

# AN AUTHENTIC DERIVATIVE

by Caleb Coy

There is nothing so pretentious as an epigraph. For those readers who don't dig why I didn't have one, now you know. I recall Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, who said it best: "Never use epigraphs, they kill the mastery of the work." I would no more need an epigraph before a decent book than I would need a tuning fork before hearing a decent record. They are gimmicks for the kitsch and the predictable. One might as well fill a page with all the quotations they could find about whales. This practice of adornment through pilfering is no different than the many teenagers who emblazon their social media with quotations from their favorite blockbusters as if their own musings were worthy additions to the monuments that came before.

When we epigraph we are merely pinning the jewels of another's genius at the top of our page, as one would tie a bow, to signify that we are as profound as our predecessors, repackaging the social capital of our imitative work for more than it's worth by stamping it with the de-contextualized words of another as if it were a mere motto, or worse, a brand. It's profusely cliché. George Eliot ostentatiously used over eighty-six of them in one book, and I can tell you that nobody reads *Middlemarch* unless they're told to.

Epigraphs are for people who don't have the patience, or the mental faculties, to thumb from one page to another and hear the work speak for itself. So if you don't have the patience to flip the pages, you've come to the wrong place, my reader. The author is still unknown—the title and cover were just edgy enough to grace your virgin bookshelf.

I'm writing this book to release the burden of a narrative that was bestowed upon me. A passage from Publius Ovidius Naso that

still haunts me—you may know him as Ovid, the Roman author of *Metamorphoses*, although few are familiar with his work in *Epistulae ex Ponto*—was one my grandfather highlighted in the front of a book he gave to me on my graduation:

“Our songs will escape the greedy funeral pyre.”

I considered it a challenge from my grandfather, to escape banality, mediocrity, Hell—what have you. It’s haunted me in a way I think it would haunt anybody who’s heard it, and let it simmer for such a long time that it really began to define, in a way, the essence of what’s really coming out of our generation. We plagiarize and obfuscate our affectations, the lot of us, and I am in no position to adjudicate my generation.

I’m being pedantic.

But I will judge the unfolded narrative of Garrett Sedgwick, a chronicle that will change the way you drink your coffee. He has been described as “a restored, antique seismograph whose finger was on the pulse of a generation,” but I find that to be both patronizing and hyperbolic. I don’t hate Sedgwick—or as those of who like to think we knew him personally, “Wick”—I really just hate the cannibalistic smog that tended to followed him.

When I first heard of Wick, he had just released his fifth independent label album, *Gravity Waltzes: A Study in Velvet*, one that garnered mixed reviews, which in my opinion are the best reviews. Before he released the album exclusively online, followed by a vinyl release, he paid his producer out-of-pocket to release all nine tracks in a limited edition box of 3 1/2 inch microfloppies (twenty-seven of them, it took), which the music community interpreted either as a bold sign of retro-techno avant-garde genius or as an audacious commentary on the elitist drive of fans who would go out of their way to either purchase a 1990s PC or an Imation drive, merely because it was rare and lo fi. There were not enough for it to become a collector’s item, not even for those who professed to have gotten the irony of the release.

The unofficial first release of the album actually happened before all this, when the album leaked online and a local radio station played the entire set on the air at midnight on low fidelity the day before the official release. Wick called in to the station, who predictably aired the call, and in no kind words berated them for committing sacrilege against the industry by airing the leak. This act legitimized his integrity among high school dilettantes, while for others it was an obnoxious publicity stunt that created serious

blowback, which itself created such a controversy that even more devout fans, professing that they hated loving him and loved hating him, expressed their ambivalence in such terms that his status as a multi-faceted icon was further cemented. Either way, he was clever and talented, but still too recognized for his earlier work, which sold more compact discs at Best Buy and FYE than his more mature endeavors. As he himself ranted on the air, “if it’s some *American Idol* star’s big label record, you’d call it theft, but if it’s an indie artist putting food on his plate, you call it promotion? Is that it? Is that it?” Yes, that was it.

