**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**ELIOT DUNCAN**

**Interviewer**: Jay Graham

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**NYC TOHP Interview #224**

Jay Graham: Hi, my name's Jay Graham, and I'll be having a conversation with Eliot Duncan for the NYC Trans Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It's March 12th, 2024, and this is being recorded at the Brooklyn Public Library. So, would you mind starting us off by introducing yourself?

Eliot Duncan: Hi, I'm Eliot. I'm a writer and educator. I live here in Brooklyn. I wrote a book called *Ponyboy*, which came out last year, last summer.

Graham: Yeah, *Ponyboy* was released last June, right? For those who haven't read it, could you give a brief description?

Duncan: It's a coming of age story, really—it's a bildungsroman—about a young transmasc jerk, basically. He's navigating his way through active addiction and relationships, and it's set in Paris, Berlin, and the American Midwest. And it was actually the first book with a trans protagonist to be nominated for the National Book Award.

Graham: I'm curious how you began writing *Ponyboy*.

Duncan: I didn't really know I was writing a book when I was writing it. I started it in my undergrad degree. I was studying in Paris, and I was just like, I have all these fragments, and I had interviews with the authors that I loved—who are not alive, but I was pretending I was talking to them—and I had poems, and I had little vignettes and scenes of something. I had the guidance of a professor at the time who was like, I think this is a book, I think you're working on this book. So I just carried on for years just like, Okay, this is my little book document, this is the thing I'm writing right now. And then I moved to Berlin, where I started taking it really seriously and invested a lot of time and energy in it. Then I applied to a master's program in Iowa and went to a workshop, and there I just had two years of funding where all I did was work on the book. So I think it was six or seven years total, but the cool thing about it is it was sort of mysterious. Like, I didn't know I was really writing a book as I was starting it.

Graham: So you were studying first in Paris, in undergrad. What was that program?

Duncan: It's the American University of Paris, so it's an American liberal arts institution in Paris, and I studied philosophy.

Graham: Okay, and afterward you moved to Paris–sorry, Berlin—for which reason?

Duncan: Well, I wasn't ready to go back to the US and everybody had convinced me that I would love Berlin. I had never been, but I had this sort of wide open mentality of, Okay, why not? My partner at the time and I co-founded a queer art collective, so we put on shows and published journals. So yeah, I spent a couple years there doing that and writing my book.

Graham: That's Slanted House, right?

Duncan: Yeah, that's Slanted House. Exactly.

Graham: Can you tell me a little bit about Slanted House?

Duncan: Sure, yeah. So Slanted House, it started in Berlin. I think it was 2019, maybe 2018. Basically my partner and I co-founded it because we saw all our friends making really cool stuff —my partner at the time was a curator and visual artist—and we just didn't have any spaces to show our work. So we basically just started our own collective and had numerous exhibitions and reading nights and published journals so that people could have a place to show their work and have the event of an exhibition, an opening night. So we did several group shows, which actually had readings and stuff, and it was basically focused on underrepresented creatives so people of color, trans people, queer people living in Berlin.

Graham: And looking back on Slated House now, what do you think of it? It lasted for several years.

Duncan: Yeah, I'm so glad we did it. I'd like to revive it. After the pandemic, everything sort of slowed down, and we're all sort of doing a little bit different things now separately. But I'm really glad we did it. It was so fun. It was one of the funnest things I've ever done, because you just met so many different people, you got to engage with people not only socially but talk to them about their work really seriously, and it felt really generative to find people and people find us whose work we really loved. It was just so exciting. It was like a party all the time, right? We got to have exhibitions and hang out and talk, and people came from abroad for events. It was just a really, really warm fun time.

Graham: Do you think it had an effect on *Ponyboy*?

Duncan: Totally. I was operating in … A lot of *Ponyboy* is set in the art world in Berlin—Paris also but mainly Berlin—and yeah, there are hilarious things about the art world, I found hilarious things about the art world, and the things that people say. Like the character Ponyboy, I wanted to inject this sense of, like, Ponyboy doesn't really understand anything about contemporary art, right? But he loves it. So there's some humor and some distance there, with him wandering around not knowing what's happening.

Graham: And in his relationship to Baby. You said something the other day—I think you posted it on insta, maybe—about how when you're writing a character, the voice is always the thing that comes first. Can you tell me about how you developed Ponyboy's voice?

Duncan: Yeah, totally. The voice for Ponyboy became really clear because Ponyboy was just a hyperbolic version of myself. He was the transmasc, possessed—*possessed* in a good way, like self-possessed—sort of flippant jerk that I wanted to be. So it was easy for me to lean into his tone, how he would speak, how he would engage with the world, because it felt like an affectation or a fictional version of myself or the me I was trying to be.

Graham: Ponyboy is fiction. The novel—I guess this is a little bit of a spoiler—it begins with a scene where he's getting a haircut and Toni, his good friend, tells him, Do you know what it feels like to make eye contact with yourself? And it ends with him naming himself Eliot. I think you write in your author's note, This is very much a work of fiction, and the usual rules apply. But do you want to say a little bit more about your relationship to Eliot the character?

Duncan: Sure. I think it's interesting because I write from my lived experiences, like a lot of writers do. I guess I would align myself in an autofictional tradition of writing. But with *Ponyboy* it felt extra important for me to make a fictional distinction between me and the character Ponyboy, even though it's informed by my experiences. I don't know. I think it's an interesting philosophical question of how much of a book is the writer. I mean, oftentimes there's a very clear difference, but I think it's also exciting to think about trans people existing in fictional worlds too and not always being a sort of exposé memoir moment, that we're allowed to just exist in clumsy fictional representations also. And I also just felt like so much of my life is not in the book that to directly say that I am Ponyboy would feel like a misrepresentation. But it's complicated, right? Because in the end he names himself Eliot, which is my name, so I kind of like that about it. Like, it's a little ambiguous, and it's a little …

Graham: Yeah. You and not-you.

Duncan: Yeah. And that feels true to most things I write. It's me but it's also not me. I just wrote the book I could write. Do you know what I mean?

Graham: Yeah, we're also not very reliable narrators of our own lives to begin with.

