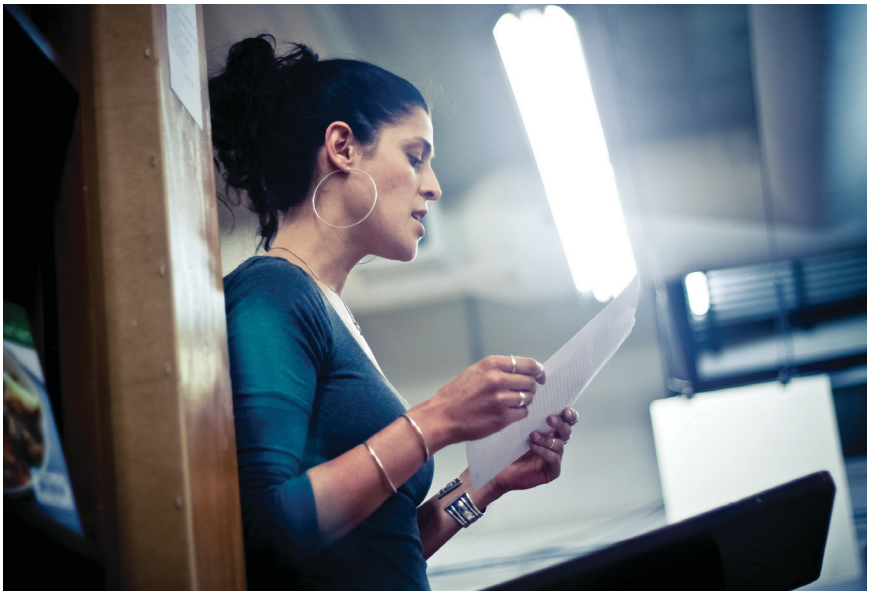
THE BERTRAND RUSSELL OF HIP HOP



an interview with

DESSA

by Eric Lorberer

Acclaimed as a songwriter, performer, and recording artist, the whirlwind force known as Dessa wears one moniker with particular pride: writer. No surprise, really. Born and raised in Minneapolis, she was valedictorian of her high school and graduated with honors from college with a philosophy degree before she could legally drink. She then held the obligatory artist jobs—waiting tables and writing technical manuals among them—but an unexpected journey through the realm of spoken word eventually led her to join the acclaimed hip-hop collective Doomtree. In addition to group projects, she has released three solo albums: 2010's *A Badly Broken Code*, 2011's *Castor, the Twin*, and her highly anticipated new work, *Parts of Speech*, which brings together a wide range of musical styles united by a thematic depth and whip-smart lyricism.

While her musical career continues to take off into the stratosphere, books, happily, are also something Dessa relishes making. She published a volume of poetic prose, *Spiral Bound*, in 2009, the short-story chapbook *Sleeping with Nikki* in 2011, and the dialogue poem "Are You Handsome?" earlier this year; Rain Taxi will publish a new chapbook of poetry, *A Pound of Steam*, in October 2013. In the wake of a pleasant spring working on the collection, we sat outside early this summer, turned the tape player on, and talked about poetry, songs, family, politics, and more.

Eric Lorberer: I wanted to start out by talking about the fact that you majored in philosophy. What drew you to this field of study?

Dessa: I remember when I was really tiny, my mom said she was going to take me to the doctor for a shot and I complained it was going to hurt and she said, "Honey the needle is so tiny, it's not gonna hurt very much at all, just a little prick." And I remember thinking, I don't care how big the needle is, it's gonna hurt, and I wish it was just half as thick. And then I imagined it half as thick in my head, and half as thick again, and it occurred to me for the first time . . . infinity! Like, *this* is an infinite regress. There is an infinity of operations that I could execute on this imagined syringe and it would never disappear. And that freaked me out, that there was no needle sufficiently thin so as to disappear. So that was a youthful incident that I remember really being impactful. And then as I was a teenager, I was at an IB school and we had a class called Theory of Knowledge, where we got to talk about things like what made a moral act moral. What made a crime a crime. How do you know you existed and how could you trust that your friends existed? And in some ways those seemed like very different kind of wonderings, but to find out that there was this term called "philosophy" that captured all of these musings was very exciting. So I went into it, and it was hard as hell. I'm still not a very good philosopher of language, even though I wish I were. But I think what kept me in philosophy was the creative writing element of it: my favorite philosophers—because they were discussing really hard concepts—were forced to come up with really expressive, imagistic metaphors to explain their complicated ideas. So I was drawn to philosophy because it was deep, but I stayed in philosophy for the writing.

