

NILOFAR SHIDMEHR

DEATH OF A LABOURER

It was a stunning Labour Day Weekend—
sun shining and the sky
blue as the man's eyes,
had they been open.

He was lying on his back in the middle
of the waterfront path, his chest
heaving like the waves.

The Pacific waves were unusually high
that day, hitting against the seawall—
we noticed them before seeing
a small crowd standing over the man.

One finally called for an ambulance,
but the police arrived first.

A female officer ordered the onlookers
to leave the scene. My companion was about to,
but I tugged at his sleeve to stay.
The policewoman rolled her eyes
and waved at us to stand back
while the other bystanders dispersed,
went back to jogging or biking.

Up ahead, someone was playing music
on Second Beach. My partner said
Let's go. But I wanted to know
what would happen—if the man survives.

He was Caucasian but ordinary—
like us and out of shape—
donned in a sun-faded T-shirt
and worn out two-strap sandals.

Upon the arrival of an ambulance
I kept my partner in place
by his shoulders, waiting
for the paramedics to descend
from the stairs up a cliff side.

Two squatted beside the man and checked
his vital signs. The policewoman gave me
a dirty look, but I was not going
to move unless the man would come round.

During the chest compression, breath caught
in my throat, staring at the man's bony legs,
which didn't stir. After a while
the paramedics lifted him on to a stretcher
and moved him out of sight.

My partner was very much disappointed;
he didn't understand why I was so worked up
about a stranger and his destiny.
He grumbled the entire way back home,
arguing that after all
Labour Day was one day we
immigrants shouldn't be sweating
over life, death, and survival
in Canada.