Duncan: Totally. I think that's an Eileen Myles thing, to say, Just write the book you can write. You know?

Graham: Say more.

Duncan: Well, my friend was talking about Eileen saying something like that. I don't know the direct quote. But it was like … Because my friend's a poet, and they were talking about wanting to write a novel. And Eileen's advice to them was, No, just write the book you can write. Don't try to write into this history or lineage of, like, This is what a novel is. Just write exactly where you're at. Because no one can write the book that you can write. Like, same with you, Jay. If you were to write a book, no one could write your book. Do you know what I mean?

Graham: Yeah, so it's sort of disregarding genre as well, or formal constraints.

Duncan: Totally. Yeah, yeah.

Graham: You mentioned incorporating all of these different fragments that you had been collecting since you were doing your undergrad program at the American University in Paris—there's a sort of love letter to Paul Preciado in which the speaker imagines applying his testogel, and there's a dialogue with Kathy Acker, and there's all these different things. Has that kind of

formal experimentation always been part of your writing practice?

Duncan: I think I started sort of messing with formal constraints when writing *Ponyboy*. I don't think I was really doing it before—consciously, anyway. But I sort of consciously did it when I was writing *Ponyboy*, because I was like, Okay, I have to access my history somehow. And this was a time where I was really realizing that I was transmasc. I kind of knew before, but it was coming to a full head and, for me, it was a very scary realization. I was like *Fuck* in this way that I don't feel now but at the time it was really scary. So I was sort of scrambling to access my history and access a way of understanding myself, and I felt like I was just like Kathy Acker. Her and I had the same gender somehow. Do you know what I mean? Or I was just like Paul [Preciado]. Like, I read *Testo Junkie* and I was like, I just need to sit down and talk to him. I didn't have a lot of trans peers or friends that I could talk to, so for me it was like, Okay, I can hang out with them in my work. I can create a conversation and just directly address the people that I resonate with. That's why I also wrote the letter to Brandon Teena, because he's from Nebraska and I'm from Nebraska. I felt like I needed to just go on a car ride with him to talk about what I was going through. You know what I mean? So it was just sort of a way of charting my own identity through a history. And you know, as trans people, no one gives it to us. We have to find it. Which is so cool about this project, right? It's a resource to access our histories.

Graham: Yeah, exactly. Can you say more about the history you were trying to access? You mentioned a few names, but were there other people that come to mind when you think about that history, those people that you wanted to sit down and talk to?

Duncan: Yeah, Lou Sullivan for sure. Yeah, Lou Sullivan more recently, not so much when I was writing *Ponyboy*. But yeah, definitely Lou Sullivan. I just love this idea that books are studies of consciousness, and I think we should have as many consciousnesses represented in books. We should have a book for every … Like, I wish I could read everyone's book. Do you know what I mean? So this idea of incorporating the voices of my trans lineage only felt natural, because those are the people who are part of my consciousness and who shaped me and who kind of gave me permission. I mean, they didn't say anything directly to me, but they did, you know? They gave me permission to be who I am. So another name is Eileen Myles. I love them so much. Like, Lou Sullivan, Brandon Teena, super important. Kathy Acker. Henry Miller—although not a transsexual. But he's really important to me.

Graham: Why do you think you're drawn to Henry Miller's work?

Duncan: Well, I love the sort of spiritual dimension of his work. I think he's just genuinely a man of God, and I say that not in a religious context. But all of his work is imbued with this transcendental oneness. He's really leaning into unity consciousness, and sometimes his words are, like, illegible. The opening line of *Tropic of Cancer*, I think, is, Once you've given up the ghost, everything follows with dead certainty. There's a fatality to his words that is always matched with a levity and a lightness. I also like how sexual his work is. There's just fucking all the time. Can I cuss on this thing? Is that okay?

Graham: I have no idea actually. I guess I'll bleep it if we can't.

Duncan: Okay, okay. Like, there's always a sexual energy happening, and I think that sexual energy is also healing energy. Also, his books were banned for so long. He was sort of forced to be an outsider writer, and I think he's widely misunderstood as projecting sexual misconduct or something. But I don't think that's really it. Also, when you hear him talk in interviews, his sense of writing being a mysterious spiritual practice, I really align with that. I think it's really cool.

Graham: Writing feels like a spiritual practice to you?

Duncan: Yeah, absolutely.

Graham: In what way?

Duncan: Well, I don't really know what's going on when I'm writing, and I think that's a good thing. There's that Pope.L line where he's like, Knowing what you're doing is overrated. I love that.

Graham: That feels like a very trans sentiment to me.

Duncan: Totally. Yeah, it's there. Absolutely. And I mean, my conception of writing right now is, I am just sitting down at the computer or my notebook, and I'm just trying to be unblocked. Like, my process of arriving to the page is to remove the blocks within me so that when I arrive, hopefully, spirit can move through me. Like, I don't feel like I'm really in charge, and I don't know where it's going, but I just sit there and hopefully have the craft tools to channel it. In that way, it has nothing to do with me. And then that frees me. I mean, Henry Miller talks about this also, a little bit. I'm free in that way because I'm not attached to the outcome. All I have to do is show up and be open, and hopefully something will move through me. But if it doesn't, that's okay too, because it's not really about me. You know? Like this egoic sense of, *I am the author of the book* kind of pushes out God or divinity from the process, you know? My name's on the book, but I don't know.

Graham: This is making me think of a few different things. Thinking about Henry Miller, he's associated with this history of sex writing and pornography pretty strongly, and like you say, there are other dimensions to his work. But I was also thinking, you know, reading *Ponyboy*, one of the reactions that I had was that, even though there is so much darkness in this book and a lot of really incredible pain, it's so pleasurable as a reading experience. It had an effect on my body. Like, it made it hard to sit in my apartment, it made me thirsty for a beer, things like that. I'm curious too about how you feel about the relationship between writing and pleasure.

Duncan: Well, I think it's exactly what you said. I agree with that. I think all of reading and a lot of writing is physiological. We talk about work "moving us." That's something literal. It stirs you. Or there are some things I read that I want to throw across the room, and I'm interested by that.

