In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing ... [Our father] told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fisherman and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.”

“But he never asked us more than the first question in the catechism, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ And we answered together so one of us could carry on if the other forgot, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.’ This always seemed to satisfy him, as indeed such a beautiful answer should have, and besides he was anxious to be on the hills where he could restore his soul and be filled again to overflowing for the evening sermon.”

Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters.”

“As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God’s rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word ‘beautiful.’”

“Always it was to be called a rod. If someone called it a pole, my father looked at him as a sergeant in the United States Marines would look at a recruit who had just called a rifle a gun.”

“Well, until man is redeemed he will always take a fly rod too far back, just as natural man always overswings with an ax or golf club and loses all his power somewhere in the air ... Then, since it is natural for man to try to attain power without recovering grace, he whips the line back and forth making it whistle each way ...”

“Power comes not from power everywhere, but from knowing where to put it on ... To [Father] all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.”

“Izaak Walton,” [Father] told us when my brother was thirteen or fourteen, ‘is not a respectable writer. He was an Episcopalian and a bait fisherman.’”

“We had to be very careful in dealing with each other. I often thought of him as a boy, but I never could treat him that way. He was never ‘my kid brother.’ He was a master of an art. He did not want any big brother advice or money or help, and, in the end, I could not help him.

“Since one of the earliest things brothers try to find out is how they differ from each other, one of the things I remember longest about Paul is this business about his liking to bet.”
“Paul ... had decided this early he had two major purposes in life: to fish and not to work, at least not allow work to interfere with fishing. ... Early, then, he had come close to realizing life’s purposes, which did not conflict in his mind from those given in answer to the first question in *The Westminster Catechism.*”

p. 7: “I was tough by being the product of tough establishments – the United States Forest Service and logging camps. Paul was tough by thinking he was tougher than any establishment.”

p. 8: “We held in common one major theory about street fighting – if it looks like a fight is coming, get in the first punch.”

“... if boyhood questions aren’t answered before a certain point in time, they can’t ever be raised again.”

p. 10: “I liked [brother-in-law Neal] even less than Paul did, and it’s no pleasure to see your wife’s face on somebody you don’t like.”

“The editor was one of the last small-town editors in the classic school of personal invective. He started drinking early in the morning so he wouldn’t feel sorry for anyone during the day, and he and my brother admired each other greatly.”

p. 11: “More than most mothers, Scottish mothers have had to accustom themselves to migration and sin, and to them all sons are prodigal and welcome home.”

“And I knew that, having been given his word, I would never get another kick from him.”

p. 13: “We regarded [the Big Blackfoot River] as a family river, as a part of us, and I surrender it now only with great reluctance to dude ranches, the unselected inhabitants of Great Falls, and the Moorish invaders from California.”

“He also must have felt honor-bound to tell me that he lived other lives, even if he presented them to me as puzzles in the form of funny stories. Often I did not know what I had been told about him as we crossed the divide between our two worlds.”

p. 16: A roll cast “is a little like a rattlesnake striking, with a good piece of his tail on the ground as something to strike from. All this is easy for a rattlesnake, but has always been hard for me.”

“Then he acted as if he hadn’t said anything and I acted as if I hadn’t heard it, but as soon as he left, which was immediately, I started retrieving my line on a diagonal, and it helped. The moment I felt I was getting a little more distance I ran for a fresh hole to make a fresh start in life.”
p. 17: “But I couldn’t shake the conviction that I had seen the black back of a big fish, because, as someone often forced to think, I know that often I would not see a thing unless I thought of it first.”

p. 18: “One great thing about fly fishing is that after a while nothing exists of the world but thoughts about fly fishing. It is also interesting that thoughts about fishing are often carried on in dialogue form where Hope and Fear – or, many times, two Fears – try to outweigh each other.”

