

General's Motor

By David Krause

“I have a lot to **cover** today, so let's get started.”

- Mary Barra, General Motors CEO, 2014,
Global Town Hall Meeting

Part I: The Facts

- On February 6, 2014, General Motors recalled about 800,000 of its small cars due to faulty ignition switches.
- Problems with the ignition switch were identified within the company as early as 2004.
- The faulty ignition switch can accidentally move into the "off" position, especially if there is any extra weight on the keyring. When the car switches off, it loses power steering, ABS, and the airbags won't deploy.

*“When's the best time to solve a problem? **The minute you know you have it.**”*

- Mary Barra, GM CEO, 2014

“GM determined that the faulty ignition switch is to blame for at least 31 crashes and **13*** deaths.”

- *National Public Radio*, 2013

*Correction: “GM victims' fund closes with **49**** deaths.”

- *USA Today*, Jan. 19, 2015

Correction: “GM ignition switch responsible for **124 deaths in US.”

- *Associated Press*

July 13th, 2015

124. Final answer.

Probably not.

Part II: The Names

Natasha Weigel, 1988 - 2006

Amy Rademaker, 1990 - 2006

Sarah Trautwein, 1989 - 2009

Kelly Erin Ruddy, 1989 - 2010

...

...

More names. Hidden names. Undisclosed names. Real names. Peoples names. Childrens names. Mothers names. Sons names. Fathers names. Friends names. Students names. Joyful names. Silly names. Shy names. Memories' names. Daughters names. Teachers names. Athlete names. Scientist names. Caregiver names. Sweet names. Strong names. Why names. How names. Whose names. Where names. What are their names.

“Safety experts say it is very likely that many of the family members of people killed by the faulty ignition switch are **not yet aware** of the **true cause** of the accidents.”

- CNN, March 31st, 2014

Part III: The Silence

“GM employees first knew that the ignition switches were malfunctioning back in **2004**.

But the automaker didn't issue a recall until **a decade later.**”

One decade

10 years

5,256,000 minutes

Silence

Part IV: The Leader

2016 - Mary Barra:

Ranked #1 on Fortune's Most Powerful Women list.

2017 - The Walt Disney Co. elects Mary Barra to its

board of directors, effective immediately.

Hide, Mary, Hide

“As I prepared for today, I thought long and hard about the very tough message I would be delivering. I knew full well how difficult this experience would be for all of us. **But I also knew the only course was to be direct and totally honest.**”

- Mary Barra, General Motors CEO, 2014, Global Town Hall Meeting

Part V: The Cost

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two dollars:

Two Dollars:

The cost, per car, to fix
each GM ignition switch.

Part VI: The Reward

“General Motors not only failed to disclose this deadly defect, it **actively concealed** the truth from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the public.”

- LA Times, September 17th, 2015

“In a 74-page opinion, a three-judge panel said that GM essentially asked the court to **reward it** for concealing claims.”

- CBS News, July 13th, 2016

HIDE

GM

HIDE

Epilogue: A Dialogue

Noam Chomsky
Professor

Mary Ruddy
Mother of Erin Ruddy

- We can distinguish three categories of crimes: murder with intent, accidental killing, and murder with foreknowledge but without specific intent.

- There was a total disregard for life. If they had done the right thing and fixed these vehicles my daughter would be here today.

- Power remains strong when it remains in the dark.

- If there are no consequences they will do it again.

- Class war, typically one-sided, has a long and bitter history.

- President Obama, as I recall, never made a comment regarding GM even at the height of it. He never expressed sympathy for the 120-plus Americans confirmed murdered by GM. If you have the head of the federal government not expressing sympathy it is not surprising that the Justice Department is not pressing criminal charges.”

- “The neoliberal programs of the past generation have concentrated

wealth and power in far fewer hands while undermining functioning Democracy.”

- I gave birth to Kelly. We had two children. Tara died from complications related to diabetes August 20, 2009 and Kelly was killed January 10, 2010, four and one-half months later. We lost both our children, one through natural causes and one through GM.