What is that? It's a physiological engagement, and that oftentimes is pleasurable, sometimes not. But oftentimes when I'm reading, I'm having a whole sensory experience, which is interesting because it's just words on a page. For the medium, it's interesting that it has such a physical effect.

Graham: Well, and I guess with smut or pornographic writing, the authors are often a little bit more transparent about their desire to have an effect on the reader's body—to turn them on, basically. I'm curious too because Henry Miller comes up a lot in your work, and people like Jane Delynn, and there's other sort of erotica writers that come to mind. When did you first begin to be interested in that type of work or incorporating it into your own writing?

Duncan: I think I've always been interested in the erotic. I think it's such an intense—and can be a transcendental—experience that it lends itself really well to writing. I'm always interested in reading sex. Oftentimes in books, it's about to happen, and then the next page happens. We skip forward. I'm interested in what happens between those pages. I want that page. I want the sex. I want to read that. So I love writers who lean into that. Jane Delynn, for example. Incredible. That book *Leash*. I've read it so many times. It blows me away every time. It's so good. And it's not even directly sexual … It is sexual, but it's a different kind of sexuality she's exploring there. But yeah, I'm interested in any sort of portrayal of sex in literature, I think. Anytime that it's actually happening, and it's there on the page, I'm interested. That's why in *Ponyboy* too … I don't think the sex scenes are super graphic—I think I could have gone further and drawn it out. But any sort of trans representation of sex, I love to read that. Like, there's this book. I don't know if you've looked it up, but I was at a residency recently, and I was like, Where's a gay transmasc book? I need that book. And I found this thing. It's a really dramatic cover. It's called *Trans Homo … Gasp!*

Graham: I don't know it.

Duncan: Yeah, you should read it! It's a collection of all these trans guys talking about sexual experiences with either other trans gay men or cis gay men. One of them is by Buck Angel, and reading those was super important to me. I was like, Oh great, there's a whole history of this happening, and there's a record being made of these kinds of relationships. So those sorts of special finds where sex is being talked about directly in a way that I resonate with in my experience I get super excited about. I was showing everyone this book. I was like, Look at this book! It's amazing.

Graham: Yeah, I mean, it's one thing to try to write a good precise psychological sex scene at all, and then there's also the question of how do you write a trans sex scene in a way that feels like it's freeing up the language and not—I don't know—concretizing pretty archaic ideas about genitalia and gender and stuff like that.

Duncan: Yeah, that's interesting. I feel like there's so much there. And also, just the more representations we have as trans people in literature, the more space there will be for all the different types of sex that happen. I feel like we've just started. So it's wide open. You can go in

any direction. And I don't know, this is maybe another point, but it's sort of miraculous that any book gets published, I've realized.

Graham: What do you mean? You mean, in terms of the book publishing industry?

Duncan: It's wild! The process, yeah. I don't know if it's true for all publishers, but oftentimes all editors have to be unanimous about a title in order to buy it. So I'm like, What is that? Some books are so divisive, and those books should also be published. We shouldn't have to all agree on the book for it to be published. You know? It's just miraculous that it ever happens at all, to me. But hopefully, more and more trans writers will become published, and it will just sort of be a metabolized, integrated part of the human experience, and it won't sort of be sensationalized into this thing that's different or strange. It can just be like, Oh, just another book. I want that for our future. I want it to just be metabolized as human experience.

Graham: Well, thinking about sort of trans representation, especially in sex writing, you mentioned that collection. What was it called again?

Duncan: *Trans Homo … Gasp!*

Graham: So all the editors agreed on that.

Duncan: I mean, well, I think that's independent publishing. It must have been. I think it was independently published, and they could probably do what they wanted.

Graham: Can you say more about that book?

Duncan: It's great. It's just a collection of personal essays by trans masc guys who sleep with men, whether they're trans or gay [cis] men. And the story that I love the most was by Buck Angel. He has a story about going into—-I think in San Francisco, because that's where he was living, and I think he still lives there, and Buck Angel for anyone who doesn't know is a very famous transmasc porn star—and he went into this gay bar where people were hooking up, and he just went into the dark room. And the story describes how nervous he was about entering this space and thinking he was going to be rejected—something that probably a lot of gay transmascs can relate to—and he just gives a very detailed account of fucking and getting fucked by other gay men and how relieved he was that this idea he had in his head about how he would be treated and excluded just consistently proved to be untrue. In his experience, right? Of course that happens sometimes, but for Buck Angel it wasn't the case. And it's beautiful to have that narrative happen, where you have someone's life as proof of your own future. So that essay means a lot to me, and it's well-written and I really like it. And there's another one where there's a transmasc dom and sub relationship. And the sub is the transmasc. The dom is a cis guy. And the sub calls the dom Dad, not Daddy, and I thought that was great. I was like, Wow, I've never heard of anyone doing that. You know? It's interesting. Interesting dynamics get brought up. It's a good read. It's fun.

Graham: I'll check it out. Cool. Maybe we could go back a little bit and talk about your background. You said you're from Nebraska.

Duncan: I'm from Omaha, which is the biggest city in Nebraska.

Graham: What was it like to grow up there?

Duncan: It was good. You know, oftentimes I meet people who have never really been to the Midwest and… I don't know. People tend to be like *Oh that must have been awful for you* kind of vibe. But actually it wasn't. I grew up in the city, so I'm what my grandma calls a city slicker—she lived on a farm, and my mom grew up on a farm. It was nice. I mean, I had friends through the punk and hardcore scene there, so I used to be much tougher than I am now. But I would go to punk houses—there were two punk houses—so we could go to shows whenever. Everyone kind of knew each other and took care of each other. I mean, there wasn't a lot to do, but we found things to do, you know? I guess another element is I wasn't out as trans at the time. I was just out as a queer person, and I never experienced any sort of bullying or disregard for that. Maybe I'm just lucky or just fell in with people who really took care of each other. And yeah, it's a beautiful place. My grandma's farm is gorgeous. I like to go back every summer. I try to, I'm not always able to. So yeah, that's where I'm from.

Graham: Can you say something about your family? Do you have siblings?

