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## On Stormy Days

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On Stormy Days  
-Ngoc Hoang  
College of Saint Benedict

### **A Short Swim; Or, How an American Behaves in Northern France**

No one in Calais liked my French, although they certainly did not dislike it either. Rather, they viewed my language with a sense of worry that they could not, for all their linguistic precision, quite put into words. Clearly, they appreciated that I spoke French; nearly everyone I encountered made a point of showing appreciation for my ability. Waiters, bus drivers, and receptionists all treated me with a peculiar respect when I addressed them fluently in their own language, but none matched the police. From the look of surprise and relief on the face of every officer I addressed, I inferred that the police force in Calais had a great deal of experience with non-French speaking foreigners. This did not mean, however, that I was particularly beloved in Calais. Calais is not Paris, and the residents there are not used to having foreigners stay in their city for prolonged periods of time, and thus viewed my continued presence as a sort of nervous oddity, a thing to endure for what would hopefully be only a short while.

But while the residents of Calais may have been a bit mystified or perhaps irritated by the fact that an American had lingered so long in their city, this was not the real issue. My greatest offense was speaking their language. Infested with tourists who spoke little or no French, Calaisiens spent what seemed like a great deal of their leisure time playing games with unwitting Anglophones. I often witnessed one called “les mots faux.” The game was simple—a group of Calaisiens, usually young males, would approach a group of tourists and ask, politely, if they needed any help finding their way around the city. The tourists almost invariably did, and they would do their best to respond in French. No matter their response, the boys would “correct” their French, unwittingly filling the tourists’ vocabulary with obscenities