- There were no cries of outrage, no indignation, nothing.

- This gag order they had people sign who settled; there is no way I would sign a gag order when there was wrongdoing by GM. My whole mission since 2010 has been to get the truth. It has taken a whole lot of doors slammed in my face and people calling me mentally ill.

- The process of shaping opinions, attitudes, and perceptions was termed the “engineering the consent” by one of the founders of the modern public relations industry, Edward Bernays.

- The night was horrible.

- This is not the result of the mysterious workings of the market or economic laws but, again, largely of the “indispensable” support and initiative of a government that is significantly in corporate hands.

- I kissed her on both cheeks
and told her "Don't fret."

Afterword (i.e., 'Critical Introduction')

This hybrid poem was completed in graduate school for a provocative and challenging English graduate course called, "The 18th-Century, Then and Now." I did not have long stretches of time to write the poem. My daughter was one month old, born on October 14th, 2018, and my partner, Devin, and I were with her almost every minute. We were anxious first-time parents, hovering overhead constantly. At certain moments, when Devin was sleeping and when it was my turn with Poppy, I would feed, burp, change, sing, read, walk, and swaddle her until she was asleep, then I would pull out my computer, realize that its battery was dead, find my charger somewhere between the dirty diaper pail and our cat's litter, plug it in, and then start to type. I didn't sleep much then. I was on the night shift, usually up with Poppy between 1 am - 5 am, knowing I should try to sleep when she slept, but knowing when she slept was also a time to work on this hybrid poem.

The facts of the GM switch recall case were a nightmare, too hard to reflect on at times while writing the poem because many of the people I was learning about were parents who had lost a daughter or son. I think that the idea of contemporary cases like this in our society are complete nightmares, often too hard to think about and too hard to publish - i.e., "too soon," so the mantra goes - which describes the current status of literary fiction in our time, I think. It seems that traditional literary fiction is having a hard time using its classic form to talk about the nightmares of today because it is currently too hard to transform these nightmares into anything with realistic hope; too hard to imagine yourself and your

family as collateral damage in a system that does not care about the subject whatsoever. These words are no longer too blunt or too alarmist. In the poem's case, GM knew that its switches would kill people, and they knew it for ten years, but they did not fix the problem, as we now know. Fixing the problem would have damaged their profits, which in turn would have damaged their reputation, which in turn would have damaged their stock price, which is the least acceptable option in any problem a corporation faces today. It is cliché to write these factual complaints of mine: of course corporations are greedy, of course the stock market runs everything; aren't we tired of knowing this; of hearing this. Do we really need another poem about it? How boring and tired.

"Bore them to death," Beckett said while directing his play, *Footfalls*. "Bore the pants off them." I thought about this from time to time while writing the poem. I also thought about my MFA in Creative Writing program, which had tried hard to preach the necessary empathy of the writer. But Beckett was better than my MFA program and so was his use of boredom. It was more important in contemporary cases of catastrophe than empathy. Boredom is not afraid. It states the facts. There was no brightness in the GM switch recall case. Murder had occurred. No criminal charges were pressed. GM's CEO was named, the following year, the most powerful woman in the world. She had successfully dodged a bullet - successfully dodged 124 bullets - she was a hero to those above her. How can I write this story the way it needs to be written: not slant, but vertical. A wall to stare at. A prison to walk into. No light. Only language. Language was my only escape. I could not be afraid of

boredom. I needed to use the actual words that were said in the case. I needed to come as close as possible to the language in order to find a way to find a different language that subverted it. There was no character trope - no "bad guy with good guy traits" - no actantial character - in the GM leadership. How do you write MacBeth, I thought? By writing the facts. The facts can be, "boring," especially to those of us privileged enough to find the themes of a case such as the GM switch recall distant. It is safe to say many MFA programs would find my poem boring and pedestrian. So much the better. Bore them to death. Impossible otherwise: too much excitement and empathy and stupefaction otherwise.