Duncan: Yeah, I have one older sister. She's a couple years older than me. And my dad and mom are both from Nebraska. My dad now lives in London—they got divorced when I was about seventeen or eighteen—-and my mom now lives in Colorado. But my mom is very cool. Maybe you heard this at the reading, but she was sort of my first example of butchness. Not that she herself is a butch lesbian—she's a straight woman—but she's just very butch. She can fix anything. She drives a truck. And when I was eight years old, she took me to an Indigo Girls concert. And I remember just being, like, amazed. I was shimmering inside. I was embarrassed but amazed. All the leather and the short hair. I was just like, Where am I? I was in heaven, you know? And my parents are both heterosexual, but they always normalized queerness. They always had gay friends. There was always a sense of openness about that stuff.

Graham: What were you like as a teenager?

Duncan: I guess I was pretty stubborn. My parents say that. I was sort of a challenging teenager, I guess you'd say. I was getting in trouble a lot. I was always sneaking out. I was always drinking or doing drugs. At the same time, I was very serious about my studies. So I had both going, where I was very into achievement but at the same time was causing a lot of trouble.

Graham: When did you start thinking about things like transness or transitioning?

Duncan: Well, I first heard of being trans probably when I was ten or eleven. I just sort of

clocked it as, like, interesting. Oh, I remember what the moment was. My dad showed me this book of photos by Joel-Peter Witkin. I don't know where he's from, but he does these really sort of dark, gothic photos, and the whole premise is sort of messed up, in a way. He basically takes photos of freaks, or like circus freaks. And a lot of his photos are of transsexuals. So I remember seeing a transsexual for the first time in one of his photos and feeling like something physiological happened—a curiosity there. And I think the term was like *hermaphrodite*—that's how it was described to me. So I felt a resonance there but nothing that was tangible at the time. And then I saw *Boys Don't Cry*—-that account of Brandon Teena's life—-and then I had, like, terror. I was like, I'm like him. That whole moment of, Oh okay, that's what's going to happen to me. Because, you know, it's in the state I'm from, etcetera, etcetera. And then I just was, like, not thinking about it for a while. It probably was simmering under the surface, but I just put it out of my mind. And then, maybe like a lot of trans people, I just experienced my life up to a point for so long that I felt like I was ready to come out. And it wasn't something I necessarily wanted to do. It didn't feel like a choice. It felt like, I'm just a guy. It was an unavoidable fact. I was just like, Well, this is just what's happening for me. This is what's going on. You know? And once I did that, once I was able to come and move forward with that truth and change my name and saw that the people around me were luckily really loving and open, I was able to move forward and get on T and get top surgery and sort of just move through my life in a different way. But getting to that place where I could say it even to myself felt like a long time.

Graham: I mean, *Ponyboy* feels like a book to me about finally facing yourself in some way.

Duncan: Yeah.

Graham: When did you move to New York?

Duncan: Just last April. So it's been just under a year.

Graham: New York City has this mythology around it as being a mecca for queer and trans people. Is that something that drew you here?

Duncan: Yeah. Definitely. I mean, London's great also, but I've never lived in a city before where I see so many other transsexuals. When I first was visiting here—because I fell in love with someone who lives in New York and would visit him all the time—and my first or second visit, I was just talking to him, like, This is crazy. I've never just gotten on the train to go live my life and seen so many other transsexuals. And that felt really good to me. I feel and felt legible in New York in a way that I haven't before.

Graham: Do you feel like you were able to find a sense of community here that you weren't able to find in London?

Duncan: No, not necessarily, because I have lots of friends who are transsexuals in London. So I don't think it's necessarily the community aspect. I think it's more about just feeling represented when you walk in the world. Like, of course there are tons of transsexuals in

London too, but I just don't see them as much… It feels like a weird thing to say, but I'm just like, Where are they? Whereas here, yes, I have my friends who are also trans, but then I'm just going to live my life and there are so many other transsexuals who are on the train with me. Especially on the G. I'm like, What's going on? We're all here. It's amazing. It feels so good.

Graham: I hadn't noticed that about the G. That's funny.

Duncan: Well, I used to live on the G, so maybe that's why. But yeah. And of course it's complicated in some ways because maybe some people in other cities are maybe more passing or something. I don't even know what it is. But I just love that fact about New York, just feeling like we're here.

Graham: What do you think it is about New York that has that effect, that's drawn so many people here?

Duncan: Well, I think because of the history here. There's a very strong trans and queer history here, like there are other places, but here it feels more explicit and known. Also, there are so many not even transsexuals but just gay people here. The number of gay people is so high that I think we're integrated in the culture in this city than we are in other places, I think. So yeah, I don't know. It just feels like part of living in New York City is that.

Graham: How have you interacted with that history? Were you ever drawn to the Downtown writers in the seventies and eights, things like that?

Duncan: I don't know about them directly, but I really love Frank O'Hara as a gay New York poet. You know? To me, he's so good.

Graham: What do you like about him?

Duncan: I like that he just writes about dailiness. I feel like *Lunch Poems* are all just sort of like sexts he's sending. Or the way he'll notice a yellow flower. He's very just, like, walking around, you know? There's that line in *Angels in America* with the woman being scared that her husband is gay being like, Does he go on a lot of walks? Is that what gay people do? It's very like, he's just a gay man on a walk, just strolling around, his daily routine. Also, there's also something really devotional about O'Hara's poems—the way that he loves, it feels really really good. And his poems are complicated, but they're expressed in really clear language. There's a lot there, but he's very strict about his words. He doesn't reach too far with language, but there's still a lot there.

Graham: What do you mean by *strict*?

Duncan: Strict in that I don't think he just races off into lyricism. He's sort of right here right now, in the moment, being sparse about what he's describing. He's not all over the place. He's like, We're right here in this room right now.

Graham: Yeah, very present and observant. What is your relationship to poetry? Do you write your own poetry?

Duncan: I do. I usually write poems first, and then I'm like, Okay, how can I make this prose. I mean, I want to be a poet. I feel like I'm just a wannabe poet all the time. I wish I could just be a poet and that's it. But I've always lovingly gotten the feedback that my prose are so much stronger. And I think I know what people mean. When I sit down and look at my poems versus my prose, I'm like, Yeah, it's kind of true. But I love writing poems.

