"No [I am not religious], but I have to believe in miracles and the possibility of resurrection."1

Raymond Carver's Cathedral was characterized by its author and received by most of its readers as a new departure in his career. After a season of recovering from alcoholism and not writing anything, Carver wrote the title story of Cathedral first, and over the next eighteen months the other stories came to him in one sustained rush of creativity that was, he reports, like nothing he had ever before experienced (Gentry and Stull 44, 125). William L. Stull has provided the most influential account of this new and "more generous" Carver (Gentry and Stull 56). Concentrating on a comparison of "The Bath" and the post-"Cathedral" expansion of the same material in "A Small Good Thing," Stull argues persuasively for Carver's religiously inflected deliverance from some mythical Babylon of "Hopelessville". To Stull, this other side of Jordan in Carver's career is "a spirit of empathy, forgiveness and community tacitly founded on the Judeo-Christian faith," and worked out in "a subtle but pervasive pattern of religious symbols" including baptism, and closing on a Eucharistic breaking of bread (Stull 6, 11).3

Evidence for Stull's redemptive reading of late Carver can be found in a previously unnoticed feature of the Cathedral stories: the way both their dialogue and their narrative voice are generously leavened with the name of God and with the name of religious locations like hell and paradise. The differences on this score between "The Bath" and "A Small Good Thing" are suggestive. In "The Bath" there occurs but one instance of the divine name, a "my God" torn out of the mother by the news that her unconscious eight-year old son will need a brain scan. "A Small Good Thing," by contrast, is heavily populated with one Goddamn, two Christ's, three Jesus's, and nine God's. Furthermore, Carver significantly varies his use of this language in the later story, and he seems to be careful about fitting these variations to their respective narrative and emotional contexts. The nine appearances of God, for example, include two God's sake's and one in God's name, and they range from the ostensibly offhand use of the name, to its
express invocation in a prayer, and climactically to its agonized formation on the tongue of the chastened baker: "Let me say how sorry I am ... God alone knows how sorry." I will leave it to another day or another reader to sort out the play of these locutions in "A Small Good Thing." I trust that they cannot not be significant, and that Carver is telling us not to let their occurrences be lost on us when, in another addition to "The Bath," he represents the frantic mother of "A Small Good Thing" with all her powers of concentration "trying to recall the doctor's exact words, looking for any nuances, any hint of something behind his words other than what he had said." This constitutes a pithy lesson on how to read all the words of this story, and the words that I would like to put to this lesson and test are the religious names and terms punctuating "Where I'm Calling From," "Feathers" and "Fever." In addition, I will look at the originating title story of the collection, a story where comparatively few latently significant religious terms are to be found, but only, it seems to me, because, from its title on, this story is making something of a religious nature its manifest and major concern. About his fiction's concentration on the ordinary Carver has written:

It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power (Carver, Fires 24).

In the terms of this _ars poetica_, a Carver story seeks not only to endow commonplace things with significance. It also seeks to make startlingly new such commonplace exclamations as _hell_ and _God_. This is something we have learned to expect in Flannery O'Connor, but Carver's claim to a similarly ambitious engagement with words of this kind has not been so much as heard. It has not been heard even though some of Carver's most sensitive readers—most notably Geoffrey Wolff—have counseled approaching his stories more for the voice there heard and delivered than for the things of K-Mart realism there seen and represented. For Wolff, Carver's stories resonate with a "master's understanding of voice"; they "live by their sound, and syntax" (Halpert 125). For Alain Arias-Misson, Carver "has not given a voice to his characters; he has given his characters to a voice" (Arias-Misson 627). The voice to which Carver consigned his pre-Cathedral characters is, as David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips have shown, the voice of