[intro]

**Glynn:** Get a behind the scenes look at Comedy Central's The Daily Show on Beyond the Scenes. An original podcast from The Daily Show with Trevor Noah. Every week, host Roy Wood, Jr., goes deeper with notable guests and experts from the Emmy award-winning series. And together, they use comedy to tackle current topics, gentrifcation, to gun laws, and take a closer look at how and why these topics matter. Listen to Beyond the Scenes from The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, on the iHeartRadio app, Apple Podcast, or wherever you get your podcasts. New episodes every Tuesday.

[upbeat music]

Today on Snap Judgment, we're doing something a bit different. Have you ever had a problem and looked everywhere for a solution, then tripped across something random that absolutely spoke to you? Well, today, we proudly present a special presentation of a podcast called Dear Poetry. It's a show from Audible. And it's hosted by Luisa Beck. And in it, she gets a call from a person with a situation. And they turn to poetry to figure out some advice. And that's the simplified version. The real version is like poetry itself. It's complicated. It's rich with story, full of stakes, beauty, tragedy, love. And the following piece, it does reference sexuality, war, an epic poem, and an even more epic painting. And it's going to use some language that is frank and real and like all epic poems, it's going to have some graphic scenes. Listener discretion is advised. We begin with the host of Dear Poetry, Luisa Beck, telling her story.

[pensive music]

**Luisa:** To know why poetry can offer some of the best advice, I want to tell you about this one German book that was mailed to me by my godfather when I was 14. He was a minister in former communist East Germany but he didn't look like how you might expect a minister to look. He always wore a beret and carried this brown pleather briefcase. He was equal parts wit, rebellion, and heart. He'd talk a mile a minute cracking jokes about the East German secret police. And then, he'd turn around to give the bus driver a bar of chocolate to thank her for taking me to the right destination. And the book he sent me from Germany to Southern California wasn't a Bible or book of prayers. It was a collection of poems written by his favorite poet and satirist, Erich Kästner. An atheist and pacifist who heavily criticized Hitler, Germany, and chronicled the country's crimes and destruction. The book was titled *Dr. Erich Kästner's Lyrical Apothecary*. And in it were poems sorted by ailment.

The table of contents read, "If aging is putting you in a bad mood, turn to page 21, 56, 60, and 92." Or, "If you're witnessing poverty, turn to pages 42, 54, and 58." "Once the know-it-alls have finally finished lecturing, turn to pages 32, 76, 105," and on and on. I was riveted, and so was my godfather. He knew most of the poems by heart. In fact, he knew so many poems by heart, he could spend all day reciting one after the other. He'd just interrupt our conversation mid-sentence and start. Here's audio from one of the last videos I took off him.

[engine trying to start]

At first, we couldn't get his old East German car to start. But then, finally the motor started running. And pretty soon, we're driving through a forest and everywhere around us our fall-colored leaves.

[German language]

Right in the middle of our conversation, he starts reciting Rilke's poem *Autumn*. It's about the fall, and also about dying.

[German language]

"The leaves are falling, falling like they're coming from afar, from distant gardens withered in heaven," he's saying. And then eventually, he goes on, "Thus everything must fall. The sand here must fall. And this other one too. Falling isn't everything." He died a year later in autumn.

My name is Luisa Beck, and I'm a reporter who covers politics, the environment, and the many news that make the day's headlines. And though I know that facts and statistics and well-researched information can illuminate the world's biggest dilemmas, it's poetry I turn to for the tender stuff of life.

On Dear Poetry, we want to do for you what the book my godfather gave me did for me. We've put out a call for dilemmas from all over the world. And on each episode of the show, we invite a poet or writer to choose a dilemma that speaks to them, and then, choose a poem that they think might help. We talk about the poem in hopes that it can offer some comfort or a new perspective, or just make us laugh. Dilemmas can be tiny, like your left shoe doesn't fit quite right. Or you're doomscrolling until your eyes are sore. Or, they can be big too. Like you're stuck at home and it feels like the walls are about to implode on you. Or, you're struggling with heartache, in one of its infinite forms. Whatever it is, there's some bit of insight or comfort out there in the form of a poem. Here's our first caller.