Graham: I mean, *Ponyboy* feels very lyrical and very close to poetry to me, so that makes a lot of sense to me. Is that what you've been working on mostly—poetry?

Duncan: No, I mean, I'm always writing poems. But I'm writing a second book now.
Graham. Oh you are? Tell me about it.
Duncan: It's about madness. I guess, right now, my understanding… It's like that Pope.L thing, where you're like, I don't really know what I'm doing. But from what I can gather and my intentions for the book is that it's about this spiritual experience that people call bipolar disorder, so it's sort of offering a story about a diagnosis and how that can be transferred into a spiritual understanding of yourself rather than a pathological understanding. It's also about dom and sub relationships—three significant dom and sub relationships—and this thread of this spiritual condition as it manifests in the character's life.

Graham: Thinking about Frank O'Hara and other New York queer writers, you mentioned Eileen Myles earlier. When did you first connect to their work?

Duncan: I read *Chelsea Girls* when I was, I guess, nineteen, and I was blown away. I was like, Oh, right, I could write a book. I was like, Oh okay, this makes sense to me. It was the first writer I'd encountered where I was like, Oh right, the things that I experience could also be in literature.

Graham: Yeah. Worth making art about.

Duncan: And I'm a man of dyke experience. I lived as a dyke for many years. So Eileen writing about their experiences with women also felt really important to me.

Graham: I like that. "I'm a man of dyke experience."

Duncan: Yeah, I heard that on a podcast. I forgot who said it, but I was like, That's so good!

Graham: It is really good. I also think the word *dyke* is just really great.

Duncan: It's a good word.

Graham: Yeah, it feels like it encapsulates more than just an orientation and something about gender as well.

Duncan: Totally. *Dyke* is very get things done, to me. Like, dykes hold down the world. What would we do without dykes? They get things done.

Graham: Another phrase that I think of when I think of your work, particularly in *Ponyboy* I guess, is "cock-intelligence" or "cock-consciousness." Can you talk about that phrase that you use?

Duncan: Thank you for noticing that. I think it was just not having a word to describe this feeling of my … I don't know… How do I describe this? I think you just intuitively know it, but it's like when you feel turned on and hard but that hardness is also matched with a sort of intellectual path or something. You're turned on physiologically but then it's also a mental turn on. I think the line is like, My cock-intellgience smolders in my furrowed brow. You know? Ponyboy's clenched. He's fucking hard all the time.

Graham: Well, also just the word *hard*.

Duncan: Yeah!

Graham: A lot.

Duncan: All the time. Yeah, hard all the time. It just came to me, that word. And my mentor was like, Do more of that. You're onto something here. Because I would've just thrown it away, if I didn't get the insight of, Oh, that's good. "Cock-intelligence." I think there's something a little sneering about it, a little side eye. Like, I'm up to something and you don't understand what that is.

Graham: Yeah, definitely. I mean, it also gets at what I was thinking about earlier in terms of Henry Miller and writing sex scenes involving trans characters and trying to use words that are attached to ideas about genitalia in a new way. I think about that all the time. I think it's really difficult to do.

Duncan: Well, I think Ponyboy too, he also refers to "the crux of me." There's so many ways you can describe an anatomical reality. I think at the time I was writing it I was very fearful of anatomical language.

Graham: Why?

Duncan: At the time, I was not very comfortable with who I was as a trans person. I'm not saying you have to be… Like, some people are comfortable with anatomical language, and that makes

total sense. But I guess I'm at a place now where saying *pussy* or *cunt* or *cock* just feels more natural to me. Because it can be like *boy possy* or *girl cock* so easily. It's just like, There it is, readily available, there's the word. But no, I like the restriction of that in *Ponyboy*. I like "the cock-intelligence" of me or "the crux of me." I still use those words when I'm writing because they just feel correct sometimes. But yeah, when I was writing *Ponyboy…* There's this writer Monique Wittig, who's a French feminist theorist, and she writes this book where "je" is sliced, so it's like "j/e" because, she says, the "I" doesn't constitute her as a subject, so she has to insert something to make room for herself. And I think I was thinking about that. That was the dominant question in my mind when I was writing *Ponyboy*. How do we change language or terminology to make space for this trans experience? So things like "my cock-intellgience," that is that to me. Or just making space for trans experience at all in literature feels like that project of cracking open the "I." Who gets to be a subject? Who gets to be published? Who gets to be on the page that way?

Graham: Do you still study philosophy?

Duncan: Not really, no. I think I have a passive interest in it. I have a lot of friends who still read philosophy a lot, and they talk to me, and I love to talk to them about it and engage in it. I guess I read a philosophy text six months ago, so I guess I'm still doing it. But I read R.D. Laing's *Politics of Experience*. He's a Scottish anti-psychiatry psychiatrist. He's amazing. And the book is sort of incomprehensible in some ways because it's so broad and intense, but it's also sort of enjoyable in that it gives you intellectual vertigo. You're like, What's going on? What's going on? He has this amazing line that actually has to do with *Ponyboy*—I feel like this is connected—where he says, Theory is the articulated vision of experience. So the idea is that any sort of theoretical framework just sort of comes from a visionary place of knowing and experience. I don't know if that's connected, but it feels resonant with *Ponyboy*. Because as Ponyboy's moving through his transition and has to clench and have so much conviction about who he is, because no one's seeing that or reflecting that back to him. I sort of resonate with that part of Ponyboy today in my life, because I don't pass and am often getting the "she" and the "her." But I think, maybe it's just getting older or something, I just don't care as much anymore, whereas it used to feel like such a big deal when people would misgender me. Now it's just like, Oh they mean the gay she/her. They mean "that bitch over there." You know? I know who I am, so it's fine if other people don't. But Ponyboy is a very young character, and he's in the throws of that. He's like, See me. He so desperately wants to be seen. I love that about him.

Graham: Me too.

Duncan: Thanks. He's a jerk, kind of. He's like, I *will* be seen. I love that.

