Good Morning Midnight: Life and Death in the Wild

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In Review

Good Morning Midnight: Life and Death in the Wild

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Where does a man turn, how does he live, when his hopes and dreams have failed him (or—perhaps no less commonly—when he has failed them)? Few questions challenge who we are and what we believe more profoundly, as this sober account of how one troubled soul wrestled with these questions shows.

The book recounts the remarkable life and haunting death of Guy Waterman. Waterman was the scion of a prominent family, a gifted speechwriter and a New England outdoorsman and mountaineer of some renown.

Waterman's was in a sense two lives, the first lived before and the second after his discovery of the wilderness. Three sons issued from his first (mostly unhappy) marriage. By the time the first and second sons sank into despair and then vanished one after the other into the Alaskan wilds, their emotional distance from their father seemed almost greater than the geographical. Only the third son found a measure of serenity, and that only by establishing his own emotional separation from his father.

All of this, and his own "inner demons" and fears, eventually got the better of Guy Waterman. After he reinvented himself as a homesteader, mountaineer and wilderness man of letters (he could quote from memory vast sections of *Paradise Lost* and was a gifted jazz pianist), his soul's sources gave out. One afternoon in the winter of 2000, having discussed his plans in detail with his wife, he walked away from her and the home they had made. Taking a familiar path up into the mountains of New Hampshire, he sat down by the trail and died, alone with the ice, rocks and wind.

Chip Brown traces the trajectory of this man's life with great sensitivity. We see Waterman's decline through the eyes of those who knew (or tried to know) and loved (or tried to love) him. Months after his death his widow reluctantly allows herself to wonder whether her husband's resolute embrace of such a death really was noble, or was instead redolent of a profound failure toward himself and those around him. One is left thinking of small, almost mundane actions, such as picking up the phone to ask one of his many friends for help, that actually might have been more heroic. We wonder if there was something cruel (if not intentionally so) in what he asked of his partner: that she live for months in the dreadful anticipation of the death he had chosen, that she keep secret his planned suicide, that she carry on afterward with the hole his absence left in her life.

“Who has borne our sorrows and carried our griefs”? In the end, at least something of one’s grief and trials are one’s own, and there’s neither purpose nor charity in dwelling on what this man should have done with the life God gave him. The book gives us cause to respect the determination with which Waterman created a completely new life for himself when his “first life” had gone dead, even while we flinch at his sons’ pitiful attempts to make their way in life without much involvement or guidance from him. To watch Waterman in decline is to be reminded of how often the love longed for by sons and fathers alike comes down simply to having someone pay attention.

Waterman stared into his own abyss with a mixture of stoicism, self-pity and misguided heroism: to sit down on a mountain and die, with so much affection so close at hand. Not only faith, but also agnosticism can fall prey to sentimentality about death. Among other truncations, the one who chooses suicide cuts short an extended conversation with his own life. In *Good Morning Midnight*, Brown recovers and helps to complete a part of that conversation.