*Mojo* hailed *Gravity Waltzes* as “absolutely noble” and gave it a 9.5. “With a fuller, more inviting sound,” said Ben Silver of *Nashville Scene*, “*Gravity Waltzes* rubs it in our face that Sedgwick will never grow stale. I’ve already listened to it six times.” *GQ* suspected it would be their last positive review: “He’s not spreading himself thin so much as plunging his talent too deep. Surely he’s maxed himself out with this one.” *Guitar World* was also none too flattering, proclaiming that “you can’t grow tired of his new methods, but give it one listen and you’ll think *he’s* grown tired.” Benny Griggs cast a metaphor both hurtful and complimentary in *Rolling Stone*: “The melodies linger, yet they play like hardcore amusement rides: Thrilling and memorable, but not made for more than a couple rides a day.” The iTunes review tried a little too hard: “There isn’t a genre Garrett Sedgwick doesn’t know, and in *Gravity Waltzes* he covers the last frontier. He goes back to the basement, offering a street food buffet of raw sounds like a carnival barker in a time-traveling jallopy. He’s no Rumpelstilskin, but he weaves only gold.” Writing for *Blender*, Lisa Rowe said of the new record that “a thematic, meditative optimism permeates his latest album, so much so that it is a breath of fresh air, a rare gleam amidst a sordid parade of gloomy releases. Haters will hate; This record is genuine.”

The most advantageous to his continuing career came from *Pitchfork*, whose passive aggressive refusal to praise the album to its fullest came in the form of a pithy spat:

“Old maestro; New licks.”

They gave the album an 8.5 out of 10. After much reader complaints, they changed it to a 9.

I say all this to say that this was the talk of the scene and the state of things for Wick when I ran into him. A few years ago I moved to Nashville. I slept on an air mattress in an apartment loft,

with nothing but a Macbook Pro and a pile of books about design. That and the Ovid text my grandfather had given me upon getting my Master's, a month before he died. I had just graduated, taken a job offer, had a grandfather die, and began looking for an apartment all within the span of a month, all the while having the feeling that everything was uncertain fermenting in my head. This helps us frame the narrative, for though I am not the protagonist—Wick is the protagonist—I do carry the equal burdens of perspective and hindsight.

My name is Neil Oberlin, and the narrative is my burden. I've elected to record the narrative in the vintage Lapiz Lazuli Parker Duofold fountain pen that was a graduation gift from my father, but I will eventually have to transfer it to digital text.

I'm being discursive.

Before I actually found an apartment I stayed for a weekend with an old friend who had moved to a neighborhood in South Nashville. I came to look for an apartment and meet with my first client. I would have stayed with my cousin, who had moved to Nashville three years prior, but she was out of town. I slept in a slim loft office in a sleeping bag with a single alcove window over me. I browsed dozens of articles on graphic design trends, and tried to get a feel for the city. One has to have friends who are well read, well cultured, well educated, well tolerable.

My friend was Greg Dickey, whom I had roomed with for a year as an undergrad before transferring schools. He had not changed much, the same self-professed odd ball I had known him to be, an amateur photographer and ukulele player, an Asiaphile and a gamer who shared my taste in music—Radiohead, Of Montreal, New Pornographers. He had become a high school science teacher, and was a suited to disperse factoids to students with zeal as he was to overanalyze relationships. He even kept a sketch book for his theories on relationships, which often included intricate graphs. His students called him "Mr. Savage" after the Mythbusters host due to his resemblance in both form and essence—that is, when they were not calling him "Mr. Dick." He was the son of a preacher, the deer-in-the-headlights variety. He once rambled about the complexity of the universe as proof of the existence of God, which I challenged as a clear case of *ad ignorantiam*. Once, when I once explained Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, and he claimed it was merely borrowing from

Ecclesiastes and its “nothing under the sun” routine, I called him a swine and he called Nietzsche a sociopath.

Still, I would have grown permanently misanthropic towards him were it not for his optimism and his taste in music, the latter of which made us kindred spirits.

Greg and I went out for sushi and, after moaning about how girls play the “low self-esteem” card on everything, he convinced me to go with him and his roommates to go “stalkin’ the Hag”—that is, hit up a Merle Haggard show. I would have declined, as it was not my scene and I could not afford the tickets, but the ticket was free, and I was a guest of Greg’s. It occurred to me, also, that attending such a concert would indeed be a novel experience I could not pass up, as I make a rule for myself to refrain from passing up novel experiences, especially when I can get a kick out of the characters they draw. On top of all this, I was looking forward to attending a show where it was less likely that someone would mistake me for Ben Folds.