EL: It occurred to me that so much of philosophy, classic philosophy, is written in dialogue form, which is a form that shows up in your creative work—the "Are You Handsome" piece, for example. Do you think there's a connection?

D: Gosh, that has never occurred to me until right now . . . maybe. I always thought Socrates seemed really snotty because it was like he was pretending to engage in a conversation, but he was really trying to make somebody look like an idiot—it was very paternalistic. So I hated the Socratic method. I thought *Ishmael* was just the Socratic method with a gorilla. I preferred, I guess, writers who would remove that level of artifice, but a lot of straightforward philosophical writing still *feels* like a dialogue because you read stuff like, "Critics might retort that . . ." It's like you have this kind of hypothetical, imagined sparring partner, where you're listing all of their potential objections and responding to each in turn. So even without a traditional Socratic dialogue, philosophy is very often an exchange between one party and the writer . . . Yeah, you're right, busted! [Laughs]

EL: Are there specific philosophers you were attracted to?

D: I liked Bertrand Russell, and I liked Hume . . . But as I go down my list now at 32, I realize that there isn't a real theoretical consistency between the philosophers I like, but they're all good writers. I wonder if I've drifted a little bit theoretically in an effort to hang out with whoever was good with a pen.

EL: Getting back to your interest in dialogue, what about theater? Do you have any kind of theater background or interests?

D: Developing now. I wasn't a very social kid in high school; I was kind of a loner.

EL: That is really hard to believe, Dessa.

D: It was a very different time in my life! I was a cross-dressing loner. I was a runaway at fourteen for a while, but still went to school, still loved school. I would mostly just go home and read and study by myself. I wasn't yet interested in the company of my peers and so I think really social activities were lost on me until a little bit later.

EL: Theater being one of them.

D: Theater being one of them. After performing on stage for awhile

now as a musician, I thought I'd be good at that sort of stuff, but then I auditioned for some things in the past five or six years and was sort of surprised at how *not* very good at acting I was. But it's an ability that at some point I think I would like to cultivate. It feels doable, but I don't have a stunning natural aptitude.

EL: And what about as a viewer, were there any performances you wit-

nessed on TV or in film or live theater that turned you on?

D: I think as a teenager, no. I was still kind of doing the loner thing. But in my twenties, even in my late twenties, I had some formative theatrical experiences. I saw, here in town, Sally Wingert perform in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*—that was the most emotionally connected experience I'd had with surrealism, and it really made me want to understand, as a writer and also just as a human being, how is it that something so absurd could connect so emotionally and not in a cognitive, conceptual, intellectual way.

EL: That's great. One of the really lovely things about your recent record launch at the Fitzgerald Theater was opening with the Spanish guitar and talking about your father playing that when you were young—I think you mentioned that it was actually a lute he played. Did you grow up in an artistic household? Was that sort of thing normal?

D: Yeah, neither of my parents were vocationally musicians after I was born, but both of them are very musical, and both are very inclined towards scholarship. So, at my house money was never hugely important—although we had to make sure food was on the table—but verbal dexterity and argumentative acumen were crucial, you know? Could you hold your own at the dinner table? That was essential. And could you do so with an engaging style, and with wit that could be deployed when necessary? That was who won at my house. You know, parents had friends over, and if someone was very sharp and dry and funny and could hold his or her wine—that was how you won dinner. [Laughter] But my mom, before I was born, she did her masters in Elizabethan stagecraft.

EL: There's that theater element.

D: Wow, yeah. I guess when I was little, she did have these little tiny bound books of Shakespeare and I remember I would read the very last scenes in *Othello* with my best friend and we got to say words like "strumpet" and nobody could yell at us, and I was Othello and I would

kill Desdemona again and again every night before bed. So they were very word- and idea-oriented people.

