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The Search for *Standing Room*: A Conversation with Hollis Summers

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On the wall in Hollis Summers’s study, there is a poem by the Chinese poet Du Fu. The poem is called “Lu Ye Shu Huai.” I would like to introduce the following conversation with a translation of that poem. The translator is Hollis Summers.

Notes through a night journey

The thin grass of the river’s bank barely bends in the wind.  
The mast of my boat moves alone in the night.  
Stars hang close to the empty horizon.  
The moon bounces with the great river.

Why is my poem important to anyone?  
Old, ailing, I resign the notion of fame.  
My boat moves. What am I like?  
I am a sand-gull pulled between earth and sky.

RILEY: What is your work schedule? When do you work and how long do you usually work at one sitting?  
SUMMERS: When I’m on a novel, I’m good. I keep a pattern. Poetry is pick up work. Embroidery. And I’ll have spells of poems, but for the novel I like to work every day and I work on a typewriter.  
RILEY: Tell me about working on the poem “Brother Clark.” What was it like when you wrote that poem?  
SUMMERS: It was like a novel. A long piece, and I worked on it well. And then there’s a book about Adam and Eve, a poem that I worked the same way, every day.  
RILEY: Do you go to work at the same time each day?  
SUMMERS: Yes. Mornings . . . and yearn through the nights, and don’t get up and wish I would. And feel that I’m wasting time.  
RILEY: When you’re working on a story, is there a certain process that story might go through as it changes from draft to draft?
What do you need to know before the story begins to develop?
SUMMERS: I think I know what the story's about. I try. Pretty early I know what it's about. But then the rewrite is finding a voice, to be sure the right person is telling the story all the way through.
RILEY: What about rewriting?
SUMMERS: I always rewrite . . . painfully. I don't trust the first coin in the slot machine.
RILEY: Do you try to discover the story as you write?
SUMMERS: I don't think about these things. I think it is the voice. Where are you standing to call from. Are you going to be the guy whose great aunt sends him the Reader's Digest, or are you going to write for you, too? And I think maybe it's finding out to whom I'm calling.
RILEY: Do you have a person whom you write to each time?
SUMMERS: Laura ultimately. She reads to me. In the olden days I used to say, "You're not reading it right." But that was wrong. She was reading it the way it was written. So I bought some Scotch tape and sealed my lips. Now, when she reads very poorly on a story, I have to rewrite.
RILEY: Let me ask you about your characters' names, Hollis. How do you choose a name for one of you characters?
SUMMERS: I shouldn't have a barrier about names, but I do. I think of Dorothy and Dot and Dotty. They're all different people. Faulkner said that his characters told him their names.
RILEY: They told him their names?
SUMMERS: Faulkner said—and I have a tendency to believe everything he said—that they didn't tell him their names in Pylon, so he didn't name them. I think they didn't tell him their names because they weren't people. Pylon is a faulty book.
RILEY: Then you don't go searching for your characters' names?
SUMMERS: Well, I like the idea that they'll tell you. I have a feeling about single syllables. I went through a period of double syllables. I like names but you can't do much with "Hollis"!
RILEY: What about characters in your work who choose the wrong name. Does that happen?
SUMMERS: You don't let them go until they're happy. I love Lexington names. A girl's name I used was Ransom, the mother's maiden name. "She was a Ransom." And then I used it and hoped it was a little joke about John Crowe Ransom. I know a lot of women's names that seem funny. Bourbon, for instance. We know
it so much we forget it’s funny. I make a lot of this.

RILEY: Yes, I can see you do from your stories. Your characters feel as though their names are important. They seem to feel that if they could change their names, they would be different people. I assume that’s a reflection of how you feel about people’s names.

SUMMERS: I guess. Of course, a lot of these names you forget, but maybe we forget them because they’re named wrong. I don’t know.

RILEY: You said a moment ago that you can’t do much with the name Hollis. What did you mean by that?

SUMMERS: I used to pray I’d wake and be named Jim. Bill or Jim or somebody like that. A change of things, I guess. Hollis wasn’t manly enough.

