

Sample

Sur la grève hommes et femmes gesticulaient, désignant un point du large où semblait se jouer un drame. La mer très agitée inondait de linges blancs la jetée. La succession des houles creusait puis gonflait la plaine d'eau comme une immense toile que le vent posséderait. Sortir en mer relevait du suicide aussi tous les navires dansaient à l'ancre. Néanmoins le matin même, un homme, étranger au pays, faisant fi des conseils, s'était embarqué sur une plate courte et légère. La houle ne s'était pas encore levée mais les nuages s'amoncelant sur l'horizon, les saules commençant à s'ébouriffer indiquaient nettement que l'orage ne tarderait pas. Ramant ferme, l'homme s'était éloigné traçant entre les pierres une route sinueuse. Il croisait des mouettes criardes qui fuyaient vers les toits à l'abri des terres. Seule l'ignorance lui donnait une telle sûreté. Du quai quelques personnes tentèrent par de grands gestes de faire rentrer l'imprudent. Un pêcheur muni d'un porte-voix cria : reviens, reviens donc, imbécile ! La fureur se lisait sur les visages, un tel entêtement les dépassait. Il constituait à leurs yeux une offense à tous ces signes annonçant l'imminence de la tempête. Et de fait, les vagues bientôt se piétinèrent, des chœurs montèrent des profondeurs, le ciel chavira dans les nuées, brusquement les eaux se disposèrent en un cercle menant une danse infernale autour des pierres dont la plus élevée tenait le centre et résonnait de tous les cuivres de la fête. Le rameur avait compris mais trop tard, la barque n'obéissait plus au mouvement de ses bras, tantôt elle se cabrait, tantôt elle roulait sur le flanc. La ronde l'entraînait de creux en crête, pas une seconde de répit mais la prodigieuse accélération qui réduisait le cercle, déportait la barque vers le centre. De la côte, on distinguait une ligne épaisse et sommée d'un point allongé dont la base répandait sur l'eau et glissait vers le brasier de gerbes blanches d'où émergeait Nor-Laier. Trois mots jaillirent des gorges : la zone interdite ! Ils se perdirent dans le chuintement des vagues tandis que la barque disparaissait. Elle réapparut à la verticale et il sembla que le rocher pesait de tout son poids pour écarter la mer afin d'ouvrir entre elle et ses parois l'abîme où s'enfouirait le fragile esquif. Enfin comme un clou dans un bois tendre la barque s'enfonça dans le flot. Une femme chuchota à sa voisine : Nor-Laier nous le rendra quand les crabes l'auront nettoyé ...

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Un hiver en Bretagne

Suggested translation

On the shore, men and women were waving their arms and pointing to a spot offshore where a drama seemed to be taking place. The wild sea was driving white sheets of water over the jetty. Successive swelling waves hollowed out and then welled up the surface of the water like a huge piece of cloth, the plaything of the wind. It was suicidal to go out, and all the boats were dancing at anchor. However, that very morning, a man, a stranger to the locality, paying no heed to advice, had set out in a small flat-bottomed boat. The swell had not yet become heavy, but the clouds piling up on the horizon and the willows that were beginning to be ruffled were a clear sign that the storm would soon break. The man rowed fast and was out at sea, zigzagging between the rocks. He met screeching gulls flying to shelter towards the roofs inland. Only inexperience could give him such self-confidence. From the quayside, a few people, gesticulating urgently, waved the foolhardy man back. A fisherman with a megaphone shouted: "Come back, come back, you idiot". There was anger to be read on all faces. Such obstinacy was beyond their understanding. In their eyes he constituted an offence to all those signs heralding the storm. And, in fact, the waves soon rode over each other, a chorus of voices arose from the depths, the sky was engulfed in the black clouds, the waves formed a circle and danced an infernal dance around the rocks, the tallest of which, in the centre, resounded with all nature's trumpeting. The oarsman had realised, but it was too late. The boat no longer obeyed the movement of his arms, now rearing up, now heeling over. The dance led it from hollow to crest without a moment's respite, but the tremendous speed with which the circle became ever smaller, carried the boat towards its centre. From the coast could be seen an undulating line, thick and culminating in an elongated point that flattened out along the water and slid towards the inferno of gushing white foam from which Nor-Laier emerged. Three words came to the onlookers' lips - the forbidden zone - but they were lost in the swoosh of the waves as the boat disappeared. It reappeared vertically, and the rock seemed to be pressing the sea away from its walls with all its might so as to open up the abyss into which the fragile craft would be engulfed. Finally the boat plunged into the water like a nail driven into soft wood. A woman whispered to the woman beside her: "Nor-Laier will return him to us when the crabs have picked him clean."

Notes

Like many storm scenes set in Brittany, this description of a fishing community watching a foolhardy oarsman going to certain doom for disregarding the forces of nature, has a restrained style that, with its striking metaphors, is almost of biblical concision and eloquence. The words spoken at the end of the passage need to respect this mood by avoiding all familiarity of language, including the use of contracted forms.

la mer très agitée. 'Very' is the problem here. This intensifier does not always have the intended effect. Used with certain adjectives, it may even weaken their meaning. 'The sea was very rough' is perfectly acceptable, but 'the very rough sea' is much less so, as 'very' seems unnatural and adds nothing.

The reason for this is largely phonetic. In both cases, 'sea', 'very', 'rough' are stressed lexical words, while 'the' and 'was' are unstressed grammatical words. This means that 'the very rough sea' has a succession of three stressed words, which is stylistically unsatisfactory since English systematically avoids having juxtaposed stressed syllables, for purely phonetic reasons.

toile. 'sheet' is a noun often applied to water; 'a sheet of water' is an expanse of water (a lake, etc); 'sheets' is often used of masses of water falling as rain

posséderait. Be careful! Before translating the French conditional, decide what its function is. If you agree that it has a hypothetical value, check ways of translating the 'conditionnel hypothétique', constantly used in the press for unconfirmed statements: 'Inondations en Inde ; il y aurait de nombreuses victimes'.

sortir en mer. in the context, translating 'en mer' is redundant.

étranger au pays. 'stranger' = somebody unknown; 'foreigner' = somebody from another nation.

imbécile. The fisherman speaks the language of a fisherman, and the word 'silly' is unimaginable in his way of speech. 'Silly' is a word mostly used by children, not normally to be heard in adult speech, except when speaking to children or about children.

choeur. A 'choir' is a group of singers; a 'chorus' is music sung by a group of singers.

fête. I was surprised to read 'party'. The tone of the description should have been enough to exclude such a superficial idea. 'Party' is also incompatible with 'les cuivres', which implies festivities on a large scale.

sa voisine. 'neighbour' is almost always reserved for somebody living next door or close by. It is also used with the wider meaning that *voisin* has, but there is a strong tendency to prefer 'the person / boy / girl standing / sitting next to you / me / somebody, etc, in normal speech.