EL: That's great. At one point in your performance, you wrapped up a solo piece and the backup singers were on their way out and you said, "¿Dónde están las mujeres? . . . acquí están"; it was such a lovely, familial moment, and it reminded me that you have a Latino background, your mom's Puerto Rican. Did you grow up speaking Spanish?

D: I didn't want to when I was a little kid; I already had some fantastically racist ideas about, you know, Spanish being dirty. I don't know where I got those from, but I know I had them when I was three. So that was either just a childhood rebellion against anything mom wanted me to do, or it was, I don't know, tuning into a lot of the cultural undercurrents, right—French is fancy, Spanish is the language of cooks. And then, by the time I'm like six and seven and eight, I wanted to be able to talk how Mom and Grandma are talking--and I especially don't want them to be able to talk and not have me understand them. So I never became a Spanish speaker who can write as comfortably in Spanish as they can in English, but I'll converse, yeah.

EL: And what about your dad? He brought a different flavor to the ethnic banquet, right?

D: Yeah, his family's from Germany with Roma roots, we imagine. So he's got kind of a German-gypsy heritage.

EL: So do you think that between this Latino background and this European background . . . there's something I'm connecting there between those cultural backgrounds and the kind of focus on language that you were talking about earlier, about winning arguments at the dinner table. Is that something that you see as part of your cultural heritage?

D: That's a good question. I think sometimes it's tough to answer those because it's like asking, "What was it like to grow up in Minneapolis?" I'm just aware of the fact that I don't really have a control scenario, I don't have another childhood to compare it to. Essentially my only

experience was here and I can't be sure how much of my experience was due to the fact that it was here or due to the fact that I was me and I had the parents that I did. So, I'm always a little reluctant to make too many guesses because I feel that empirically I'm on thin ice. But I would say that there is definitely a performative nature to Puerto Rican conversation, absolutely—if you stop talking, you lose the floor. It also rewards speed and a sort of theatrical, or at least gestural, presentation, and if you can do that and be funny, extra points. And then on my dad's side, the trellis of an argument is important. Do our premises entail our conclusions? Are we being clear and articulate? Do we have a well-formed and informed position? So yeah, somewhere between those two poles exists my preferred conversational style.

EL: Logic and passion: clearly, these kinds of archetypes of how to think and how to be in the world aren't just abstractions. And that kind of connects to something that you brought up during your lecture for the Nobel Peace Prize Forum. You were talking about ethics in the world of hip-hop, and I think you were positioning hip-hop as a discipline that already has a connection to community action, to social justice, and at the same time has some conflicted relationships to prejudice and oversimplification.

D: That's well said, yeah.

EL: Suddenly I forgot where was I going with that . . .

D: [Laughs] Well, I just want to say, "Yes, true, confirmed, please write that."

EL: Hmm, I guess I was thinking, you know, you're a musician, you're a writer, you're a performer. Has your desire to use art as an agent of change changed in any way as you've become more successful at it, and as you've continued to stretch your own boundaries and interact with different audiences?

D: I know what I think on this point, but I sometimes struggle to say it. I rarely ever sat down to write an essay or a song with any particular

agenda. I've done my share of work as an activist but I usually do that on my off hours, so to speak: I don't write a lot of songs that have an explicitly feminist bent, and I've never mentioned homophobia in a rap song, although it's one of the topics that I'm most passionate about in the rap community. When I'm working, art is my only focus; it's so hard to write a good song already that I really don't want to compound or complicate that objective with other objectives. So I think the only hint of activism that would probably come through in my written art or recorded art would be that I have tried to focus on true stories, and my hope is that in telling my true stories as candidly as I can, even listeners who are really different than me will recognize the authenticity and some of the duende behind these stories. I want them to say, hey, here's a woman talking about her life and, lo and behold, her life doesn't look all that dissimilar than mine—she's trying to get paid, she's trying to get laid, she's trying to stay in love, she's trying to find meaning in her life, she's trying to find peace with her friends and her parents. So I don't want to make art that says, "I only get paid 77 cents to the dollar!" I think when you recognize the humanity in someone else, you are naturally inclined to treat them like a human being.

