

The Process of Writing “Pleasant Dreams”

By Claire Holley

Writing a song becomes a lesson in learning how to use a story as a point of departure instead of something to imitate.

In the fall of 2010, I performed at the Ogden Museum of Art in New Orleans with Kate Campbell and Caroline Herring, singing songs that celebrate the life and work of Eudora Welty. Prior to the concert, I was frantically trying to finish a song I’d started in response to “The Whistle,” a story that my husband had insisted I read several years ago. Unfortunately the song wasn’t coming together as quickly as I needed it to be (the Muse laughs). I was trying to condense Welty’s story into song form, as if I were a screenwriter adapting a novel into a screenplay. The breakthrough came when I realized that I shouldn’t try to imitate or condense what Welty did. Once I could let the characters and elements in “The Whistle” be the jumping off point, then I was freed up to do what I needed to do with the song. My writing, finally, had to be something apart from Welty’s story, with its own discoveries and surprises.

One of the more enduring parts of “The Whistle” for me is Sara and Jason Morton’s discovery of themselves. Would we have known them as deeply or as intimately had not the whistle blown? I think of some ‘whistles’ that have forced me to find places in myself that I had not seen before. Sooner or later life brings us face to face with a truth — and it may be a harsh truth — but we might be surprised at the freedom that accompanies facing up to it. I believe art at its best helps us in that process.

*Funny what we think we know/We can break just like ice in the snow
Til we find a little pot of gold/Til we hear our own whistle blow*

Thanks for listening.

Pleasant Dreams

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A young girl's dreams
In an old woman's sleep
Lovely scenes from a warmer day
More color than your winter's grey

When the whistle blows
In that early cold
Wakes you up from your sleep

Pleasant dreams are made to be
Pleasant dreams are made to be
Woken out of

A fire can be made
From unusual things
This time the view's not so plain
While the old man makes it blaze

When the whistle blows
In that early cold
Wakes you up from your sleep

Pleasant dreams are made to be
Pleasant dreams are made to be
Woken out of

Funny what we think we know
We can break just like ice in the snow
til we find a little pot of gold
til we hear our own whistle blow

Pleasant dreams are made to be
Pleasant dreams are made to be
Pleasant dreams are made to be
woken out of ...

Music and Lyrics by Claire Holley © 2011 / Olivia's Attic Music (ASCAP)

*other titles:

Pot of Gold
Break like Ice
Blaze
Pleasant Dreams
Early Cold