

# THE ABSTRACT HUMANITIES

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*Sandra Simonds*

1

On August 14th, 1971, when they arrest Justin Smith on Rose St.,  
his neighbors don't know he's a subject  
in the Stanford Prison experiment, and Justin himself  
doesn't know that within 36 hours of dunking his head  
into that fake cop car that he will have a mental breakdown  
even though he keeps telling himself "This isn't real."

Daumier's *The Third-Class Carriage*. This isn't real.

Turnitin.com. This isn't real.

Bingham's *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*.

This isn't real. In solitary confinement he thinks  
of his grandmother, Pearl, the only woman who  
has loved him unconditionally,

and he finally recognizes Todd,

the guard, as the student who sits in the row  
in front of him in biochem. Our quiz will be on

Ludwig van Beethoven's "Pathetique,"

Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection.

On destiny, 35.

On disillusionment, 543.

On empires, 96. On imperialism, 467.

2

Do you know how many of Karl Marx's  
children starved to death?

Yes, but he kept a maid.

Do you know the difference between pity  
and compassion? This isn't real.

Do you know the difference  
between compassion and empathy?

I am bleeding.

It is easy to be empathic and lack compassion  
but sometimes a person is compassionate and lacks  
empathy. The limit-case being a saint or

martyr. To write the most tender  
poem for Karl Marx,  
which includes the Torah or rather the light  
of the Hebrew alphabet which casts  
its glyphs on one  
of Rembrandt's apple cider, wide-eyed walls.

3

Do not write "luminous glyphs" for it is  
overly Romanic. Do not write  
a love poem to Karl Marx,  
for you might lose your job.

Do not talk about compassion, for this is not  
a temple. Do not use the word "tender,"  
for this is art and art must be  
cold like money or a fish. Do not  
say you're a Jew,  
for you never know who is reading.

Do not place the word "money" next to the word  
"Jew" for people will think that all  
you care about is money, Jew.

On patronage, 310. On pride, 59.

On reform, 331. I am shaking.

On scientific truth, 387.

4

It has been fifteen years since my mother  
tried to kill herself. There is no way  
into the abstract  
humanities. In the experiment, Todd  
beats Justin. You can only follow  
me so far, but when we get to the river, Horatio,  
you will not be able to cross through my  
particular hourglass: *Übermensch* 468,  
*Ulysses* 533, *Un Chien Andalou* 552.

It is hard to believe that I found her.  
It is hard to believe that I lived in that apartment  
with my mother and sister.

It is hard to believe that I was at her side  
in the hospital. The bourgeoisie  
are so self-destructive!

That's the real secret of the *Communist  
Manifesto*. On the phone she says,  
"Why do you think about things  
that happened so long ago?"

5

Horatio also says, let the past  
be the past, doomsday, doomsday.  
Zeno, Zeno.

Zen philosophy, 596.

Let the peasant in this painting reap  
what she sows, and if nothing comes  
of nothing, Zero, Zero, let the mother  
of the third-class carriage's weeping  
hands over woven basket, infant  
to the nipple, rest unseen.