EL: The culture at large has undergone such a dramatic shift with regard to gay rights; locally we've had an almost unimaginable shift from turning back a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriage to actually legalizing it. Are you seeing any kind of progress with homophobia in the hip-hop world as well?

D: That's a good question. I think from the start, the people with whom I work most closely have been like-minded, and that's probably because I picked them and they picked me, so naturally you gravitate towards people who share your most basic values. Beyond that, I think there is a shift—I can't tell how big it is, but take Brother Ali's op-ed in *The Huffington Post* last year; he did this really cool piece about how ten years ago he was using the six-letter f-word, and he talks about why

he did it, why he didn't get it, and what it took to make him get it and remove that slur from his parlance. And he was real straight up about it: "I don't have any gay friends, I think that's gross man, it's not natural." Okay well, now you meet somebody who's really compelling and they're gay and they say hey that sucks, and he realizes "you're different than I thought you'd be." I mean that's how all of us are educated away from some of our long-held prejudices: you meet somebody who you thought you wouldn't like and it turns out you like them, so now you have to reconsider your paradigm. But although I see some changes, I'm not sure about the really big mainstream artists who use homophobic language . . . it seems so damn entrenched. There was an article that came out two weeks ago about me and another artist having come out publicly against homophobia, which seems like—I mean, it's just crazy that that would even be a thing to cover. But beneath it were pages of hateful comments, "this dyke bitch" and such . . . it didn't surprise me that there was one comment, but that they went on and on reminded me about how pervasive that attitude is. And how rare, in a lot of ways, my little insular, liberal Minneapolis community is from the rest of the world.

EL: I'm with you; any progress is welcome but it's sometimes hard to find it.

D: Yeah, it's hard to tell.

EL: So it was really fun to see you with members of your live band, and doing that thing that music can create where people click as a group entity. You've referred to some of these folks you've worked with as intellectual comrades, too, and I wondered if, aside from that kind of more spiritual congress of music, there's a language side to it. Do you guys talk about ideas when you're working out songs?

D: Totally, yes. In Doomtree there's seven of us and probably when we all met our ideologies were pretty similar; now it's ten years later so it's a little bit more disparate, you know, the rifle shot has had time to spread. I was reading an interview with P.O.S., who's one of my closest friends in

that group context, and the reporter asked him, "So you're a really big advocate, a proponent, for the group Anonymous right?" And he said, "Yeah, man." And the guy said, "Why?" And he says, "They're hackers, why would you be against hackers?" And I remember for the first time asking myself, "Why *am* I against hackers?" I guess I had just put them in a little box in my head like "Lawbreakers," but I started to think,

why and how have we criminalized hacking? And who stands to benefit from those protections? And I think all the time, particularly by Stef (P.O.S), I'm challenged on a socio-political way because he is just all the way, you know—go as left as you can and then go a little farther. He's a for-real radical. And having him in my life makes me question some ideas that I think I would not have otherwise questioned. Then Sean, my bassist, is a really, really verbal dude. Even just when we're talking about music, every once and awhile we all get a little squinty looking at each other because—wait a minute—was that chord change good or did you just describe it in a really compelling way? If he says, "It's like the Bertrand Russell of D-minor," I'm like, "Wait a minute, you just know that I like Bertrand Russell, that has nothing to do with how that sounded." Every once and a while I feel like I have to be on my guard to make sure that I wasn't romanced by the language as opposed to the music. He's really good.

EL: I ask because I wanted to get back to talking about some of the writerly DNA in your background. I was touched that on the liner notes to *A Badly Broken Code*, you gave an RIP shout-out to David Foster Wallace. David was a good friend to Rain Taxi and even wrote a piece for us back in the day. What is it about him, or other contemporary prose writers, that you dig?

