

Clarence Nathan takes the subway train – his grandfather has inculcated in him a love of this journey – and he emerges from the station, walks jauntily to the construction sites near Battery Park. He has been given new sneakers for his sixteenth birthday.

He watches the choreography of commerce toward the sky.

The men who create the giant buildings are seen only as specks moving on naked beams, a series of hard hats going back and forth. They move at the rate of a floor a week. The cranes feed them steel, then the men bolt it together. When the steel is clad, the men climb higher, distancing themselves from the world below. Sometimes Clarence Nathan goes into neighbouring skyscrapers, saying he's a delivery boy, then sneaks his way to the top floor for a better view. He has bought a pair of binoculars in the pawn shop. He loves to see the men in motion on crossbeams and columns, climbing without harnesses even. The men move as if on solid ground; their feet never slip; there is no need for them to spread their arms wide for balance. Some even swing through the air on the end of jib lines. Clarence Nathan falsifies the application forms and says he is eighteen, though it's clear to the foremen that he hasn't even begun shaving.

“Come back when your testicles drop,” says one of the ironworkers.

One afternoon two security guards have to drag him from a ladder twenty-three floors up an unfinished skyscraper. They grab at Clarence Nathan's feet and are amazed at the brutal strength in his legs. He shakes free and they watch him leap the final eight rungs to the steel decking below. He lands with knees bowed, the binoculars swinging at his neck. “You goddamn fool,” says one of the guards. He is escorted down to the street and told that if he comes back again he'll be arrested. Clarence Nathan nods gravely, leaves the site and, when he is far enough away, he punches the air in euphoria. Some day he will climb and they will watch in awe. He will create his own movement in the air. He will climb higher than any of them.

Clarence Nathan stands on top of a parking meter, balancing, until a cop shoos him away. Further down the street he tries another parking meter on the other foot.

He returns day after day to the skyscraper site, wearing his grandfather's boots and an old lumberjack shirt. The ironworkers finally allow him to sling chokers on the giant steel beams on the ground as long as he promises not to climb. He attaches the short lengths of cable and watches the beams rise, lifted by the Favco cranes. Weeks later, Walker answers the door to a school official who says he hasn't seen the boy in ages.

Colum McCann, *This Side of Brightness* (1998)





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