

Salinas is
KM Bailey

The Salinas Valley breathes life into your lungs like a blacksmith's bellows. The imprint of its wind is always there. After you've been away for a spell, you long for the foggy mornings and the hot languid afternoons. Like clockwork the fog rolls in and out. The next day it starts all over again.

This rhythm happens through a juxtaposition of the sea and landscape. The central coast is known for its fog. When the southward blowing winds travel down the coast, the Earth spins beneath the surface currents, and the sea peels away from the land. Cool water from below flows up. Warm moist air blows over the chilly surface, and vapor condenses into a cloud of low laying fog. It usually hangs just off the beach in a band on the horizon.

Down in the valley around Paso Robles, the sun heats the air. The hot gas rises and creates a sort of vacuum in its place. It sucks the fog-laden coastal air in through the mouth of the valley. The fog flows past Salinas around 3 pm, just in time to cool the lettuce pickers. It cascades up the valley about 20 miles to Gonzales where the moisture burns off. At night, all that warm air aloft gets cold and tumbles back to earth, creating the morning offshore winds that push the fog back to sea. The valley inhales and exhales like a breathing animal.

The valley's rhythm lingered in John Steinbeck. He was born, raised and buried in Salinas. Some of his best stories are set there. He wrote, "I was born to it and my father was. Our bodies came from this soil. Our bones came from the limestone of our own mountains and our blood is distilled from the juices of this valley."

The green valley with its golden hills is a landscape where your roots set in deep. You can't tear them out cleanly, clods of the valley's dirt stick with you and its breath lingers. Just as Steinbeck said, "strange how I keep the tone of Salinas in my head like a remembered symphony."