D: Hmm, it's so hard to not sound like a teenager . . . I think David Foster Wallace seemed as smart a human individual that I had access to. Maybe there are many others working in neuroscience or something that I can't access meaningfully because I don't communicate in the same parlance, but reading his work I thought, *if there is a more capable mind working in language today, I haven't yet stumbled across it.* Did I love everything? No, absolutely not, but Jesus, just the horsepower of that guy, intellectually. And then the idea that if he's not dumbing it down, or at least I can't perceive him to be dumbing it down, and he's going to write a book with calculus in it and trust me to learn it, then what the

hell am I doing occasionally polishing off the rough edges of my work? If this guy who's seven stories above me trusts his readership to follow, then what are so many of the rest of us doing when we opt for the more accessible word or become apprehensive that the esoteric information that we've somehow stumbled into might fail to relate? So to me there was like a stylistic boldness in his insistence that his intellect be allowed free range in his work. He put a stake in the ground, you know?

And I know that he and a lot of the other Davids—Rakoff, Sedaris, and Eggers—that they all have had to face allegations of either masturbation or of gimmick. When I was a young reader I was worried about that: "Oh wait, is this just gimmick?" I'm not sure that I think that word is that important anymore. An innovation is just a gimmick if you get tired of it, otherwise it stays and it's an innovation. I think that they were all, particularly Eggers and Wallace, doing some interesting things with what it means to present words on a page. They played a little bit with how linear things had to be and also played temporally with how a reader experiences this work by making formatting decisions that could support constant little disgressions. Here's the footnote, here's the footnote to the footnote. Or in *Consider the Lobster*, with all these kind of text boxes and arrows so you get a page that looks like prose and also looks like a flow chart. I totally get that some people might say, "Lets just write, you know—I don't need you to be so fancy, I don't need you to sing your scales; just sing the song." But I liked that stuff: I thought it was creative, I thought it was innovative, and I thought it made for a really interesting tone that felt a lot more like having a conversation with someone who's had a lot of coffee or a little bit of cocaine.

EL: Those writers also play with boundaries between nonfiction and fiction; they're essayists and novelists. Is that sort of genre gamesmanship attractive to you?

D: I think we may have different reads on it. When I first found Eggers I stumbled into him as a creative non-fiction dude. I thought it was

really cool the way he was able to stay almost like a creative non-fiction purist by announcing when he was going fiction. It's like I retain my total credibility as a storyteller if at a bar room table I'm telling you a story and then I look you in the eye and I say, "I'm going to make up the next two sentences." And then after I do, I look you in the eye and say "We're back to the literal truth now." I have been totally honest, but I have given myself license for a flight of imagination. The way that he did that to me was so cool because you could stay firmly in nonfiction and still have these really imaginative little twirls and flourishes, as long as you announced in a tasteful way exactly what you were doing. In his first book when he put the real phone numbers of the people in his book and then recorded how many people called them—that blew my mind.

EL: Is there prose that you're engaging with now that you feel strongly about?

D: Kind of half-assedly, because I'm in the middle of a record cycle, you know? There are just too many adrenal distractions in my head. But of the few things that I've been kind of slowly going through, one is called *The Poisoner's Handbook*. The style's kind of silly, but it's a history of all the poisons and what they do. I thought it could be good to use as fodder for something later. I don't know why, but I think I should know about that.

EL: I think in the Nobel lecture you talked about having a book club. Do you still have a book club?

D: Yeah, it's like the least disciplined, most scattered and infrequent thing. We just do it on Twitter and Facebook: I'll announce what were reading, I'll give everybody seven days, whoever wants to go pick it up, we'll never meet face to face, and I'll set a couple lunch times where we'll talk about it. And then we'll just use the hash tag #lithop to share our ideas.

EL: Cool—we can print that?

D: Sure, yeah.

EL: Rock! So let's talk about poetry, how were you introduced to it? And feel free to include everything and the kitchen sink: school exposure, family exposure . . . maybe lets start there, since people who have immigrated from Europe or Latin America tend to have a higher respect for poetry than the typical U.S. person. Has that been true for you?