Philip wrote, in regard to her poem, *Zong!*, that she wanted the murdered slaves' bones. I tried to find the bones of the murdered people of GM, too, but failed because I couldn't even find their names. I searched for their names using many different online engines, typing explicit keyword phrases, such as, "GM Switch Recall Victim names," but no results showed on my screen. A few news articles mentioned things like, "GM to finally release victims names," but these articles failed to include names too. I couldn't find a single list anywhere, not of the first 13 murders, and most definitely not of the final 124 count. I wondered if this is where we'd arrived. I thought about the Zong case and about about the poem, and how the names of the victims were so important in order for a reader to start to see them in their eyes. But I do not know all of the names of the GM recall. None of us know all of their names. Not even some of their families. GM had murdered 124 people, knew for ten years it was murdering people, tried to ask for a reward for concealing the

murders, and then did not tell us the names of the people it had killed. It is tragic. It is not funny anymore. There is no satire possible. The powers that be had gone too far. They'd murdered their own and the didn't even have the spine to tell us their names.

My poem takes its movement from the story of the slave ship, *Zong*, on which 133 people who were enslaved had been murdered by the crew in order to collect insurance on their lives. The narrative, therefore, that I see continuing from the 18th-century to now is the ways in which those in power rationalize and legalize the act of turning the human body into a commodity. My contemporary example is the General Motors Switch Recall case that I've talked about for a while now. GM, I first learned, offered murdered victims' families a "lump sum" payout to each person harmed, therefore assigning a dollar value to the harmed body in order for the harmed body's society to go on functioning as before - i.e., the corporation who has and who will harm bodies must know how many bodies it can harm and then "payout" and still stay profitable thereafter.

My project uses the approach of *Zong!*, specifically in what I see as the disappearance of language and in turn an exploration of silence and space. I used the actual language from the GM Switch Recall Case - i.e., the written and spoken words in and around the case: the news articles covering the case; the comments below the news articles; interviews with the CEO of GM; a public intellectual (Noam Chomsky) who has documented corporate power abuse; and a narrator. My plan was to use these words in a poem or play, therefore the approach of the poem or

plan was postmodern in the sense that it was to use actual words already said and spoken as its content. But at the same time I think the project is slightly different than traditional postmodernism (is that a thing? Ironic phrase it seems) because I am trying to place these already existing words in a dialogue so that they become traditional realism - i.e., try to find a way place these actual, existing words around the case in a dialogue that makes the dialogue what appears to be realism, whereas traditional postmodernism might make it obvious that these words have been "cut and pasted" in. I think that my try can be called Intrarealism, which is realism within realism. Barthes wrote about the death of the author in a piece of writing, but I think that a writer doesn't metaphorically die - rather their language does. The death of language is most important, I think, in a piece. Only then can language find silence; find a ghost. In a catastrophe today, with mass noise put forth by those in power, the way to subvert language is to find those already shouting and then transmute their shout, make it more direct. Classic literary fiction fails to tell the tragic stories of our societies - fails to tell the story of Zong and of GM.

Bibliography

Chomsky, Noam. *Who Rules the World?* New York City: Picador Press, 2017. Print.

Editors. "Text, video of GM CEO Mary Barra on switch report." USA Today. June 5th, 2014.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/cars/2014/06/05/gm-ceo-mary-barr-a-speech-switch-recall-report/10012715/>. Accessed November 15th, 2018.

James, Shannon. "Family of GM accident victim speaks." World Socialist Website. September 18th, 2015.

<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/09/18/gmot-s18.html>. Accessed November 18th, 2018.

Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press. Middletown, CT. 2011. Print.

Stout, Hilary. *As Recalls Expand, G.M. Offers Plan for Victims of Faulty Ignition Switch.* June 30th, 2014." New York Times Website.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/business/gms-payout-formula-for-the-dead-1-million-and-up.html>. Accessed November 20th, 2018.