LOVE ALONE
18 ELEGIES FOR ROG
by Paul Monette

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Monte Oliveto
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BROTHER OF THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.
—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

geometry of the hill towns their heart-stopping squares with the well in the middle and a rampant lion on the governor’s roof we’d already scrutinized every thing and now before we left wished to see it peopled going about their business out of time keeping bees holy offices raisin bread as if nothing had happened since Galileo instead this voluble little monk pulling us into the abbey church its lofty Gothic vault overlaid in sugared Baroque plaster like a bad cake then Brother John grips us by the biceps and sweeps us down the cypress-paneled choir to the reading desk where the Gutenberg is propped on feast-days he crouches and points to the inlay on the base and there is a cat tail curled seeming to sit in a window every tiger stripe of him laid in jigsaw as we laughed our rapturous guide went mew mew like a five-year-old How long have you been here we ask a question requiring all our hands fifty years he tosses off as if time had nothing to do with it one hand lingering on my shoulder is it books we like then come and we patter round the cloister in his wake duck through a door up a stone stairs and peer through a grill wrought like a curtain of ivy into the library its great vellum folios solid as tombstones nobody copying out or illuminating today unless perhaps all of that has died and there’s a Xerox glowing green in the abbot’s study John pokes you to look at the door carvings it seems he is not a bookish man but who has time to read any more we must descend and see the frescoes fifty years without the world

combing the attic for anything extra missed or missing evidence of us I sift your oldest letters on onionskin soft-cover Gallimard novels from graduate school brown at the edges like pound cake and turn up an undeveloped film race it to SUNSET PLAZA ONE-HOUR wait out the hour wacko as a spy smuggling a chip that might decode World War III then sit on the curb poring over prints of Christmas ’83 till I hit paydirt three shots of the hermit abbey on the moors southeast of Siena our final crisscross of the Tuscan hills before the sack of Rome unplanned it was just that we couldn’t bear to leave the region quite the Green Guide barely gave it a nod minor Renaissance pile but the real thing monks in Benedictine white pressing olives and gliding about in hooded silence Benedict having commanded shh along with his gaunt motto ora et labora pray work but our particular brother John couldn’t stop chattering not from the moment he met us grinning at the cloister door seventy years olive-cheeked bald and guileless no matter we spoke no Italian he led us gesturing left and right at peeling frescoes porcelain Marys a limpid row of arches across the court like a trill on a harpsichord little did he know how up to our eyeballs we were on the glories of Florence the Bach
pray work pray work and yet such drunken gaiety
gasping anew at the cloister’s painted wall
clutching my hand before the bare-clad Jesus
bound at the pillar by the painter so-called
Sodoma the parted lips the love-glazed eyes
JUST WHAT KIND OF MEN ARE WE TALKING ABOUT
are we the heirs of them or they our secret
fathers and how many of our kind lie beneath
the cypress alley crowning the hill beyond
the bell tower how does one ask such things
with just one’s hands then we took three pictures
me and John John and you you and me click
as the old monk takes my arm I’m certain now
that he likes touching us that we are a world
inside him whether he knows or not not that
I felt molested I can take care of myself
but a blind and ancient hunger not unspeakable
unsayable you think he knew about us Rog
how could he not pick up the intersect
the way we laughed the glint in our eyes as we
played our Italian for four hands but my sole
evidence is this sudden noon photograph
the two of us arm in arm in the cloister
delirious gold November light of Tuscany
washing our cinquecento faces splashing
the wall behind us a fresco of the monks
at dinner high above them in a pulpit
a reader trilling in Latin you can’t even
eat without ora et labora and we look
squinting at John as if to wonder how
he will ever click the shutter right it’s like
giving a watch to a savage but we look
quite wonderful you with the Green Guide me
clutching the pouch with the passports we look
unbelievably young our half smiles precisely
the same for that is the pierce of beauty

that first day of a rose barely started
and yet all there and Brother John so geeky
with the Canon A-1 did he even see what
he caught we look like choirboys or postulants
or a vagabond pair of scholars here to
pore over an undecoded text not religious
but brotherly enough it’s a courtly age
where men are what they do and where they go
comrades all we look like no one else Rog
here’s the proof in color now the tour is over
we are glided into a vestibule where cards
slides rosaries prayers that tick are gauntly
presided over by a monk senior to John
if not in years then officialdom the air
is strict in here we cut our laughter short
this one’s got us pegged right off this keeper
of the canonical cash drawer withering John
with a look that can hardly wait to assign vast
and pointless rosaries of contrition we buy
the stark official guide to Monte Oliveto
leave a puddle of lire per restauro
for restorations and then we’re free of His
Priestliness and John bundles us off still
carrying and irrepressible too old perhaps
to fear the scorn and penitence of those
racked by sins of the flesh who never touch
a thing and ushers us out to the Fiat
bidding us safe journey who’s never been
airborne or out to sea or where Shiva
dances or Pele the fire-god gargles
the bowels of the earth we wave him off
and leap in the car we’re late for Rome flap
open the map but we’re laughing too Did that
just happen or what and we drive away
winding up past the tower towards the grove
of graves where the tips of the cypress lean
in the breeze and a hooded monk is walking head bent over his book of hours in passing I see that it's John wave and grin rividerci startled at his gauntness fixed on his text dark his reverie no acknowledgement goodbye that is the whole story you know about Rome and flying tourist opening weeks of mail putting a journey to bed and on and on but I've thought of John ever since whenever the smiling Pope makes another of his subhuman attitudes the law he drives our people from the temples and spits on the graves of his brother priests who are coughing to death in cells without unction and boots the Jesuit shrink who calls all love holy he wants his fags quiet shh and I try to think of John and the picture he saved three years for me till the lost roll of Tuscany came to light and turned out to hold our wedding portrait the innocent are so brief and the rigid world doesn't marry its pagans any more but John didn't care what nothing we professed he joined us to join him a ritual not in the book but his secret heart it doesn't get easier Rog even now the night jasmine is pouring its white delirium in the dark and I will not have it if you can't I shut all windows still it seeps in with the gaudy oath of spring oh help be somewhere near so I can endure this drunk intrusion of promise where is the walled place where we can walk untouched or must I be content with a wedding I almost didn't witness the evidence all but lost no oath no ring but the truth sealed to hold against the hate of the first straight Pope since the Syllabus of