

RICHLAND AVENUE – NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

How to describe Richland Avenue? A five-block residential street full of mostly older homes, on Nashville's west side, it was brand new around the turn of the last century. It lay beyond the edge of town at the time, a retreat for Nashvillians of means.

I was about three when I first discovered it. My father attended a religious college that occupied several neighborhood buildings. Walking up and down the grassy median thrilled that little boy who had never before seen one. Its trees annually exploded into spectacular autumn visions. I knew nothing of Nashville, but I knew I loved trees: cherry, oak, maple, even cedar. They left moist massive mounds of leaves to explore.... Sniffing a handful and throwing it into the air was even more fun than kicking through them. Resting my hand on the cool gray stone walls that ran here and there stirred my heart, especially where their horizontal run met the magnificent trees. It was calm endurance, though I didn't understand that yet. Trees and stones stay mostly where they are, perfectly at home. Even preschoolers see the value of that.

A weekly rhythm band for the neighborhood children, in the red brick home of the woman next door, put the delight to music. I still love rhythm sticks and triangles!

Years later, my professor father returned to Nashville, and we eventually settled a few blocks down, near the end of Richland Avenue. It was a solid fixer-upper, before trendy invaded, before it took a fortune to appear old and established. My hatchet and I battled shrubbery that had grown untrimmed for decades. On one side lived a doctor. On the other, a "hippy graduate student" from Vanderbilt lived in an upstairs apartment with his wife and little girl. The daughter liked my jokes, and told her mother I was funny. The amazed mother said that I looked like I had the sense of humor of an undertaker. True enough, I take my humor seriously.

One day, I had to clean out the shell of an original stable on the alley, before demolition. A spherical glass vase caught the sunlight atop a decaying stack of ancient newspapers, like a drop of water. I cleaned and polished it, cherishing its pure roundness for years.

Walking home one fall night, near the corner of Richland and Bowling, I proposed. My wife

Jonathan Rogers 1/8/19 7:42 AM

Comment: These two sentences both rely on appositives (that is, a noun or noun phrase that renames another noun or noun phrase—*a five-block residential street full of mostly older homes, and a retreat for Nashvillians of means*). There's nothing wrong with either sentence, nor is there really anything wrong with putting them back-to-back like this, but be aware when you're using unusual grammatical structures and don't let it become a tic. You probably wouldn't, for instance, want to have three appositives in a row.

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:19 PM

Comment: There are three and a half lines (plus a paragraph break!) between this pronoun and its antecedent.

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:23 PM

Comment: There's a reference issue here, too. I assume "one" refers to "median," but the phrasing is a little odd—perhaps because it's not immediately apparent to a reader what's so thrilling about a median, even if it's the first one you've ever seen. It's an interesting observation, but another sentence in which you clarify why it was exciting would seal the deal.

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:26 PM

Comment: Forgive me for nitpicking, but you've got me seeing reference issues everywhere. You'd be better off saying something like "a handful of leaves and throwing them" rather than "a handful and throwing it." Especially since you say *them* at the end of the sentence.

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:27 PM

Comment: There are fourteen words between the subject (*band*) and the verb (*put*).

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:27 PM

Comment: Later than what?

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:28 PM

Comment: This is funny!

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:28 PM

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and I prepared to be missionaries there, to explore life beyond Richland Avenue.

Yet the street had its cracks. Thieves stole my best friend's classic Chevrolet. Richland Avenue people in our church spread denominational division that brought us back from overseas for good. Someone robbed my daughter at gunpoint in the alley. Some days, I wished that I had never laid eyes on it....

Years later, the college buildings tumbled. A fleet of rumbling dump trucks swallowed up the debris — homes from the street's first days, and buildings that I had watched go up as a young man. *Relocation*, they called it.

I still love Richland Avenue, although I belong there less than ever. Any sliver of autumn sun piercing a golden maple leaf must compare to it. Light falling on the right kind of raindrop, finds me discovering a delightful dusty glass vase in the stable on the alley.

Allan—

This feels like the skeleton of a considerably longer essay. It's obvious that you have way more to say about Richland Avenue than you can squeeze into 550 words. This needs to be a short memoir with Richland Avenue as an organizing principle.

In this piece, as long as you're describing the physical facts of Richland Avenue, your writing is strong (except for the reference issues I'm about to discuss in the next paragraph). But when you lift up your head to talk about bigger issues than autumn leaves and old stables, you drift off into vagueness. Because I know Richland Avenue and the college, I was able to understand what you were talking about. But I think I would have been good and confused if I didn't. Again, I suspect this was largely a matter of your word-count limitations.

Sub-optimal pronoun reference. Man, you were on a spree in the first couple of paragraphs! None of your reference issues were technically errors, but in each case you're asking your reader to do extra work that's really yours to do.

I get the distinct impression in reading this piece that you simply had too much to say about Richland Avenue, and the word-count limit made the task impossible. I encourage you to revisit this essay and stay with it until you've said all you have to say. I suspect you'll end up with something that's closer to 5000 words than 500.

Jonathan Rogers 3/15/18 1:48 PM

Comment: This metaphor doesn't work, mainly because I thought for a split-second that you literally meant the pavement was cracked on Richland Avenue.

Jonathan Rogers 1/8/19 7:34 AM

Comment: This sentence is vague—I suspect it's because you're squeezing months or years of drama into a sentence that is essentially an item in a list (of "cracks").