**Caller:** My dilemma, which I'm asking for help and guidance on, is love. Literally love. Me, at 21, I'm moving very, very fast to being the person I've always dreamed to be. I work two jobs and learning how to DJ. I have my own business. I have my own car, pay my own rent, and I live by myself. And I'm just really ready to just find someone to love me for me. But I'm always ending up in predicaments with guys who don't appreciate me for me or just want to have sex with me or just want to use me for their own advantage or doesn't really love me for me, just loves my body. I'm always being sexualized. I'm just at the stage where I'm not out looking for love, but I want to be loved, I want to be held, I want to be hugged, and someone to tell me they love me for me and surprise me with dates and take me out places.

Why is it always me who ends up with people who don't appreciate me? It's a horrible feeling that makes you feel so rubbish about myself. Is it because I'm ugly? Is it because I'm too independent? Is it because-- I just don't know. And it just really makes me feel like I'm really going to end up in this world on my own forever. I'm 21 now, and I know 25 is a long way to go, but I always had that dream in my head that one day, I will have kids at 25 and start a family, but how can I start a family when I haven't even found anyone now other than maybe I put boys off for being so independent and being a CEO and wanting to be successful? So, I don't know. Maybe I just need some guidance or some words of wisdom to help me. It's something that I think about probably nearly every, every day. But yeah, that's my life dilemma. Just being successful and falling in love.

**Luther:** Her questions were so vulnerable. I felt she was really just opening up there.

**Luisa:** Luther Hughes is a poet and founder of Shade Literary Arts, an organization for queer writers of color. His debut poetry collection, A Shiver in the Leaves, will be published by BOA Editions in September of this year. What about this dilemma resonated with you?

**Luther:** I was drawn to it because of the deep desire for love. And it's funny because also, they mentioned their age of being 21. I remember kind of being 21 and wanting love in the way I thought love was supposed to be given to me. I wanted to have kids and have a family at 25. But as I listened to it, and kind of reminiscing on my own experiences, I was like, "Ah, yeah, this is a very common feeling because love is so complex." And then, it's also not. It's a basic function of humans to want love.

**Luisa:** Totally.

**Luther:** And also what drew me to this was the announcement of their independence, they're all these things, which is also a very interesting thing to place beside the deep desire for love. So, it got me thinking about self-worth, which is why I chose a poem that we're going to talk about today.

**Luisa:** And I've got to say, you chose a really unexpectedly intense poem in response to this dilemma. [laughs]

**Luther:** I love this poem.

**Luisa:** Can you tell me a bit about the poem and the poet who wrote it?

**Luther:** Yeah. The poem is by Paul Tran is called an acrostic, which is a poem in response or about a piece of art, or object. And the title of the poem is *Judith Slaying Holofernes,* *Oil on Canvas*, Artemisia Gentileschi 1620.

**Luisa:** And so, the poem is named after this 17th-century Italian painting, which depicts the biblical figure of Judith. And I read that she's famous for assassinating this Assyrian general, Holofernes, who've been trying to conquer the Israelites.

**Luther:** Yes.

**Luisa:** And I just want to say to those listening, that it's totally worth pausing a moment if you can to google of this painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, because it's crazy. Can you describe the painting?

**Luther:** Yeah. So, the painting was created by Artemisia Gentileschi who was an Italian painter, I believe for the 17th century. The painting itself, it has Judith leaning over Holofernes with a knife slitting his throat. And then next to Judith is her maid who is kind of holding him down. Also in the painting, they're on a bed, there's blood coming from, he is pretty much almost dead.

**Luisa:** What's struck me about the painting is that it's so gruesome, but it's a full-on beheading. Holofernes's eyes are wide open in horror. There's blood soaking the sheets. And there's something about the look in Judith's eye that looks so righteous, and she's just filled with vengeance.

**Luther:** Yeah, right. It's so interesting. The background, I believe, if I remember correctly, Judith used her beauty and her charm to persuade Holofernes to follow her to this and he was drunk or something, of course, as men tend to be in following women. [Luisa laughs] And so, she lured him into this sort of setting and then slayed him. But yeah, it's a very striking image. And because she slayed him, the people of Israel were no longer under oppression, so she became like the savior of that war. So, the poem is written in the first person from Judith's perspective to Holofernes.

