Impermeably embedded in a microchip in the computer of a major West Coast newspaper is the news that, along with Edward Abbey and N. Scott Momaday and Larry McMurtry and Robert Stone and Ernest Gaines and Max Apple and Tom McGuane and Ken Kesey and Wendell Berry and Tillie Olsen and plenty of other writers who could be named, I was a student of Wallace Stegner's in the writing program at Stanford. This was particularly news to Stegner and me. Wouldn't you think one or the other of us would have remembered that?
This went on, enough, that after a lecture-tour talk by Wally which had
been prefaced by my being singled out in the front row as a former you-know-
what of you-know-who, Wally afterward gave me a Stegnerian look--furrows across
that Mount Rushmore forehead--and said he was sorry about my being
mis-introduced in his introduction, he didn't know how that story had got
started. Hey, don't worry, I told him, we're probably both better off with
this erroneous version--this way, he didn't have to put up with me as a student,
and it saved me all that Stanford tuition.
That kind of inexplicable bonus to me, that because I am a writer of
and about the West, I must have spent time at the Stegnerian elbow—that's
pretty much the way I do feel about Wallace Stegner, that there was a general
benefit to me just being in his region of the country and line of work. /And,
along that line, of merging the white space of writing with the landscape
expanses of the West, I want to take you traveling into a particular piece
of Stegner work.
In 1987, two books of his were published. One was his last novel, Crossing to Safety—as he described it, "Of all the books I ever wrote... the most personal... Deliberately close to my own experience, opinions, and feelings... refracted through a narrator not too different from myself."

The front-flap copy of Crossing to Safety describes it this way: "In the mid-thirties, in mid-Depression, a bright, nice, open couple from the West with gifts and dreams but no prospects or connections meets a bright, nice, open couple from the East with wealth, lakeside cottages, long lines of family certainties in manners, tastes, and opinions, and the generosity
to share all they have of good fortune. The friendship that forms and 
flowers in a single evening binds them together all their days."

Back to Stegner's own description of the book: "The themes of the novel 
are love, friendship, and survival. The villains are willfulness, polio, 
cancer, and blind chance. The tensions are the tensions between and among 
people who love each other at least as much as they resist each other. It 
is all very quiet. I intended it to be true. I wrote my guts out trying 
to make it as moving on the page as it was to me while I was living and 
reliving it."
Quiet though it was, Crossing to Safety caught on. People in publishing firm are skittish about numbers even when they have good news to report, but my phone calls to Crossing to Safety's hardback and paperback publishers add up to the evident fact that it has sold somewhere over 150,000 copies. Friends in the bookstore business frankly tell me it's been a favorite of theirs to sell—as one of them put it, "You don't get very many novels you can tell your customers are about friendship."

The other Stegner book of 1987 was a mere 86 pages of text, and five or six of those were given over to photos. The book's set of three essays had been delivered as the William W. Cook Lectures at the Law School of the University of Michigan in the fall of 1986—(look up)—one of those endowed lecture series with what sounds like the up-and-down results you get out of an academic selection committee—Arthur Danto of Columbia talking about philosophy one year, and Bartlett Giamatti of Yale and major league baseball talking about "Americans and
their Games" another year. The acquiring editor for the University of Michigan Press, Mary Irwin, tells me the publication rights to Stegner's set of talks was "fairly easy" to lay hold of—she believes he "felt some kind of loyalty" to the U. of Michigan because it provided the occasion for the lectures. The U. of Michigan Press went ahead and published the essay trio, to little fanfare and almost no reviews. I have the appalled memory of being at the American Booksellers convention three years later, at a lunch with the book review editors of most of the major U.S. newspapers.
Stegner's name came up, I chipped in something about the University of Michigan Press book—and there was a puzzled general silence as it became clear that none of the book review editors were familiar with it.