Graham: You said that you feel like you're in a much different place with your transness now than you used to be, more comfortable. You're not bothered when people misgender you in the same way. Can you talk about how you got to this place and how you feel about your gender now? Say as much as you want.

Duncan: I'm happy to get into it. I think when I first came out I just was maybe a little illegible to myself. I knew that I was a man, but I hadn't yet seen the physical changes that I do now. So it felt more precious, and it felt like a lot was at stake—to be seen and for people to call me my name and to not misgender me—whereas now, like, my mom calls me my birth name sometimes and I'm like, Of course you do. Right? She gave birth to me. She's always correcting herself. But I'm like, Of course. I don't necessarily know exactly what happened. I think I got sober—that's maybe the big thing—and feel more aligned with a spiritual awareness about my life, and my identity as a transsexual is kind of part of my spiritual life. It's just somehow arrived to me to give people a lot of grace. Also, for me as a white transmasc person, there's not a lot at stake. I'm not hypervisible in a way that makes me prone to being attacked or that violence occurs to me. When I think about what's most pressing in our community, it's not me. So I feel relaxed in that way because I have the privilege to relax. Like, yeah, people are going to fuck it up and people won't understand my gender, and that's probably okay. I don't need everybody to get it, right? Because I get it. And I know that I'm legible to my friends. And the people that I love get it. So it feels less important that I'm seen, understood, and heard. Because I also feel like I'm not—as far as trans community goes—I feel like I'm not the priority, and that's a good thing. That I can get on the subway and just go to work and not feel hypervisible or prone to people bothering me. So in some ways, I just remember that vantage point of my identity and just ride it out. Also, it can be funny. We can approach things with a sense of humor too.

Graham: Yeah. I remember you said at the reading that when you were writing *Ponyboy* you thought of it as a very serious project, took it really seriously, in that it was your big transmasc book—

Duncan: So serious, yeah.

Graham: —and the stuff you're writing now, you were saying, there's a bit more levity to it, more playfulness with it.

Duncan: Totally. Because I think the thing that happened for me mainly was this sense of generosity in spirit and grace was given to me by other people, and so my idea of how I try to live my life is, Let me freely give that back. And that means everybody. That doesn't mean only some people get it, only the people I love get that love and generosity. No, I genuinely just try to give that to everybody I meet. Because so many people in my experience, especially when I'm back home, just have never met a trans person who's like, I am a trans person. They probably have met trans people, but they're passing or stealth or whatever. So it's mostly in my experience, and because I feel safe with my family in those moments, it's just like, Oh yeah, I'm trans. And move on. Like, These are my pronouns, now you know. Move on. It can be this light, swift thing. And the times when it's not … For example, I went to a rehab in Iowa, and there was a guy and he just didn't get it. He was like, Is it a disease that you're trans? He just didn't understand. I was like, I'll just talk to you about it later. I just wanted to check out. And some of the counselors talked to him about it, and he was like, I had never met someone like you. We had a beautiful conversation about it. Even in times, for me, when it's challenging, I never feel like my life is at risk.

I never feel like something's being taken away from me. So I feel like, in a way, it's my choice and my responsibility to show up in those moments, even though it can be tiring and annoying because you're just trying to have a conversation, it doesn't derail my day. It's just a natural part of being alive. And it can be funny. Like, I used to take care of kids, and one of the kids would be like, You're a boy? And I'd be like, Yeah, I'm a boy, isn't that funny?
Some people don't think I'm a boy, but I'm a boy. And he would just think about it. And one time I was picking him up from school, and they said, She's here—like me, picking him up. And he was like, Eliot's a boy! Screamed it in front of everyone. So it's funny, right? Because I don't feel like the crux of who I am is dependent on other people seeing me. I actually don't need anyone to get it. I don't need my mom to get it. I just need her to love me. Understanding doesn't predicate love. She can not get it and still support me tremendously. And I just think about that when I move through the world. That was such a long answer. I really went on.

Graham: No, don't—

Duncan: I became self-conscious and was like, Wow, I was really just on one for a second.

Graham: You mentioned your sobriety and going to a recovery center in Iowa, and you also talked a little bit earlier on about being a teenager in Omaha going to hardcore shows and drinking a lot and stuff. Could you say something about your experiences with sobriety and recovery?

Duncan: I was basically a baby alcoholic. I started drinking when I was thirteen. And for me, it was off to the races. After I had my first drink, I was drinking every day, and I got arrested, and just lots of trouble. And that just escalated as I got older. And like I said, I always have been focused on achievement, so I always was trying to do both. I just got to a point where I could no longer do both. When I was doing my MFA at Iowa, I reached a bottom, where I was just like, Okay, if I keep doing this, I'm going to die. And it's kind of beautiful and mysterious, because I don't necessarily know what happened. The conversation that happened in the book actually happened in real life, where I had a friend—a trans friend—who was like, You know, Eliot, we don't survive from this disease. I was like, What do you mean? He was like, Trans people, we don't survive. You've got to fucking take care of this. So that sort of tipped me off, but of course I just kept drinking after that. But I don't know. I don't know what happened, really. I guess what happened was that it occurred to me in this drunken stupor one night that I could do something different or I could ask for help. So I did. I did. I asked for help. And there's a lot of alcoholism in my family—either luckily or unluckily—-and a lot of us who are sober. So as soon as I asked for help, I was flooded in support. My mom came and picked me up, and very similar to Ponyboy's story, I ended up in rehab, where I was shown that I could live a day without drinking. I stayed there for, like, thirty days. Yeah, it was pretty incredible. And I just sort of leaned into the twelve step program. I was like, Well, I'm here. Obviously what I was doing wasn't working, so I leaned into that as a way of life and a way of connecting to other people who are hurting. And now I can support other trans people. In the twelve step program I'm in, my sponsor is trans, and one of my sponsees is trans. So it's also a way of preserving our community and looking out for each other and keeping each other alive one day at a time.

Graham: I've heard that some people when they go into Al-Anon sometimes have difficulty around the sort of heavily Christian orientation that it can take on, but it sounds like that wasn't really part of it for you. Was recovery connected to your relationship to your spirituality in some way?

