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T A N I N G E S

M E A N W H I L E

The wonderful American Poet Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent lecture about poetry that “This year, a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics finds that one out of every 136 residents of the United States is behind bars — many in jails, unconvicted.”¹

In the same lecture she quoted the Greek Poet Yannis Ritsos:

In the field the last swallow had lingered late,
balancing in the air like a black ribbon on the sleeve of autumn.
Nothing else remained. Only the burned houses smouldering still.²

I picked up the phone and knew immediately it was an unexpected call from you, speaking from your flat in the Via Paolo Sarpi. (Two days after the election results and Berlusconi's comeback.) The speed with which we identify a familiar voice coming out of the blue is comforting, but also somewhat mysterious. Because the measures, the units we use in calculating the clear distinction that exists between one voice and another, are unformulated and nameless. They don't have a code. These days more and more is encoded.

So I wonder whether there aren't other measures, equally uncoded yet precise, by which we calculate other givens. For example, the amount of circumstantial freedom existing in a certain situation, its extent and its strict limits. Prisoners become experts at this. They develop a particular sensitivity towards liberty, not as a principle, but as a granular substance. They spot fragments of liberty almost immediately whenever they occur.

1 Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* (New York, 2007).

2 Yannis Ritsos, Romiosini, in: *Selected Poems 1938–1988* (New York, 1989).