I will always credit Jack Miles, of the Los Angeles Times, for pulling out a notebook and in honest amends, jotting down the title. As to sales of that book, if Wally thought Crossing to Safety was a quiet piece of work, he must have thought this one was mighty near mute—555 sold in hardback, five-thousand five-hundred in the University of Michigan paperback.
The three essays that formed the book now have been subsumed into the larger and more general collection of Stegner essays, Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs. And though it's true that Where the Bluebird Sings... is attracting a much greater readership, the "Michigan trio" of essays are now sandwiched in a "Habitat" section of the book, between a couple of magazine pieces--so that it's not apparent, any more, that the "Ann Arbor three" represent a unified summary of Stegner and his West, by Stegner: what he wanted to say, when offered the chance to say whatever he wanted, three nights in a row.
The title, of that little book, that went down in Jack Miles' notebook and in thin ranks on bookstore shelves was /The American West as Living Space/—to give it the emphasis Stegner himself stressed in its preface: "the living region, with its country and its people, its splendors and its limitations, its facts and its fantasies, its opportunities and its problems, its romantic past and booming present and dubious future, all suggested"—and I may be in as sharp a minority as the disparity of those sales figures—this small set of essays selling less than one/twenty-fifth as many copies as Crossing to Safety—when I say that, for my money, The American West as Living Space is the grander finale of Stegner work.
Here's his opening paragraph:

"The West is a region of extraordinary variety within its abiding unity, and of an iron immutability beneath its surface of change. The most splendid part of the American habitat, it is also the most fragile. It has been misinterpreted and mistreated because, coming to it from earlier frontiers where conditions were not unlike those of northern Europe, Anglo-Americans found it different, daunting, exhilarating, dangerous, and unpredictable, and entered it carrying habits that were often inappropriate and expectations that were surely excessive. The
dreams they brought to it were recognizable American dreams—a new chance, a little gray house in the West, adventure, danger, bonanza, total freedom from constraint and law and obligation, the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the New Jerusalem. Those dreams had often paid off in parts of America settled earlier, and they paid off for some in the West. For the majority, no. The West has had a way of warping well-carpentered habits, and raising the grain on exposed dreams."
Lots of lessons in that one paragraph, an impressive number of them about the art of writing. Parallel constructions, alliteration, deft change of sentence rhythm from that four-worder which crescendoes in "the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the New Jerusalem" down to the honest power of that four-word dreambreaker: "For the majority, no." More vitally, though, he sweeps us at once into his exploration of the great theme of the West, the clash of its ecologies and its cultures.
This first essay carries the title "Living Dry," and the second is called "Striking the Rock." Elsewhere, Stegner once said with a bit of a sigh that "the whole West, including much of California, is arid country, as I've been reiterating ad nauseam for fifty years." In this pair of essays he is, unabashedly, on what he believes is the main set of tracks in the West. Investigative reporters, certainly since Watergate, and Woodward and Bernstein have spoken openly of the principle: "follow the money." Stegner is telling us here that if we want to savvy the West, follow the water. To me, this has the ringing sound of Stegner hitting the nail on the head, as usual—the true cliche about the West is that, out here, water flows uphill toward money.
His "Living Dry" essay is an overview of western climate and geography, and the explorations and settlement patterns and water laws that the Anglo-American immigrants brought in. He covers a lot of territory, fast, and even an academic on an off-day could encyclopedify him into a corner on some of his assertions. Even I, as a sometime magazine writer, can catch freelance virtuoso him at giving an inconvenient fact a quick elbow in the ribs and waltzing away while it's still catching its breath—he calls "the northwest corner of the West, on the Pacific side of the Cascades...a narrow exception" to western aridity; as a current resident of that area, I would point out to Wally
that the arc of the raincoast from Oregon up through Washington and British Columbia and Alaska is at least as long and strong as the usual "West-defining" "dry line" of the 98th meridian from North Dakota to Texas.