**Luisa:** And so, the poem basically imagines her speech as she is killing him, so at the moment of his death.

**Luther:** Yes.

**Luisa:** Would you read it for us?

**Luther:** Yes. *Judith Slaying Holofernes,* *Oil on Canvas*, Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620, by Paul Tran.

I know better than to leave the house without my good dress, my good knife, like Excalibur between my stone breasts. Mother would have me whipped, would have me kneeling on rice until I shrilled so loud I rang the church bells. Didn’t I tell you that elegance is our revenge, that there are neither victims nor victors but the bitch we envy in the end? I am that bitch. I am dogged. I am so damned not even Death wanted me. He sent me back after you sacked my body, the way your armies sacked my village, stacked our headless idols in the river where our children impaled themselves on rocks. I exit night, I enter your tent, gilded in a bolt of stubborn sunlight. My sleeves already rolled up. I know they will say I am a slut for showing this much skin, this irreverence for what is seen when I ask to be seen. Look at me now: My thighs lift from your thighs, my mouthspits poison into your mouth. You nasty beauty. I am no beast, but my blade sliding clean through your thick neck while my maid keeps your blood off
me and my good dress will be a song the parish sings for centuries. Tell Mary. Tell Eve. Tell Salome and David about me. Watch their faces, like yours, turn green.

[pensive music]

**Glynn:** We're not done, Snappers. We can't just drop that poem on you and not know why. When we return, find out how an epic painting ties back to a woman looking for love. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back. You're listening to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington. And we were just in the middle of Dear Poetry. This piece does contain some grown folk language, so listener discretion is advised. The show, it finds answers to real problems in the form of poetry. So, let's pick back up with Luisa Beck and poet, Luther Hughes. Snap Judgment.

**Luisa:** Wow.

**Luther:** Yeah.

**Luisa:** You can just imagine Judith spitting this poem with vengeance.

**Luther:** Yes.

**Luisa:** It's very different from the dilemma and tone. Like, the poem is venomous, while the dilemma is very tender. So, yeah, why did you bring this particular poem for the caller?

**Luther:** I feel like a poem that would have been like, "Wait for love, it'll come," or, "Don't worry," or, "Love is great. Just hold it out," wasn't strong enough as a response to this very, yeah, tender dilemma, and recognizing that, of course, this poem doesn't respond to her directly. But within the dilemma itself, I think, desiring the deep love they were asking for is surface-level dilemma. And I think the real dilemma is recognizing one's true power, and that to use one's own characteristics, or whatever draws people to them, to use that as they develop their own confidence and then wanting love and deserving love. And so this poem, I want to call to you as a guiding light for their own self-worth, and to keep thinking about what Judith did, and how she used her beauty to get what she wanted. And it is that line, like, "I am that bitch. I know my worth, and I know what I deserve."

**Luisa:** Yeah. To me, "I am that bitch," is like the ultimate declaration of self-confidence. How did you read the line? Is it that at the end of the day, we always admire the badass?

**Luther:** Yeah. It's saying that it doesn't matter who wins or who loses, because all we care about is, "I'm the one you envy. I'm the one you're going to be thinking about and talking about after the war, the whatever is over." And they're right. After the war was over, it was Judith they were talking about because of what she did.

**Luisa:** Right, she saved her people.

**Luther:** Saved her people. Exactly. And so she wasn't on a battlefield. Doesn't matter, she wasn't neither a victim or victor, but we remembered her because she saved her people.

**Luisa:** And we're still talking about her, we're still admiring her. [laughs]

**Luther:** She's a literal icon. And then, "I am so damned," and damnation having its own connotation tied to hell and doing wrong, being not good, I'm so outside of the terminology of good and evil and wrong, not even death, he didn't want me because I'm too iconic for death. I'm not saying, caller, you should go killing men who treat you wrong unless you need to, but however recognize that--

**Luisa:** We'll keep it on the low down.

**Luther:** Yeah, keep it on the low. Don't want to see you on Snap, but keep it on the low. But I brought it up because I want the caller to recognize that even though we have these low times, even though we're not getting what we think we deserve, you are dogged, you are the ones who people envy at night. The caller said that they're a CEO, they're independent, they pay their own rent. The caller is that bitch, so don't fret over the moments when people don't treat you right. Don't let all these guys in there simple mindedness deter you from who you are and your self-worth. And then, it's going to happen when it happens. But still, even when it does happen, still owning up to that bitchology if I can say so.

