

Do angels have wings? Can men fly?

When Mr Saladin Chamcha fell out of the clouds over the English Channel he felt his heart being gripped by a force so implacable that he understood it was impossible for him to die. Afterwards, when his feet were once more firmly planted on the ground, he would begin to doubt this, to ascribe the implausibilities of his transit to the scrambling of his perceptions by the blast, and to attribute his survival, his and Gibreel's, to blind, dumb luck. But at the time he had no doubt; what had taken him over was the will to live, unadulterated, irresistible, pure, and the first thing it did was to inform him that it wanted nothing to do with his pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices, it intended to bypass all that, and he found himself surrendering to it, yes, go on, as if he were a bystander in his own mind, in his own body, because it began in the very centre of his body and spread outwards, turning his blood to iron, changing his flesh to steel, except that it also felt like a fist that enveloped him from outside, holding him in a way that was both unbearably tight and intolerably gentle; until finally it had conquered him totally and could work his mouth, his fingers, whatever it chose, and once it was sure of its dominion it spread outward from his body and grabbed Gibreel Farishta by the balls.

'Fly,' it commanded Gibreel. 'Sing.'

Chamcha held on to Gibreel while the other began, slowly at first and then with increasing rapidity and force, to flap his arms. Harder and harder he flapped, and as he flapped a song burst out of him, and like the song of the spectre of Rekha Merchant it was sung in a language he did not know to a tune he had never heard. Gibreel never repudiated the miracle; unlike Chamcha, who tried to reason it out of existence, he never stopped saying that the gazal had been celestial, that without the song the flapping would have

been for nothing, and without the flapping it was a sure thing that they would have hit the waves like rocks or what and simply burst into pieces on making contact with the taut drum of the sea. Whereas instead they began to slow down. The more emphatically Gibreel flapped and sang, sang and flapped, the more pronounced the deceleration, until finally the two of them were floating down to the Channel like scraps of paper in a breeze.

Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988)