D: I think the first exposures that I had were in my mother's office—she had a little home office, and on the highest shelf were these bound volumes of Shakespeare. Reading the verse in his plays was probably one of my first exposures to poetry . . . and then my dad would quote poetry, and sometimes I'll still run across a line that I'll realize he didn't make up, you know? He's big into cathedrals, although I would say he's mostly a secular guy, and so he would sometimes say things like "ship laden with ancient souls," an Auden line, although I'm sure I have the words in the wrong order. The first time that of my own accord I was really interested in poetry was probably somewhere between twelve and fourteen—it was T. S. Eliot, the same stuff that everyone gets in high school essentially, like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," but I think that was my first "What is this?" moment. And the first time I felt the drive to memorize stuff, or to commit at least a few lines, this kind of an adult expression of teenage feeling—it's beautifully done, but there are feelings that it doesn't take an adult heart to understand. Then like a lot of teenagers I wrote a lot of very, very bad poetry in my basement, I mean really truly bad. I was 14, 15, 16, 17-year-old kind of high and sad, you know, in my mom's house. I got into Plath a little bit, although I still haven't read the reorganized version of *Ariel* that we talked about. Ah, it's so cool. And then Mary Oliver, I think she was one of the first nature poets I got into. I've got allergies and asthma, there's nothing about my organism that really is nature-loving, but reading some of that stuff through her perspective felt a lot like reading similarly themed prose, which was where I was more comfortable, like Annie Dillard. I felt like the only things I'd read about nature were really glowing and cheesy and

about "the glory of it." And that doesn't match the nature that I know. So in reading Oliver, I felt like she could acknowledge the beauty of a sunset and also the absolute brutality of nature, and I liked that quite a bit. Gary Snyder is the poet that I've most recently discovered. I'd never heard of him until nine months ago. I just missed him. I don't know if I was absent that day or what. But I really like it. I never really cared for ode poems, whether it be to a Grecian urn or about hearing America singing. Poems of just celebration, for whatever reason, didn't ring my bell; the ones about more complicated relationships were the ones that got me.

EL: That's interesting, because the bombastic style is really in your songs—but you're an artist channeling things into various forms, so it makes a lot of sense that the more anthemic stuff is going into your music, and the poetry is more insular.

D: This is the first time I feel I'm really figuring out my voice as a poet, to be honest. In the past I've gone there and I've been afraid, I've retreated from it.

EL: Well, it can be scary, frankly.

D: Yeah. And the bar is high and the margins are low. [Laughs]

EL: Well, one thing I've noticed about your poems is that they tend to be, if they're in the first person, written from a point of view one might not immediately associate with the author, or at least the version of Dessa people might take away from your music. For example, you have a poem written from the point of view of the imaginary friend of a 13-year-old girl. And the ones in the third person have a built-in analytical coolness. The second-person poems are the ones, oddly enough, that feel like maybe closest to yourself as a speaker. And then some of them deal with ghostly elements, supernatural elements, feeling like an outsider. Thinking about these broad strokes, are those elements that you're putting in the poetry because the form is more suited to those sorts of ideas? It's not to imply that they're not in the songs . . .

D: I think some of the most tender, highly emotional, maybe emotionally risky or delicate topics are easy to present in the first person in a way that becomes cliché. First person, present tense: "I'm saaad," you know? And so I think for a lot of the poems I write—particularly things that center on being a woman, things that relate to my gender—I don't think I could tell those stories in a way that wouldn't sound either whiny, or

occasionally self-celebratory, in the first person.

EL: That leads us to the strong narrative component to so many of your poems—again, it's just sort of interesting to consider that the songs are getting your lyric aspect, and the poems are getting your narrative aspect. How conscious are you of diverting ideas into one stream or the other?

D: More conscious now that you said that! [Laughs] God, I don't know . . . it's easy to be disinterested in things that you're not very good at, and I'm not actually interested in that narrative objective because I suck at it; I'm not very good at building really long story arcs. My interest has always been much more in scenes, in snapshots, and most of all in character studies. Maybe because life feels more like a long character study than any arcing plot that I can see. So I think in the poetry, it's as if the form is brief enough, at least the way that I'm engaging with it, that I'm confortable crafting a story, whereas all my essays end up being meditations. I also feel like I have license in poetry; there's almost nothing you can't do. It's got to be good, that's it. There are a lot more boundaries that I am aware of in songs: It's got to be catchy, at least if it's going to be listened to successfully; it's got to be of a certain length, so if I were to come out with a thirty-second song I might have some listeners, but I'm going to forfeit a lot of others, and if I'm going to come out with a song that's longer than five minutes, you're out. So the scope is so rigid. Whereas in a poem it just feels like you could do four lines or you could do 400. It's much more elastic than the other forms in which I work. So maybe I've had the nerve to tackle stories there because I was disinterested in doing it elsewhere, given the parameters in the other forms with which I work.