“That’s how you know when you have thought too much – when you become a dialogue between You’ll probably lose and You’re sure to lose.”

p. 19: “I thought all these thoughts and some besides that proved of no value, and then I cast and I caught him.”

p. 20: “Below him was the multitudinous river, and, where the rock had parted it around him, big-grained vapor rose. The mini-molecules of water left in the wake of his line made momentary loops of gossamer, disappearing so rapidly in the rising big-grained vapor that they had to be retained in memory to be visualized as loops. The spray emanating from him was finer-grained still and enclosed him in a halo of himself. The halo of himself was always there and always disappearing, as if he were candlelight flickering about three inches from himself. The images of himself and his line kept disappearing into the rising vapors of the river, which continually circled to the tops of the cliffs where, after becoming a wreath in the wind, they became rays of the sun.”

p. 21: “He was thirty-two now, at the height of his power, and he could put all his body and soul into a four-and-a-half-ounce magic totem pole.”

p. 22: “The canyon was glorified by rhythms and colors.”

“She was one of America’s mothers who never dream of using profanity themselves but enjoy their husbands’, and later come to need it, like cigar smoke.”

p. 23: “Besides [Paul is] behind in the big stud poker game at Hot Springs. It’s not healthy to be behind in the big game at Hot Springs. ... At Hot Springs they don’t play any child games like fist fighting.”

p. 24: “I was confused from trying to rise suddenly from molecules of sleep to an understanding of what I did not want to understand.”

p. 25: “When her black hair glistened, she was one of my favorite women.”

p 26: “She was one of the most beautiful dancers I have ever seen. ... It is a strange and wonderful and somewhat embarrassing feeling to hold someone in your arms who is trying to detach you from the earth and you aren’t good enough to follow her.”
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p. 28: “Seeing that I was relying on women to explain to myself what I didn't understand about men ...”

“Both [of the uncles] were charming, but you didn't quite know what if anything you knew when you had finished talking to them.”

“Sunrise is the time to feel that you will be able to find out how to help somebody close to you who you think needs help even if he doesn’t think so. At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear.”

“Yet even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as ‘our brother’s keepers,’ possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go.”

p. 30: “My wife was barren of double-talk ...”

The Great Northern mascot mountain goat was “the only goat that ever saw the bottom of his world constantly occupied by a bottle of bar whiskey labeled ‘3-7-77’ ...”

p. 31: “They couldn’t get [the sheepherder’s] underwear off – it had been on him so long his hair had grown through it. Finally, they had to pluck him like a chicken, and when his underwear finally came off, pieces of skin came with it.”

p. 32: “There was something deep in Neal that compelled him to lie to experts, even though they knew best that he was lying. He was one of those who need to be caught telling a lie while he is telling it.”

p. 33: “I was already wise to the fact that Neal’s opening ploy with women was to ignore them, and indeed was beginning to recognize what a good opening it is.”

p. 34: “Although the Scots invented whiskey, they try not to acknowledge the existence of hangovers, especially within the family circle.”

p. 36: “One thing about a ranch road – there is less and less of it the closer it gets to the cows.”

p. 37: “Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart – I don’t know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere deep. Many of us probably would be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect.
“The hardest thing usually to leave behind, as was the case now, can loosely be called the conscience.”

p. 39: Eastern Brook Trout “are beautiful to see – black backs, yellow and orange spots on their sides, red bellies ending in under-fins fringed with white. They are compositions in colors, and were often painted on platters. But they are only fairly good fighters and they feel like eels because their scales are so small. Besides, their name is against them in western Montana where the word ‘brook’ is not a socially acceptable substitute for ‘creek.’”

p. 40: “The Elkhorn looks just like what it is – a crack in the earth to mark where the Rocky Mountains end and the Great Plains begin. The giant mountains are black-backed with nearly the last of mountain pines. Their eastern sides turn brown and yellow as the tall prairie grasses begin, but there are occasional black spots where the pines scatter themselves out to get a last look back. The mythological Brown Trout and the canyon harmonized in my thoughts. The trout that might be real and close at hand was massive, black on the back, yellow and brown on the sides, had black spots and a final fringe of white. The Elkhorn and the Brown Trout are also alike in being beautiful by being partly ugly.”

