

# Meetings in the Senacole

*A new story from  
a forgotten master*

**Samuel Astrachan**

*Samuel Astrachan is an American master, still alive and working, who is now unknown in his native country. Born in 1934, Astrachan wrote most of his first novel, *An End to Dying*, during his junior and senior years at Columbia, completing the book at Yaddo in the summer of 1955. It was published to great acclaim in 1956, three years before Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. The two young Jewish authors were frequently mentioned together, along with other precocious talents like Leonard Michaels, as the angry young men of Jewish letters. Soon, however, Astrachan had difficulty getting his work published. He moved to France, where he has had a successful career, writing in English and having his books translated into French, the language in which he is now published.*

*The short piece below, "Meetings in the Senancole," is part of a cycle called *Nineteen Short Pieces*. It is published here for the first time.*

**My head bent, my hands clasped behind my back, I walk to** work between the bushes of flowering rosemary. I call this place the Valley of Rosemary, though here too are terebinth trees, live-oak and blue-berried prickly juniper. Before I arrive at the place I call the Valley of the Eagle—because one year I often saw one flying high in the sky there, and once, climbing, passed a cave from which there came the sudden thunderous sounds of beating wings—, I hear a snort and I find myself facing not thirty feet away a boar, low to the ground, like a cannon shell that might at any second hurtle forward.

I clap my hands that he turn and run away. I bend to pick up a stone to throw at him. Something makes me look into his eyes. I put down the stone. His tusks are small but there is in his regard a waiting force that simply is. He is not dealing with imperatives that I understand. He is, in a way that I am not.

I turn and walk back the way I came. After a time, lost again in

my work, I forget all about him. Climbing the hill out of the Senan-  
cole, I hear a whistling sound of movement far below me. I look  
down into the valley; the boar, distant now, was all this time leading  
a sow and six young ones.

**Just below the grotto that we call the Henry Moore because the**  
sculptor, had he carved with wind and waters, might so have made  
it, I feel a presence. Often in the Senancole, I have the sense that I  
am watched by veiled spirits standing in niches in the rocks, in shal-  
low caves. Sometimes they stand behind bushes almost on the path.

A young man is tying his shoelace at the water crossing; he is  
boyish, fair, thin, sweated; a paperback book sticks out of his back  
pocket. I cough to warn him of my presence. He looks up, startled.  
He asks if I live in the grotto.

"Not yet," I reply, and continue on my way.

Some minutes later, he catches up to me.

"Are you a writer?" he asks.

He asks if I'm old and if I'm married, and how I met my wife  
and if I have children. He says he is trying to find his way.

I ask if he's trying to find his way at Senanque, the twelfth-cen-  
tury Cistercian monastery at the source of the valley.

"Have you," he asks, "never wanted to join a religious order?"

"No," I answer.

But by this time we have reached my spot and we fall silent  
looking at the rock formations that resemble Easter Island statues,  
Cycladic Island masks.