EL: More elastic and also more . . . isolated?

D: What does that mean when you say that? Like it lives in its own thing?

EL: No, I mean . . . the amazing thing to me about popular music is that

it's this kind of hybrid of verbal intelligence and base musical emotionality. So you have your speaker in a song, you have the beat they march to, you have instrumentation to round out their portrait. In poetry, you've got the line and nothing else, you know? It's there naked on the page. At best, you're going to be able to say that line aloud at some point and give it some intonation, some theater. That's sort of what I mean by being isolated—and that's another reason why it is a scary art form.

D: Right, and it also just feels like a smaller target. I don't know how to say it, but it feels like even a song that's not very good can be listenable, whereas I infrequently would want to read a poem that isn't very good, if that makes sense.

D: The world is with you on that one. It's easy to ignore not-so-great poems.

EL: Yeah, and it's harder to like some but not all of it. In the way we would say, "Oh, wait for the chorus." You can like a song in parts and pieces, but I don't think that is usually how we approach poetry. Maybe it's because of the compact length, but it feels like you've just got the bulls-eye—everything else doesn't count.

D: When you gave that rundown of poets that have made an impact on you, one I was anticipating might be on the list is Edgar Allen Poe—probably because on the new record you have a tune called Annabelle and it seems to dovetail with some Poe-esque ideas. There aren't a ton of people who are interested in his quirky corner of the universe these days, but it's fun.

EL: It seems weird to me that certain writers can get away with themes that attract thirteen and a half year old boys, but still count as literary. Usually those are scenes you'd associate with very low-brow art forms, like the horror flick—if we think a movie is smart then we elevate it and we change our language, call it "a suspense film." Poe exists has an interesting overlap of this kind of macabre, unapologetically supernatural interest, but everyone thinks he's smart as hell still. He didn't get down-

graded, he didn't get demoted.

D: That reminds me of another example of "interesting overlap." At one point, when we were talking about one of your poems, you referred to a lyric by Crash Test Dummies—it was one moment, among many, where I have thought about this question of musical lyricism as a kind of poetry that is related to but different than the poetry one attempts for the page alone. What influences are you drawing on from the music world that are meaningful to you as a writer?

D: A writer of poetry, prose, or both?

EL: Well let's do both, why not.

D: Okay, let's see: I guess I haven't read it on the page without the music going in my head, so maybe my reading is thrown off, but Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" remains one of the most incredible feats of musical and literary value that I know. I just can't get over it! I think probably in prose, however, music has asked me to get a little more casual with my language, because if I don't guard myself I can be a little too indulgent in over explaining something, or in keeping my language too formal. And I think rap keeps me a little more grounded. It reminds you of how powerful casual language and street language can be, particularly when interspersed with fancy pants language, you know? And I think poetry demands a real awareness of stressed and unstressed syllables, the meter stuff, trying to figure out how line breaks do or don't relate to kicks and snares . . . When writing poetry I'll sometimes wonder, can I trust that that readers will sense a downbeat here? When you're writing lyrics the kick goes there, no ambiguity, you know what I mean? But trying to figure out how to get as authoritative with line breaks and punctuation. . . . that's tough.

EL: Exactly, that's why free verse at its best is just as rigorous as formal verse—breath by breath there's an attention to metrics but the overall form is not pre-set. You certainly get into that in some of your free-verse poems; is that a challenge for you, or maybe a pleasure, given the tighter

frame of a lot of song lyric structure?

