

The Price of Oil

Frederic Rzewski

1980

texts compiled by the composer from newspaper accounts and interviews with real people

Narrator

The man on the right is very rich. He is one of the most successful traders on the Rotterdam spot market: an international network of agents buying and selling the tremendous quantities of oil that transits the city's enormous port. The man on the left is a worker. He is one of the thousands of people who live on the North Sea oil rigs drilling and pumping thousands of barrels of oil out of the earth each day twenty-four hours a day.

Worker

It was a little after six in the evening

and we'd just had a nice dinner.

Some of the guys had already gone to bed.

I thought I would go to see the movie.

Dealer

I come in at 8:00

and I'm like an animal on the hunt. I spread myself all over I peer and I look, and I have to find out everything that happened to oil that night.

Everything. If you don't, you're ruined. My eyes are the phone. I call everybody and they call me.

If there's time, we talk about stupid things: Families, the weather, stuff like that but when it's important,

I heard they were showing a Western
that night.

I'd just come off a 12-hour shift,

and I was pretty tired.

Suddenly there was a big noise.

Working here is like being in jail. We
don't see our families for weeks at a
time.

The waves here can be ninety feet high.

The winds get up to a hundred and ten
knots. Sure, we make some money.
Some of us even get to take it home.
Can you imagine anyone doing this job
if it weren't for the money?

It all happened so fast. Nobody knew
what to do. That rig wasn't supposed to
go over. It was supposed to float.

The weather was bad, but not that bad.
A "floating luxury hotel," they called it.
If that rig was so perfect,

we get right to work: what he's got for
me,

and what I've got for him. You've got to
be quick.

If Tokyo says he has a nice ship,

a beautiful ship,

sailing from Italy.

You have to watch out. Poison.

If the ship is really that beautiful,

he'll want to keep it all for himself.

Japanese traders you can always see
through.

why were they going to replace it in a few days? We've got all kinds of men out here on the rigs:

Englishmen, Scandinavians, Americans, we're all together four men in a room.

We're hibernating: fourteen, twenty days at a time.

But we've got to feed our families.

We need the work.

And believe me, they make us work. Let me tell you something about dangerous work.

Take the divers, for instance.

They're on call all the time to fix the pipelines,

They have no room.

They're cornered.

They've got a whole country that'll be shivering in caves

this winter unless they get oil.

They need the oil.

And you can get them to pay. I mean really pay.

They'll pay in anything.

I'm calculating all day to make the figures match. Deutschmarks to pounds, pounds to rubles, rubles to dollars, dollars to guilders, I don't care and nobody else does. Dollars mean nothing to me.

I only care about what's behind the numbers. I care about oil. Nobody tells the truth. Nobody.

to make sure they're coming off the stinger at the proper angle,

Say I'm talking to London, and they have enough of what they want.

to cut and join the pipe sections on the bottom.

They'd never tell me. They'd never let me know

You're all alone down there.

that the market's going down. They try to be clever, but it doesn't matter.

At three-hundred feet your friends are far away.

I can read them.

If you go, your widow gets fifty thousand dollars.

I can read what they don't say.

That's what a man's life is worth.

If London doesn't say anything,

Nobody knew how many men were on the rig when it went down.

if they ask me about my health, I know that means they don't want

Phillips Petroleum said one thing,

the market to go down any further.

the government said another. Why should they bother? They don't test their equipment properly, and they keep the figures secret. Why should they care about drowning men?

I can tell. It's in me.

We try to get the union more involved, but they know how to control it. They know we need the money. If we start talking about a strike,

I lie too, but I'm better at it.

or tightening up the safety regulations, they know they can get around us by offering another hundred pounds a month.

I'm circumspect.

One thing they've got is money. We need the money more than they do.

If the market's going up,

We've got wives and children to look after. If they come across with a raise in pay,

I don't say it's going down.

we're not going to hold out for more lifeboats.

That's shallow.

If we talk about safety,

I ask them if they've heard about Genoa.

they talk about production.

That scares them. That makes them sweat.

They know there are plenty of guys on shore waiting to take our jobs.

They don't know anything about Genoa.

We heard two bumps and a crack.

They're worried. They can't think till they find out about Genoa. They want to go and find out, but I don't let them. I talk, and they're twisting,

It was like an almighty explosion.

and I get what I want. I'm good at it. If you're not good, that's it. You're out.

In fifteen seconds, it tilted to thirty degrees.

Gas oil was one hundred sixty dollars in January, a month later it was three hundred fifty, and a month after that two hundred.

Then it went to forty-five degrees.

Each time it moves, someone is out. Someone gets hurt each time.

And fifteen minutes later it toppled right over.

I don't get hurt. I'm too strong to get hurt.

People were thrown right into the sea.

I protect myself.

Everything was flying around.

I have real estate on two continents.

I was hit by something heavy, maybe a T.V.

I have service groups unrelated to oil.

There were big guys screaming like children. There was nothing we could do.

I have barges for when storage costs are bad. I have storage tanks for when shipping costs are bad.

I was picked up by a huge wave.

I am diversified.

And a big steel container pinned me against the wall. Drums of oil were flying around. I saw a lifeboat, but then I went under. I thought, this is it. This is what it's like to die.

I am as infallible as possible.

Nobody knew what to do. There were supposed to be enough lifeboats to hold every one of us, but only a few of them got into the water.

People say they can control us, but they can't.

The others couldn't be launched because of the tilt. About ten of us made it to lifeboat five. It was upside down. We managed to turn it over.

The Rotterdam market makes ends meet

We just got ourselves organized somehow. Only a few of us didn't panic.

for all of Northwestern Europe,

I didn't panic. I couldn't afford to panic.

but only five percent of us are in Rotterdam.

I had to concentrate on the job to be done.

We were bouncing around together,

somehow, working together,

I don't know how we did it, we were
right side up again.

There we were in the sea.

The storm was all around us.

It was very dark,

with nothing to reach out to.

Everyone was praying.

Praying to God.

We were all sick.

The other traders are everywhere.

No country can hold us.

No one government can check up on us.
No government at all.

Only banks can check.

I live by banks. If I make a deal, I want
an international bank guarantee. With
the guarantee I'm okay. The guarantee
is my life,

and it is automatic. It is true. There is
only one other place where I never lie. I
never lie to Platt's.

You lie to Platt's and they know. They
call maybe a hundred people. If ninety-
nine say things are high, and you say
they're low,

Platt's will know this. They can tell.

You cannot hide things from Platt's. I
don't need to hide.

The market is good.

The waves were crashing over us.

It was very cold and we cuddled together. We were stuck there for eleven hours.

People were in terrible pain,

men with broken legs. I thought of my wife and children. I wondered whether I would ever see them again. Water was pouring into the boat.

And we didn't think we would ever be found. We didn't think we were going to make it, and many of our friends didn't make it.

Even when the supply ship came, it nearly turned us over, and we thought we'd had it.

It was murder. Now it's over.

But it's not really over. It can happen again.

As long as these rigs

Prices here are higher than ever.

They're way above term.

They will stay that way. Producers will keep on sending

oil to the spot market.

More all the time.

You hear talk about supply and demand.

That won't end the market.

That's silly.

Politics are too uncertain for that.

are made of thin steel,

they will continue to break.

Now I only want to go home; but I
expect I'll be back.

Nobody can get enough oil.

Nobody trusts anybody's guarantees.

Everyone wants one thing.

Everyone wants more oil.