

The Nihilisthete by Richard Kalich (Permanent: \$17.95; 155 pp.)

If you subtracted all that makes a person recognizable as human and, left with that breathing zero, painted a face on its minimal form, you would have before you the hero of "The Nihilisthete": a *cri du chat*.

The victim of this syndrome has a microcephalic head, diverse mal-

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formations, a ceiling IQ of 35 and, from whence derives the name of the genetic disorder, a plaintive cry, bringing to mind a kitten in pain.

"The Nihilisthete" contains two dimensions—one is the grimy, opaque descent into the hell of Harlem and the dismal odyssey of a demented social worker's attempts to destroy one of his cases: a *cri du chat*. The second dimension is parabolic: A symbol of negation tries to eradicate all light in a soul and, in doing so, creates in the midst of a physical midnight a human sunrise.

The novel is disturbing and, like a tiny Tar Baby encountered on the shelf of existence, cannot be put down once contact is made. In the tradition of "Notes From the Underground," "The Metamorphosis" and "The Case Worker," Richard Kalich's first novel is the manifestation of an unhappy consciousness finding an objective correlative in the world and then wrapping itself around the object, to fester the form into submission.

The narrator, Mr. Haberman, is a 54-year-old social worker who has let starve any stirring from his heart. He is devoid of everything but the void. During one of his nocturnal perambulations, he encounters a riveting sight in front of the Maine Monument. A chalk artist is drawing the face of Christ

before a horseshoe of onlookers. Among them is a wheelchair-bound figure. This "retard," this "freak," as the social worker immediately calls him, is the *cri du chat*: a 21-year-old man named Brodski. Cared for by a 68-year-old surrogate mother named Mrs. Rivera, the *cri du chat*'s life is reduced to looking: He is nothing more than what appears before his eyes.

The social worker conspires for his target of despair to become his case. Then begins his nefarious experiment: to take this creature capable of recognizing beauty and rub him out as though he were the last glow of a cigarette ash.

Brodski doesn't speak. He makes signs: with tears, with eye movements, and other times with the cat cry. Hibernating in his room, he lives off the beauty provided by art prints. He has anointed the walls of his hell with imaginary windows.

Ingratiating himself into the world of the *cri du chat*, the narrator takes Brodski to visit museums, so that he can addict the *cri du chat* to beauty, and then destroy his will by removing him from it.

Mrs. Rivera is gradually displaced until the narrator is able to gain total control of the *cri du chat*. Unable to walk and burdened with vestigial arms, Brodski is dependent on everything from having his diapers changed to literally shifting the angle of his head.

As the narrator can't experience love, "the miracle of forgetting," he will make the *cri du chat* his unhappiness. Thinking that he can desiccate the *cri du chat* by letting him paint, Haberman orders a prosthesis arm-and-hand for Brodski. He buys canvas and oils, brushes and easel. He will let the *cri du chat* describe his world. And

the miracle is, he does. Speechless, armless, legless, the *cri du chat* rises from the debris of himself and finds beauty in a Harlem as deformed as his body.

By trying to reduce Brodski to the same nothingness he occupies, Haberman inadvertently creates that splendid creature of freedom: the artist.

The last phase of the savage game begins. Haberman removes the *cri du chat*'s bridges to the world: wheelchair, posters, paints, plunging Brodski back into the trough of his own drooling, dependent existence. But the victim is now armed—with imagination.

When the final brush is torn from the *cri du chat*'s grasp and he is reduced to using "dirt, pus, food remains, blood, biting his lip, anything to give him color," the narrator is certain he has won. But the *cri du chat* goes on creating. "What's that?" the exhausted narrator notes. "A smirk on his face? A beautiful smile! He's . . . he's in his own head. HE'S PAINTING. NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Like the Chinese artist who escaped death at the hands of the emperor by fleeing aboard a boat he painted into one of his seascapes, Brodski eludes Haberman by ricocheting off the world into his own cosmos, to paint forever.

Haberman forgot what Wallace Stevens reminds us in "The Well Dressed Man With a Beard":

After the final no there comes a yes

And on that yes the future world depends.

"The Nihilisthete" is a journey into the encyclopedia of lost souls. It is a brilliant, hammer-hitting, lights-out novel.

The *cri du chat* is a *cri du coeur*.

Lindh is editing "The Theory of Sand," a novel based on his adventures in Saudi Arabia.