The opening band bombed, but Merle Haggard, whom I had actually never heard before, was decently vintage with a rugged authenticity I could not bemoan, and the edginess of his outlaw persona I found to be a precocious veneer until I heard from Greg’s roommate, Hank, that Haggard did indeed spend time in prison, which cemented his legitimacy and allowed me to enjoy the concert. Still, it was not my scene; I stood out in my Che tee.

Because I ended up enjoying the concert, and because I was still seeking to initiate myself into the scene, I obliged Greg in attending his church with him the following Sunday. I was in the nexus of the Bible belt, after all, and my trip would not be complete without the obligatory concert and church combination. This was not to say that I had no interest in pursuits of faith. I am not fan of organized religion, but I would qualify myself as a seeker—or perhaps more of a ponderer.

The congregation was large, as expected, and the building was an uninspiring, drab slab of brick. The hymns were sung in a capella fashion and all the men above the age of forty wore a cheap sport-coat. They had a crisply spoken and a paternally watchful preacher, one who knew his text well, but his sermon did not stimulate me intellectually. The narrative of this church consisted of the typically fed lines that immersion into a new mode of existence through a supreme being full of grace and hope was a salvation from eternal damnation, and I recalled being a child and hearing that same narrative, that same anthology of mostly harmless

untruths that kept old people in their pews. The folks were nice, though, and they were in love with their text—or rather their tradition of experiencing their text. One old woman gave my hand a good squeeze and told me to come again. As we left an elderly man told us boys to take care of ourselves, drive careful, and “don’t go on any wild tangents.” These people amuse me. Still, it was not my scene; I stood out in my Nietzsche tee.

They let me pick lunch, Greg and his roomies. I mentioned a bistro I wanted to try downtown, but they didn’t want to hassle with the traffic. They teased me, asking if I had heard that Jack White liked to eat there. I made the mistake of sarcastically mentioning that we could go to Shoney’s when I saw one up the road. My sarcasm being too subtle, Shoney’s it was. I didn’t speak up, so as not to offend them, but they finally became attuned to my sarcasm when, after we sat down, I contemptuously complimented the breakfast buffet’s homestyle grits served at room temperature for being “just like my grandmother made them.” Brunch then became awkward, and for my penance I ate in silence.

I internalized the experience of eating at a buffet not as an act of eating but as a commentary on how we eat, which, like Warhol and his cheeseburger, was a joke understood by no one else. I ate the buffet not to please Greg and his friends, but to ironically savor the entertainment of actually scraping the thirty-minute-old eggs and potatoes out of the pan and onto a cold plate as a commentary on the absurdity of mass produced, mediocre food culture. My condescending amusement may have only offended anyone who noticed. The brunch took me back to my days of eating at the school cafeteria, and I was beginning to feel misanthropic. I wanted to go home and read Kafka.

I’m being melancholy.

After talking about the concert the night before, Greg and his roommates, Hank Scott and Mason Leary, began discussing music, and I forgot that I was eating derisively. Greg was far more enlightened on the music scene, while he was appreciative of more commonplace artists. Hank was a throwback fan, a firm believer in the old school heroes of Country Music—Merle, George (Jones more so than Strait), Charlie, Willie, Waylin. It was a family tradition to him, and his father had named him after Hank Williams—the first Hank Williams, that is. I knew nothing of these artists, but he was humble and passionate about his opinions. He

also wore a hip pair of prescription horn rim specs that boosted his authenticity. Mason had a catlike air about him. He spoke seldom on the matter of music, but spoke sharply and sincerely. His era and genre of choice were the Grunge and Alternative scenes of the 1990s. But he had recently purchased an album called *Gravity Waltzs* that he recommended, and it was then I was first introduced to Garrett Sedgwick.

I tell you all this, readers, to tell you that I would eventually be introduced to Wick in the flesh, as well as to tell you that though these new friends were not in my scene, they would come to resurface again. The three of them agreed that he was talented, and though I was having a miserable day after attending a concert, a church and a buffet that were all not to my liking, it struck a cord with me that Greg, Hank, and Mason would all give such an artist a rave review. They burned me a copy of the album and I played it to myself in the loft bedroom as I hunted for apartments. I had to give Wick two listens in order to make a decent judgement.

This is no prologue, readers. This is how the narrative must unravel, where it begins: If it was not when I moved into an apartment in downtown Nashville, it was when I first heard of a local artist named Wick while dining at a Shoney's just south of the city.

I'm being sentimental.