RILEY: What about your middle name, Spurgeon. That’s a name I’m not familiar with.

SUMMERS: Baptist. A Baptist preacher. He was famous like Billy Graham. And I think Hollis came from a cheap novel that my grandmother was reading when she named my father. She was sixteen, and her husband was named Elliot West, which is a handsome name. But this frivolous, maybe evil, woman chose Hollis Spurgeon.

RILEY: I’d like to move on, now, to the stories in *Standing Room*.

SUMMERS: Yes.

RILEY: To begin with, what is it, do you think, that makes a story complete?

SUMMERS: From, Through. To.

RILEY: From Through To?

SUMMERS: From. Through. To. I think I’m always conscious of that in a poem or a novel. Where are you starting from? To whom do you call? And with what words and silences do you call? And the silences become increasingly more important.

RILEY: The silences? Why is the silence important to your work?

SUMMERS: Selahs. A person needs *selahs* in his life. Do you know that word? It is from *Psalms*. David will say something important, and then add, *Selah*, as if to say, “Just imagine that.” I think we need that moment of thought. We pretend to cover our lives with noise. We need to admit that silence.

RILEY: Could that be why your characters spend so much of their time paying attention to their hands and to what they’re doing, instead of to what they’re thinking?

SUMMERS: Yes. I think we do that a lot but I don’t know why. It
could be we're afraid of what that silence implies.
RILEY: How do you recognize the “From” of a particular story? Is it the position of the narrator that “From” refers to?
SUMMERS: The igniting moment.
RILEY: The igniting moment. Is that usually the same moment? For instance, do you have suddenly the voice of a character that comes to you, and you say: this is going to be a story. Or do you have situations and you looked for characters then to put into those situations?
SUMMERS: It varies. They generally know who they are in a poem or a story.
RILEY: Let's take a story from Standing Room, say “Amaryllis and the Telephone.” What was the “From” of that story? Where did it start?
SUMMERS: A woman whose father died went to the funeral home by herself. While she was viewing the body, she smoothed her father's hair. She told us about the occasion with great detail. She had gone to the funeral home to see Daddy, and it was dawn. She was alone with the body. That's where the story started. Her father had a big television set and he loved to visit the hospital. Television set and hospitals disappeared from the story, but they were the igniting forces. It's an old story.
RILEY: It is? Are most of the stories in Standing Room older or more recent?
SUMMERS: Older. The first story, “Hershell,” is from the new novel. And “Diving” is from the new novel. And one other, oh, “Fortunato and the Night Visitor,” is a recent rewrite.
RILEY: Which of the stories is your favorite?
SUMMERS: Are you going to like one of your children better than the other?
RILEY: I knew that was coming, but seriously, is there one in particular you’re especially happy with?
SUMMERS: I don’t know. Let me look at them. “Diving,” I think, is nice.
RILEY: What was the instigation for that story? Where did it come from?
SUMMERS: “Diving?” I made it up. It is a chapter in the new novel. I guess it came from the development of the characters. Three kids. The older one does everything right. The youngest is a bitch. I’m always fascinated by middle child stories, and I think its hard to be a middle child. (I think it's hard to be a younger child,
and I think it's hard being the oldest). But the middle child in the story does everything with love. Of the three, he's the most lovable.

