poems about his lifelong literary friends, Philip Levine, the unbeliever who could recite Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" so movingly that he "could turn even an agnostic into a believer," and Bob Pack, another doubter, whose conversations with Mariani sounded like "two rabbis" through which "blessed banter flows." Mariani looks forward to laughing with them again when they cross the great divide. And then there's the poem about the saintly Margaret—who, on the brink of crossing over, finds Mariani's wife, Eileen, telling her that they'll have lunch together "on the other side." For Mariani does not invoke death without a resurrection.

The tour de force of *All That Will Be New* is the five-page "A Periplus of Poets," Mariani's Dantesque poem beginning with his "turning from the dark" to see "a light coming toward me." It is his deceased teacher and mentor Allen Mandelbaum. Like Virgil, Mandelbaum introduces to Mariani all the poets whose biographies he has written after spending "years searching for a reality" among "those precious scraps they left." Mariani could make no stronger statement about the role that ars poetica played in all those "unanswered questions" to which he seeks answers. Among the parade of ghostly writers are Wallace Stevens, John Berryman, the "Jersey Doctor" William Carlos Williams (who in another poem Mariani extols for getting life right, "which still moves me all these years"), the "raw-nerved Robert Lowell," Hart Crane, and Hopkins, who created beauty out of life's "blue bleak embers," lifting Mariani's

imagination to offer him “consolation.”

Running through these poems is Mariani’s keen description of and profound reflection on nature, with both its pined splendor and its tumultuous power. Like the paintings and poems that have been central to his life, the natural world also unlocks the glory of the Divine. “God’s creation, all of it so good, so very good.” Trees, rivers, birds, and flowers bear the imprint of holiness in Mariani’s poems. The 131-year-old catalpa outside his house is likened to “a silent guardian angel,” the snow moon over Singer Island reminds him of “the host the priest raises,” and every tree and leaf are “part of God’s mysterious flower.”

Leaves hold a special place in creation for Mariani. “Think how in time these branches will shake / their way to bud and leaf again come spring.” What nature awaits is also what waits for humanity: renewal and redemption. So central are leaves that a world lacking them would be “like words gone silent as they lose their way.” Mariani’s leaves, of course, as for Walt Whitman, are the pages of his books filled with words that have not lost their way.

But *All That Will Be New* does not omit the relentless tragedies of life, such as the blight of the coronavirus, the harrowing journey of the Black Moses, Harriet Tubman, or the “primordial tensions of those natural forces” such as the tumultuous waves in the “vast Atlantic” “crashing in to smash against the jagged granite shore” and the “silver glitter spume that explodes” which is “as old and now instant as the whirlwind confronting Job.” With Job, Mariani has tried to hold steady the course toward salvation.