D: You know, old school rap is very like verse in its rhyme scheme, like a-a-b-a or a-b-a-b. But current rap would sound very dated if it kept to that; it sounds kind of nursery-rhymey to adhere to those really simple rhyming structures. So usually you could write out a whole rap song as a paragraph if you wanted to and the rhymes might come at the end of lines or they might come internally. If you just read it you might not even know, until you heard it: "Oh, I didn't even realize this rhymed." So I think with poetry, free verse feels like rap in that way—you've just got to make sure there's a natural elegance to every line. I think I'm particularly aware of spondees, of double-stressed syllables side by side, those are always key words in rap songs, so I'm really aware of when a double stress falls in a poem. Maybe that only is satisfying to me; maybe it will be satisfying to other readers or maybe it will go unnoticed. But that's something I pay more attention to now than I think I would have before doing the rap stuff.

EL: That's interesting. Another way in which your poems and your songs feel different is that your songs are really allusive—you call on stuff like Zeno's Arrow and Greek myths—whereas the poems are less likely to do so. Is there a transgressive element to drawing on that kind of material for you in your music?

D: Whatever the little sister of transgressive might be, yes. Because I think it plays really differently. Even when you hear a man and a woman sing the same emotional song, because of decades of gender roles we might react differently: if sung by a woman, "Okay, she's sensitive, she would tell us all about it, wouldn't she?" Then when we hear it from a guy it's like, "Shut up, man. Matt has something to say." The same idea can be influenced by context. And so poetry, rightly or wrongly, is considered as kind of a smarty-pants thing to do, and allusions are considered smarty-pants things to make because they depend on this sort of presumption that there is a textual common ground. To import literary

references into rap music is to make an unusual assumption as far as rap listeners go: yeah, I expect that you probably had the same high school shit that I had right? We all read about Prometheus. I didn't do that in my off time, right? But I think I'm more careful about that on the page because it plays very differently; it's harder to do that in a way that still feels vibrant and alive and doesn't feel unduly scholarly or esoteric or making the allusion just to seem smart. So I'm comfortable doing it in rap music, and I guess I've infrequently done it in poetry because I want to better understand how to do that in a way that doesn't seem nose up in the air.

EL: Well, one poem that imports a kind of contemporary reference is "Saya," which is about the idea of robots that have human emotion, but it also ties back to what you described as your spark of interest in philosophy: ideas about who we are and that kind of stuff.

D: Yeah, but it feels like something that you read about in the newspaper that's current events-y. It feels more populist than referencing something that Aristotle said. I read about Saya in the paper and I thought, what the hell are they talking about? and then I looked it up online and I saw this little robot maneuvering through the world and the little blinking light in my head went off, like, "Am I having an artistic moment? Am I living through something that should be art at the moment?" I think in part because it tapped in to a very unattractive feeling of otherness. I thought, God it's so weird in Japan. It was one of the feelings I had, a very us-and-them kind of thinking. How is it that they build all of these machines that seem so dystopian in some ways? And they seem to be doing so much better than we are at all this shit. How are those two things reconcilable? And so I think it was in this feeling of big, big separation from a culture that I thought maybe there is an opportunity to parley that kind of, I don't know, very provincial thinking that I'm detecting in myself into a larger statement. What is a Japanese life like? And then

also: what is a human life like as opposed to a machine's life?

EL: Last question: Your given name is Margret Wander and your stage name is Dessa, which, when one thinks about it, is a Greek derived word that means "wander." It might be said you reinvented yourself as yourself. Was that intentional?

D: [Laughs] No, I took Dessa when I was a teenager and because I was singing illegally at a karaoke bar, so if I got busted I didn't want them to know what my name was. It was only later that I found out that it meant "wander" and I thought, *Well, isn't that damn convenient.* And since then, yeah, my dad emails me as Dessa and my boyfriend calls me Dessa, so I live by that. ◆

Video clip of bonus question at www.raintaxi.com

Launch event for *A Pound of Steam* at Walker Art Center, Thursday, October 3, 2013

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dessa, born and raised in Minneapolis, is a poet, essayist, and musician. She studied philosophy at the University of Minnesota. Before earning her living in the arts, Dessa wrote pacemaker manuals, waited tables, painted faces, and sold knives.

In her early twenties, Dessa joined the Doomtree collective. With that group, Dessa published her first literary collection, *Spiral Bound*, and released more than a dozen recorded projects.

She now splits her time between a Minneapolis apartment and an Econoline tour van.

rain taxi

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