**Luisa:** [laughs] I thought this is such a great line too, "My sleeves already rolled up. I know they'll say I'm a slut for showing this much skin. This reverence for what is seen when I asked to be seen. Look at me." I thought about this line too when I heard the caller's message, "I try to not be sexualized, but always just get sexualized." And I love how Judith handles being sexualized and humiliated in the poem, in those lines. She doesn't care. She clearly wants to be seen, and so she just rolls up her sleeves to show herself. And shows that she's got the upper hand or she's above those insults. And yeah, I just thought maybe that line can be inspiration for the caller too, in terms of just owning how you want to look and be fine, "You want to sexualize me? Fine."

**Luther:** That's the very thing that drew Holofernes to her, the rolled-up sleeves, or showing that much skin. That is what drew him to her.

**Luisa:** So, her skin is basically what gives her the access that she needs to save her people?

**Luther:** Yeah. It's funny because she's seen as disrespectful for doing this. But then, that's the very thing that caused her to become a hero because, "The very thing that I am looked down upon is the very thing that saved us." And so like, "You're welcome. Look at me, yes, look at me for sure because I am the one you evny at night because you wanted to be the hero, but couldn't because you were afraid to show this much skin. You were afraid to give into the very thing that is causing people to want to be with you." And it goes back to the caller, to own up to that sexuality and own up to the very power they wield with that, use it, I think. It's a very powerful tool to wield one's sexuality in that way.

**Luisa:** Mm-hmm. Do you have any last words of advice for the caller that I didn't ask you about?

**Luther:** I would just say take your time. Love is always going to be there. Focus on the person that you are. Be in awe of the world around you. Take fearful and healthy leaps into things and don't let a guy to find you.

**Luisa:** And remember, you are that bitch.

**Luther:** Yes, that's actually the main point of this. Whoever is listening, just internalize the phrase, "I am that bitch." And then, walk out the door.

**Luisa:** Dear caller, there's one detail in the painting of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* that we didn't talk about, but I think it might be a sort of visual key to your dilemma. The painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, was a woman, which in 17th century Italy, where wealthy women mostly became nuns or wives was a big deal. If you zoom in on the painting, and look at Judith's left arm, you'll see that she's wearing a golden bracelet with these green oval stones. They're engraved, and it's hard to make out the details, but some historians think they depict the Greek goddess, Artemis. And that Judith in the painting is actually a self-portrait of the artist. And it makes sense when you know Artemisia's story.

When she was 17, her mentor the painter, Agostino Tassi, raped her. And she testified against him in court, a decision that was maybe even more radical back then than being a female painter. Especially because in 17th century Italy, it meant she'd be tortured with thumbscrews while the court interrogated her. I know that sounds crazy, but the courts used torture as a sort of lie detector. The belief was that if a person is willing to tell their story while enduring excruciating pain, it must be true. But Artemesia told her story. And despite being tortured, she won the trial. Her mentor was found guilty and sentenced to exile. But he had connections to the Pope, and you know how those things go. He never served sentence. Instead, Artemesia was publicly shamed for telling the court about what he did to her.

A year later, she started that painting of *Judith Slaying Holofernes.* It's not hard to imagine, who she might have been thinking about when she drew Holofernes, wide-eyed and bloody on the bed. When I look at that painting now, all I can think is Artemesia, I'm in total awe of the expressiveness of that painting, and of her. She had achieved something that was nearly impossible for a woman in 17th century Italy. She'd turned her love for art into a life. She'd become an independent and highly successful painter. I just imagine her with that bracelet, turning to her mentor, Agostino, and all the other men who tried to keep her down and say to them, eyes narrowed, "That's right. I am that bitch."

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thank you so very much to Luisa Beck for this segment of Dear Poetry. Thank you to poet, Luther Hughes, as well and also to the OG poet, Paul Tran, who actually wrote the poem featured here. Dear Poetry has even more callers with more dilemmas and a lot more poetry on their podcast. You can listen on Audible at *adbl.co/dearpoetry*. If you like what you hear, know that Audible has a free trial, go listen to the entire season of Dear Poetry with that free trial and leave a review because reviews help in so many ways.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*