p. 42: “... it is not fly fishing if you are not looking for answers to questions.”

p. 43: “The cast is so soft and slow that it can be followed like an ash settling from a fireplace chimney. One of life’s quiet excitements is to stand somewhat apart from yourself and watch yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful, even if it is only a floating ash.”

p. 44: “Poets talk about ‘spots of time,’ but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish and the fish is gone. I shall remember that son of a bitch forever.”

p. 45: “That’s one trouble with hanging around a master – you pick up some of his stuff, like how to cast into a bush, but you use it just when the master is doing the opposite.”

p. 46: “To women who do not fish, men who come home without their limit are failures in life.”

p. 47: “The storm came on a wild horse and rode over us.”

p. 49: “The light first picked up [Neal’s] brow, which was serene but pale, as mine would have been if my mother had spent her life in making me sandwiches and protecting me from reality.”

p. 53: “Sometimes a thing in front of you is so big you don’t know whether to comprehend it by first getting a dim sense of the whole and then fitting in the pieces or by adding up the pieces until something calls out what it is.”

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p. 54: “... I felt about why women are such a bunch of suckers and how they all want to help some bastard like [Neal] – and not me.”

p. 55: “If you have never seen a bear go over the mountain, you have never seen the job reduced to its essentials. Of course, deer are faster, but not going straight uphill. Not even elk have the power in their hindquarters. Deer and elk zigzag and switchback and stop and pose while really catching their breath. The bear leaves the earth like a bolt of lightning retrieving itself and making its thunder backwards.”

p. 56: “What a beautiful world it was once. At least a river of it was ... What a wonderful world it was once when all the beer was not made in Milwaukee, Minneapolis, or St. Louis.”

p. 58: “In the middle of a heat spell death comes to running water at high noon.”

“There was nothing in the shade but shadows.”

“To one familiar with a subject, there is no trouble to find reasons for the opposite side.”

“The brain gives up a lot less easily than the body, so fly fishermen have developed what they call the ‘curiosity theory,’ which is about what it says it is. It is the theory that fish, like men, will sometimes strike at things just to find out what they are and not because they look good to eat.”

p. 59: “While this [bobcat] was wet, it was a skinny, meek little thing, but after it got dry and fluffy again and felt sure that it was a cat once more, it turned around, took a look at me, and hissed.”

p. 61: “Still, I was grateful to get the horse collar [big fat zero] off my neck.”

“I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river.”

p. 62: “... part of the way to come to know a thing is through its death.”

p. 63: “It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness.

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“The fisherman even has a phrase to describe what he does when he studies the patterns of a river. He says he is ‘reading the water,’ and perhaps to tell his stories he has to do much the same thing. Then one of his biggest problems is to guess where and at what time of day life lies ready to be taken as a joke. And to guess whether it is going to be a little or a big joke.

“For all of us, though, it is much easier to read the waters of tragedy.”

p. 67: “You have never really seen an ass until you have seen two sunburned asses on a sandbar in the middle of a river. Nearly all the rest of the body seems to have evaporated. The body is a large red ass about to blister, with hair on one end of it for a head and feet attached to the other end for legs. By tonight, it will run a fever.

