

Stephen Markley, *Ohio* (2019)

Many were hungover from toasting Rick in the Lincoln Lounge the night before. Over cheap beer and well drinks, they shared classic stories, brave recollections, and dark musings. The rumors, the gossip, the urban legends ran wild. New Canaan had a curse, their peers decided. Their generation, the classes of the first five years of the infant millennium, they were all stepping through life with a piano suspended above them and bull's-eyes on the crowns of their skulls. This was different from (but probably a companion to) the garbled small-town myth known as "The Murder That Never Was." Whoever came up with that particular phrase wasn't much with grammar, but it stuck nevertheless, debated and ruminated in bars, salons, and diners, sometimes whispered, sometimes not—particularly that night when the speculation was belted out across the dim pall of the Lincoln. The Murder That Never Was held that there was someone who went missing or not, who died accidentally or not, who was gruesomely murdered or not, who faked his own death or not, who made off with a heist or not, who burned rubber out of town laughing like a demon or not. Now in the light of day, in the queasy suffocation and sluggish eternity of a hangover, how silly that all sounded.

The driver pulled his truck to a stop, bringing the flatbed in front of a stage that had been borrowed from the high school and erected beneath the square's hundred-year oaks. On that stage, Rick's parents and his brother, Lee, stood among a scrum of friends, family, the mayor, the sheriff. "Amazing Grace" played over a jury-rigged PA, and as the final chords reverberated, the pastor of the First Christian Church, where Rick and Lee had so frequently fidgeted, farted, and fought with each other every Sunday (two of the most disruptive kids to ever grace the pews, according to most), delivered the opening prayer. "Jesus, take your son Rick into your arms, and give his family and friends the strength to endure this loss," he said. Boilerplate stuff.

Following that, four people were to speak that day.

One of them, Rick's high school girlfriend, would never make it to the mic. Kaylyn Lynn was so stupefyingly high nothing seemed to matter at all. The wind whipped unwashed hair about her pretty face and bit through Rick's football jersey (#25), which he'd given to her after the team banquet his senior season. She hated that Rick's parents had asked her to speak. There was no fairy tale here. They broke up the summer after senior year. She basically cut out Rick's heart and ate it in front of him. Pawned the engagement ring he tried to give her. Fucked his friends. Told him how much she loved him only to make sure he'd never really leave her. The pastor's prayer wound to a close, and she watched a crow pick apart a piece of the flag cake selling outside of Vicky's. There was red and blue frosting all over the bird's beak as it dug into this treat smeared across the asphalt. Ill with guilt, when her time came, Kaylyn simply kept her eyes lowered and gave Rick's parents a panicked shake of her head. Hid her high with bereavement. She rattled and sucked on her inhaler, her eyes as vivid as Cassiopeia.