Duncan: Definitely. I mean, it isn't a Christian program, it's a spiritual program. It's more about finding a connection to a higher power, and everyone in the twelve step program that I'm in has their own conception of a higher power, so there's not one dogmatic force. It's sort of wild, because everyone has their own higher power. So being in a situation where I was ready for a change … Like, alcohol and drugs had beat my ass, right? And I was like, I can't do this anymore and live. So it was this shift of mindset, where I was like, Okay, everytime I do twenty-four hours without drinking or using, that's evidence of God. Because there's some other force carrying me through this. It's more of a higher power sense in that way, rather than a Christian way. And I'm sure there are a lot of people who use a Christian God, but any sort of understanding of God you want works in the program. So it sort of changed my mindset to be like, you know, you and I sitting in this room right now is evidence of God, in a way, because we're both alive and here talking. So it's looking for those moments of evidence of God in people's lives. So that sort of spirituality, I think, in the twenty four hours.

Graham: The way that you described writing sounded also like an evidence of God moment. Is that accurate?

Ducan: Totally, yeah. I think writing is evidence of God too. Yeah. Because the main thing is, it doesn't have to do with me anymore. Because a lot of my life—I know a lot of people who are addicts and alcoholics also have expressed this—it was all about me running the show. Because, you know, it's like clockwork. To be an addict, it's like a job. It's lots of scheduling, and do I have enough money, and who do I have to get money from, what am I going to do, when am I going to have my next drink. It's a lot of planning. It's a lot of me, me, me, me, how am I going to feel okay? So when that was taken away from me, I was able to sort of shift the focus onto others.

Graham: A shattering of the self type of thing?

Duncan: Yeah, yeah.

Graham: What ideas do you have about God now?

Duncan: I think God is everything, and God is here. I don't know. I used to understand God as this exterior transcendental power kind of thing, but the more that I move and sink into my version of spirituality, it's very spacious and calm. And it's this idea that all I have to do is what I have to do today, or even the next few hours, and that there is some loving, shimmering, gorgeous thing outside of me taking care of me and taking care of everybody and anything that comes my way I'm given that thing because I can handle it. Like, there's nothing put in my

direction that I can't handle. That's also how I approach navigating the world as a transsexual. It's like, Oh I can handle this. I can do this and be okay. Because, in a way, it was given to me by God. And I know maybe it sounds a little out there, but that's just what I believe in my heart. And it's just also this sense of, I'm going to be alright. There's no need to catastrophize or heavily dramatize anything, because I have this sense of being carried and that being carried comes from a sense of God, a sense of faith. And also, to connect it to our interview, this sense of there having been so many transsexuals before me, and I love to align myself in this lineage of, like, being a transsexual is actually to be kind of hard. I'm smiling when I'm saying it, but to be kind of tough. Right? Because I sort of want to resist this idea that being trans makes us fragile and precious and tenderqueer. It's like, actually no, to me being transsexual is to be kind of fucking tough. And to be so assured and beautiful in your sense of self that you don't care about some consequences you might have for that, right? And that is God too—to be so unblocked and aligned with who you are as a person that even with everyone around you not understanding or not getting or even refuting who you are as a person, to wake up every day and to be yourself, that's God. You know?

Graham: When you said *hard*, I also remembered that you'd go to hardcore shows as a kid. Was that a big part of your identity when you were an adolescent?

Duncan: Yeah, I wouldn't say that I was fully in the scene. But there was a good punk and hardcore scene in Omaha, and I played bass badly in a band, and was around, you know? And my dad, also, was punk, so I was raised with Joe Strummer as a really important guy. And it wasn't because he was cool, it was because he lived by his principles, he stood up for what was right, he took himself and the people he loved seriously, he had a message—a political and emotional message. These sort of figures were really revenant in my house growing up. I mean, I love Black Flag. Henry Rollins is so hot to me. I know he's, like, so embarrassing in some ways, but I just find young Henry Rollins videos … Love. So yeah, this idea of hardness or a sense of punk to me sort of transcends any faction or musical alignment and is more about my dad raised me to be, which is, you stand up for what's right, you're loving, you take care of the people around you, and you try and do what's best for everybody—which I guess is not everybody's definition of punk, but that's what was shown to me. And my dad's kind of bonkers. He's a wild guy. And I was so lucky to have him, because he always was like, You just do exactly what you want, you be exactly who you are. So I was raised in this way, and when I came out as trans, of course I was very scared, but I had this context, this framework of, like, This is who I am, so this is what I'm going to do. The obvious thing.

Graham: Can you describe your dad? Was he a musician?

Duncan: Yeah, he played in punk bands in Omaha when he was a kid. I wish I remembered the name. Oh yeah, his band name was Vinyl Aggression. And he played in bands. And the main thing my dad will talk about with punk though is all the shows he saw. Like, I saw Bad Brains at this time, I saw Black Flag in a basement, I shook Joe Strummer's hand four times. He really loves to talk about the bands he saw. And he now lives in London and works in tech, so he has a very different life now. And a lot of my friends will ask him, Well, what happened? You were

this punk guy, and now you're doing this? And he never really has a direct answer. But I don't really mind, you know? I feel like he still lives his life in this way where he's very direct, upfront, and ultimately really caring about the people around him, and is unafraid to say what he thinks and live a life that makes sense to him, regardless of what other people think. He's just kind of tough like that. And that toughness is also love, I think. Conviction.

Graham: What about your mom? You described her a little bit and her butchness.

Duncan: Yeah, she's great. She's a schoolteacher. She loves to read. She's a bigger reader than me. And she lives in the mountains, in a mountain town, like a ten-thousand-feet—

Graham: In Colorado?

Duncan: Yeah, it's called Leadville. She lives in a cabin in the woods. And she's very spiritual. Her sense of God is very strong. She does transcendental meditation. And she prays for me every day, and I swear I can feel it. I really feel it.

Graham: Really? What does it feel like?