“That’s the way it looked then, but, when I view it now through the sentimentality of memory, it belongs to a pastoral world where you could take off your clothes, screw a dame in the middle of the river, then roll over on your belly and go to sleep for a couple of hours.”

p. 74: “The women I was brought up with never stood around trying on different life styles when there was something to be done, especially something medical.”

p. 75: “I had long ago learned, sometimes to my sorrow, that Scottish piety is accompanied by a complete foreknowledge of sin. That’s what we mean by original sin – we don’t have to do it to know about it.”

p. 76: “A man is at a disadvantage talking to a woman as tall as he is, and I had tried long and hard to overcome this handicap.”

p. 77: Then Jessie added, “Tell me, why is it that people who want help do better without it – at least, no worse. Actually, that’s what it is, no worse. They take all the help they can get, and are just the same as they always have been.”

p. 78: “Actually, I was feeling lordly with love and several times broke into laughter that I can’t explain otherwise ...”

“Mother was excited when we got to Missoula. She tried to wring her hands in her apron, hug Paul, and laugh, all at the same time.”

p. 79: “Somewhere along the line she had forgotten that it was I who liked chokecherry jelly, a gentle confusion that none of her men minded.”
p. 81: “Help,” [Father] said, “is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly. So it is,” he said, using an old homilectic transition, “that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don’t know what part to give or maybe we don’t like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed. It is like the auto-supply shop over town where they always say, ‘Sorry, we are just out of that part.’”

p. 82: “Usually, I get up early to observe the commandment observed by only some of us – to arise early to see as much of the Lord’s daylight as is given to us.”

Mother “knew nothing about fishing or fishing tackle, but she knew how to find things, even when she did not know what they looked like.”

p. 84: “The flat ended suddenly and the river was down a steep bank, blinking silver through the trees and then turning to blue by comparing itself to a red and green cliff.”

p. 85: “Big clumsy flies bumped into my face, swarmed on my neck and wiggled in my underwear. Blundering and soft-bellied, they had been born before they had brains. They had spent a year under water on legs, had crawled out on a rock, had become flies and copulated with the ninth and tenth segments of their abdomens, and then had died as the first light wind blew them into the water where the fish circled excitedly. They were a fish’s dream come true – stupid, succulent, and exhausted from copulation. Still, it would be hard to know what gigantic portion of human life is spent in this same ratio of years under water on legs to one premature, exhausted moment on wings.”

p. 88: “So, on this wonderful afternoon when all things came together it took me one cast, one fish, and some reluctantly accepted advice to attain perfection. I did not miss another.”

p. 90: “It seems somehow natural to start thinking about character when you get ahead of somebody, especially about the character of the one who is behind.”

p. 92: “All there is to thinking,” [Paul] said, “is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”

p. 94: “They made ten, and the last three were the finest fish I ever caught. They weren’t the biggest or most spectacular fish I ever caught, but they were three fish I caught because my brother waded across the river to give me the fly that would catch them and because they were the last fish I ever caught fishing with him.”

p. 95: “The voices of the subterranean river in the shadows were different from the voices of the sunlit river ahead. In the shadows against the cliff the river was deep and engaged in profundities, circling back on itself now and then to say things over to be sure it had understood itself. But the
river ahead came out into the sunny world like a chatterbox, doing its best to be friendly. It bowed to one shore and then to the other so nothing would feel neglected.”

p. 100:  “It never occurred to either of us to hurry to the shore in case he needed help with a rod in his right hand and a basket loaded with fish on his left shoulder. In our family it was no great thing for a fisherman to swim a river with matches in his hair.”

p. 101:  “At the end of this day, then, I remember him both as a distant abstraction in artistry and as a closeup in water and laughter.”

p. 102:  “In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the trees took the river in their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us.”

Mother “was never to ask me a question about the man she loved most and understood least. Perhaps she knew enough to know that for her it was enough to have loved him. He was probably the only man in the world who had held her in his arms and leaned back and laughed.”

p. 103:  “Like many Scottish ministers before him, he had to derive what comfort he could from the faith that his son had died fighting.”

“No,” I replied, “but you can love completely without complete understanding.”

“How can a question be answered that asks a lifetime of questions?”

p. 104:  “Then he asked, ‘After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don’t you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why. It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.’”

“No nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.”

“Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

“I am haunted by waters.”