RILEY: What about the title of the collection? What is the significance of Standing Room?
SUMMERS: Oh, that's nice to ask. It's not Standing Room Only, and it's not Sitting Room. At least you're not sitting down.
RILEY: I don't understand. It's not Standing Room Only?
SUMMERS: If you can, there is room to stand. You can endure. You can get by.
RILEY: I see what you're saying now.
SUMMERS: I can stand this . . . terror . . . horror of being human. You can at least stand.
RILEY: There is standing room for all of us, then?
SUMMERS: Yes. You don't have to grovel. I'm particular with this title. You like for it not to be a titled story. I think all these people are sad people, but the winners are the endurers. I can stand. That's all. All these people are standing. Some of them aren't worth standing. But I think the standing room of the father in "Diving" is worth while. In a sense, it is bearing something that is not to be borne: the death of this kid that isn't too bright or too marvelous. But the father telling the story is standing. And Mary Thomas, I think, makes her standing room. She's dishonest. She stands one way, and I don't approve of her, but she stands. We all stand. And we don't always stand correctly, but at least we stand. That is remarkable, what we're capable of standing.
RILEY: You said earlier that a lot of these stories were hard to write. Do they reflect upon your own life? What's the relationship there?
SUMMERS: When people ask me that, I always say, "of course." Did it really happen? Of course it really happened. They all really happened. I always try to tell the truth, whether it is reality or fiction. Truth.
RILEY: Do you catch yourself when you realize you haven't told the truth?
SUMMERS: Oh, sure, I lie like crazy, and this is when you rewrite.
RILEY: Could you give me an example of that? Pick one of the stories from Standing Room and show me where you realized you just turned wrong, and then what you did to correct the direction of the story.
SUMMERS: Well, "The Hundred Paths," ultimately, is about the two men, and I don't think I knew this when I started writing. I didn't think they were particularly close at the outset, when I started writing. But the story is about the two men, and they almost communicate while the girls are off being raped by the bears.

RILEY: There's an image from that moment in the story I'd like to ask you about. It occurs when Clark tells Leonard about the affair. Leonard says, "He seemed capable of crying. I felt as close to him as if we were strangers in a falling plane, determined to identify ourselves before we disappeared."

SUMMERS: That's standing room. But I don't think I knew it when I started writing. It just seemed odd for the couples to come across two kids at the edge of a field. I think the standing room has to do with this lack of communication. "I'm not trying to force significance. . . ." This was a hard enough thing: communicating with another generation is beyond long distance. But there was this meadow and this dream world. I state these as images, but I don't want to rub your noses in them. The meadow isolates, the railroad bridge is going someplace. Two couples communicate, not knowing what they're doing. I think the teller of the story has a heart attack on page thirty-five, something like that, but there had been communication. They're all looking at each other. "At the bridge we had looked at each other, not looking." I know what that means, don't I? Here is the communication that is not communication. "I know the boy was waiting for us to leave. I know we left because he was waiting for us to leave." The man here is closer to this belligerent kid than he is to his wife. I think that's sad. And it's a moment. I like for a story to be a moment, and surely this story has two answers. They could have gone on and found it, because there are surely two ends to the road.

RILEY: That's where the story seems to rest, then, the fact that they don't go and look for the explanation.

SUMMERS: Yes. And they could do that. And I like the notion, "I can't remember how long he held the door open, looking into the car. It was as if he were letting something out, or letting something in." Susan says, "'Careful.' I have not asked her what she meant." And you realize that the logical explanation would be that she is worried the boy will fall in the water, but she's afraid the rust will stain the blossoms on his shirt, which is silly, but
they have to have some kind of explanation because they’re nervous.

RILEY: Let me ask you about the relationships in your stories, particularly the couples you write about. It seems impossible for them to communicate.

SUMMERS: Yes. But these couples are not Laura and I. Do you know the little chapbook Dinosaurs? Dan Towner printed it, and there is this one poem, well, it seemed to have happened because there used to be a dormitory where the parking lot was, and the guy remembers the girl he kissed once. And someone said, “Wouldn’t Laura shoot you if she read this?” I couldn’t have been more shocked.

RILEY: But so many of your characters are isolated, alone even when they are with other people. It is a theme you work a lot.

SUMMERS: Yes, but I don’t know why. If you find standing room, you’ll sit opposite each other.

RILEY: That’s interesting, I think. The connection itself is interesting because it is the attempt at communication between the couples in your stories that leads us to the most disturbing realization, the realization that we really are alone, regardless of how close we may think we are to the people around us. And what is even more interesting is the fact that no matter how much your characters struggle to overcome that isolation, I can never decide whose fault it is that communication fails. I can never decide whose side you’re on?

SUMMERS: Truth. List me on the side of truth. Writing is a search for truth. Sometimes, maybe, it is even a finding.