But Stegner had said frankly near the start of this "Living Dry" essay that "I can't come to even tentative conclusions about the West without coming to some conclusions about myself," and so if he scampers a bit in his historical overview, he has a place he is hungry to get to. Here, I think, is how he begins to merge his conclusions about the West and himself as a Westerner:
"Our migratoriness has hindered us from becoming a people of communities and traditions, especially in the West. It has robbed us of the gods who make places holy. It has cut off individuals and families from memory and the continuum of time. It has left as least some of us with a kind of spiritual pellagra, a deficiency disease—a hungering for the ties of a rich and stable social order."
There are a couple more pages of assertions and examples, scholarly and reflective, then all of a sudden Wallace Stegner, son of the West, just lets/rip:
For the moment, forget the Pacific Coast, furiously bent on becoming Conurbia from Portland to San Diego. Forget the metropolitan sprawl of Denver, Phoenix, Tucson, Albuquerque, Dallas–Fort Worth, and Salt Lake City, growing to the limits of their water and beyond, like bacterial cultures overflowing the edges of their agar dishes and beginning to sicken on their own wastes. If we want characteristic western towns we must look for them, paradoxically, beyond the West’s prevailing urbanism, out in
the boondocks where the interstates do not reach, mainline planes do not fly, and branch plants do not locate. The towns that are most western have had to strike a balance between mobility and stability, and the law of sparseness has kept them from growing too big. They are the places where the stickers stuck, and perhaps were stuck; the places where adaptation has gone furthest.
Whether they are winter wheat towns on the subhumid edge, whose elevators and bulbous silver water towers announce them miles away, or county towns in ranch country, or intensely green towns in irrigated desert valleys, they have a sort of forlorn, proud rightness. They look at once lost and self-sufficient, scruffy and indispensable. A road leads in out of wide emptiness, threads a fringe of service stations, taverns, and a motel or two, widens to a couple of blocks of commercial buildings, some still false-fronted, with glimpses of side streets and green lawns, narrows to another strip of automotive roadside, and disappears into more wide emptiness.
The loneliness and vulnerability of those towns always moves me, for I have lived in them. I know how the world of a child in one of them is bounded by weedy prairie, or the spine of the nearest dry range, or by flats where plugged tin cans lie rusting and the wind has pasted paper and plastic against the sagebrush. I know how precious is the safety of a few known streets and vacant lots and familiar houses. I know how the road in both directions both threatens and beckons. I know that most of the children in such a town will sooner or later take that road, and that only a few will take it back.
That outburst of... longing, I think it has to be called, Stegner and we will come back to, in his final part of The American West as Living Space.

But first he closes off this "Living Dry" essay with a potent final paragraph:
And what do you do about aridity, if you are a nation inured to plenty and impatient of restrictions and led westward by pillars of fire and cloud? You may deny it for a while. Then you must either adapt to it or try to engineer it out of existence.
"Striking the Rock" is his essay about our attempts to "engineer away" the fact of Western dryness, and it's a wicked-sharp recounting of environmental battles, and of the historically checkered personalities of both westerners and government agencies. The dam-building Bureau of Reclamation of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, he turns every way but loose. He cites to us other writers, such as Donald Worster, Marc Reisner and Philip Fradkin, who've taken scathing looks at "the hydraulic society" of dam-building and irrigation, and then, once again he personally cuts loose.
Stegner has written elsewhere of his fondness for the Salt Lake City where he spent his adolescence and young manhood, and of the Mormon society there which he said generously "welcomed even such gentile waifs as my brother and me."

But making the desert "blossom as the rose" is at the heart of his skepticism about engineering away aridity, and he quotes a Mormon hierarch, John Widtsoe, who advocated irrigation projects thusly:

"The destiny of man is to possess the whole earth; the destiny of the earth is to be subject to man. There can be no full conquest of the earth, and no real satisfaction to humanity, if large portions of the earth remain beyond his highest control."
Stegner takes that head-on:

"That doctrine offends me to the bottom of my not-very-Christian soul. It is related to the spirit that builds castles of incongruous luxury in the desert. It is the same spirit that between 1930 and the present has so dammed, diverted, used, and re-used the Colorado River that its saline waters now never reach the Gulf of California, but die in the sand miles from the sea; that has set the Columbia, a far mightier river, to tamely turning turbines; that has reduced the Missouri, the greatest river on the continent, to a string of ponds; that has recklessly pumped down the water table of every western valley and threatens to dry up even so prolific a source as the Ogallala Aquifer; that has made the Salt River Valley of
Arizona, and the Imperial, Coachella, and great Central valleys of California into gardens of fabulous but deceptive richness; that has promoted a new rush to the West fated, like the beaver and grass and gold rushes, to recede after doing great environmental damage."
That splendid shout of Stegner's, echoes and echoes away in the face of
the fact—as he too well knew—that the dams exist, the rivers pool behind
them, the cities and suburbs grow and grow by suckling on their tapwater and
electricity. He ends this chapter, this essay, this way:

"Sad to say...the West is no more the Eden that I once thought it than
the Garden of the World that the boosters and engineers tried to make; it;
and that neither nostalgia nor boosterism can any longer make a case for it
as the geography of hope."
Then, the finale chapter of a finale book: "Variations on a Theme by
Crevecoeur"—by which Stegner of course is westernifying the famous rhetorical
question Crevecoeur asked in his Letters from an American Farmer more than
two hundred years ago—"Who is the American, this new man?"

Stegner knew better than to give a hard and fast answer to his version,
our version, of that thumping question, "Who is the Westerner?" Those two
biting essays on aridity and the denial-by-engineering of course add up,
to something like this Stegnerian summary:
"We are not so far from our models, real and fictional, as we think. As on a wild river, the water passes, the waves remain. A high degree of mobility, a degree of ruthlessness, a large component of both self-sufficiency and self-righteousness mark the historical pioneer, the lone-riding folk hero, and the modern businessman intent on opening new industrial frontiers and getting his own in the process. The same qualities inform the extreme individualists who believe that they belong to nothing except what they choose to belong to, those who try on life-styles as some try on clothes...
One reason why it is so difficult to isolate any definitely western culture is that so many Westerners, like other Americans only more so, shy away from commitment."

To radically summarize a chapter which deserves careful reading, I'll tell you that Stegner found a resurgence of hope, for his native geography, in certain western "tastes, attitudes and skills," as he put it. In interests of full disclosure, I have to tell you, too, he mentions—in this connection—certain writers, with names like Kittredge and Welch and Erdrich and Doig.
Add on all the writers in and about the West who were his actual students, and my hope is that we can find a strength, in this loss of him. That instead of Wallace Stegner's long-familiar and often lonely eloquence for the West, the rest of the country may now have to hear from us as a tribe of western writers, a swarm of us.
Back to what Stegner saw, in the conclusion of The American West as Living Space, as hopeful western attributes. In person-by-person terms, he phrased this as—"the individual who transcends his culture without abandoning it, who leaves for a while in search of opportunity and enlargement but never forgets where he left his heart."
In societal terms, he put his hope this way—"towns and cities still close to the earth, intimate and interdependent in their shared community, shared optimism, and shared memory." Missoula, need I point out, he figured was one such a place. Elsewhere in this final chapter of his, Stegner makes a backtrack that I'm very glad to see him make—away from that wonderful peroration about "characteristic western towns," to mention that Los Angeles is the West, too. This is Doig now, rather than Stegner, "striking a rock" to see what will flow, but I think the Wallace Stegner who came around from his 1979 self-description as "a pretty straightforward, realistic story teller from
I once heard a stone mason use the term "a bad leave" (l-e-a-v-e). A bad leave, he said, means that the previous stones had been forced to fit together, but in such a way that they left trouble when the next stone had to be inserted. The West has had more than its share of "bad leaves"--the damage done, and left behind, by the fur and hide rushes, the mining rushes, the agricultural rushes, the energy rushes, all the booms and busts.
Typically, though, Wallace Stegner did things a little differently than the region with which he had such a passionate lover's quarrel for 84 years. In his writings, his voice for the land, his battalion of students—honorary and otherwise—he gave us the best "leave" he could, to build on.