Duncan: Well, I have a therapist I meet with, and we do somatic therapy together. And we had this really intense session where I was—I don't remember exactly what I was feeling through—but I was acknowledging some wave of emotion that was moving through me and connecting it to my mom and how she would take care of me as a kid, some of the things she would do—like, she would take me out of a bath, and she always smelled like cigarettes and Chanel, and her wrapping me in a towel, those sorts of sensory moments when you're a kid. And I got off the phone with him, and then right away my mom called me. She was like, I was just walking and I thought of you, and I had a really clear image of you in my head, and I just love you so much. Stuff like that. We're connected, you know?

Graham: Yeah, the synchronicities.

Duncan: And she always prays for me, because she's like, You're living in New York now, starting your new life…

Graham: Right, she's worried about you.

Duncan: And I'm talking to her about my friends, and she's like, Wow, you have a friend named Spider! What an interesting life you're living! But I feel her. I feel her love for me. Because at the end of the day I have a sense of calm and oneness, and I can feel her honest intention for me to be happy.

Graham: And safe, it sounds like.

Duncan: She wants me to be safe. The crazy thing is, I don't think about safety. Maybe this is a very privileged thing to say—I'm very open to that—but I don't really enter spaces thinking about safety. Because I'm a drug addict and child of God. I'm fine. You know?

Graham: You should put that on a tee shirt.

Duncan: I probably should. I guess a lot of people, a lot of people I know, walk around thinking about safety.

Graham: Yeah, I mean, some people walk around New York like it's a video game, just dodging threats.

Duncan: Right, right.

Graham: Sounds like you don't experience that at all.

Duncan: I don't, no.

Graham: How have you experienced New York? We talked about that a little bit.

Duncan: I love it, I love it so much. I'm having a great time. It's the first place I've lived where I've felt a sense of coming home. I've lived abroad a lot, and then when I was living back in the Midwest, I didn't really feel at home. I love New York. It's buck wild. People are loud. There's always something going on. The chaos of it I find really exciting. I feed off of that. I love that. I live in Crown Heights now, and it's starting to get warm, and I love that people are out on the street, sitting, playing music, talking. Living in Europe for a while, there's so much more public spaces to occupy, like parks and places to go. And here, I don't feel like we have it as much. But people are just like, Alright, we're on the stoops, we're on the sidewalks. I like that part of it.

Graham: Yeah, people make it their own. You went to Iowa Writers Workshop, but you also taught there. You've worked as a creative writing instructor. Can you tell me about that?

Duncan: It was interesting. I feel like I didn't connect with the students. I think maybe the problem might have been that I was a new teacher, first of all, and teaching's really challenging. I find it really challenging. But I also assigned Andrea Lawlor's book *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, because I love the intro of the book, and it's set in Iowa City. I was like, We're in Iowa City, it's set here, this is amazing. So I just assigned the first couple chapters. And they were shocked by all the sex. Because I didn't think about that. I was like, But you're in college, and it's just sex and whatever. But people were kind of turned off by that.

Graham: That's pretty surprising to me actually.

Duncan: Yeah, I was surprised also. So I think it was a good experience, and I think I learned a lot doing it, and I also gained a lot of respect for the professors I've had. Because I was like,

This is really challenging. And I feel really confident as an editor—because I've worked as an editor—and as a workshop leader just doing standard workshop critique. Like, I've got that down. Got it, got it, got it. But when it comes to instruction and material, I feel a little bit like it's new to me. And also, I have friends now who are professors, and they're like, You just have to get comfortable in the silence and just call on people. But I think I was a little younger then. And if no one answered my question, I'd be like, Okay we're sitting for one minute in quiet, and I'm just so uncomfortable. I'm like, Okay, If you want to change the subject… I'm too lenient that way. Like, Okay, it's fine, we'll move on! Instead of really engaging in the silence. So I think I would do it differently now. But I'm starting a workshop actually called Comma Workshop with one of my friends, and it will be a mix of bringing in other texts and then workshopping. So I'm excited to be teaching again.

Graham: It's called Comma?

Duncan: Comma Workshop. Yeah, it's going to start in April.

Graham: Okay nice. Is there a sort of thematic center that it's going to orbit around?

Duncan: Well, I'm a transsexual obviously. And my friend who's starting it is indigenous, Cheyenne. So she's going to try to work through a bunch of indigenous writers. And I'm going to try to work through other trans and queer writers. Obviously it's open to anyone, but those are the backgrounds we're trying to serve in a critical and rigorous writing space.

Graham: And you said you also work as an editor. How long have you been editing work?

Duncan: Just the past year and a half. I mean, at the workshop all you're doing is editing other people's work. But the past year and a half. I just work one-on-one with clients and go through their novels or chapbooks or journals, and we just meet wherever they're at. And it's fun. I'm an editor in a way where I'm, yes, acknowledging the zoom in of line edits and the zoom out of philosophical questions, but we also talk about writing from your heart space. Like, what does that mean? And lean into this idea of what is the physiological aspect of writing that moves you, and how to tap into that. Because often writers who are curious or engaged—everyone I've talked to and worked with—they already have the answers. They know what book they want to write. It's just about having a voice, an interlocutor, who helps you unblock yourself from those answers. Because everyone has the way, you know? It's just we forget, and we need someone to remind us.

Graham: You said people need an interlocutor. I also read somewhere that you feel like novel-writing is inherently a collaborative process. What do you mean by that?

Duncan: I just mean that we think of writing books… I'll talk about myself. I thought about writing books as, I'm alone in my room, and my brow is furrowed, and I'm so tense, and I'm thinking so deeply, and I'm writing something I want to be proud of. And I had a mentor early on, Shawn, she encouraged me to do readings and meet other writers. And I was like, big no energy,

absolutely not, I'm not doing that. I was so shy and precious and strict about my work. And she introduced this idea to me that novels are collaborative projects. What that means is every conversation you have about your work, every walk you go on, everything you eat, everything you see, everyone you talk to, everyone you have sex with, everything that you're doing actually is informing the person you become when you sit down to write, so your whole life is the collaborative engagement that leads you to write a book. So it's not an isolated incident. Your novel is your life. Like, oh my god, I had hours and hours and hours of conversations with my friends being like, I think Ponyboy's going to be like this, and then I think this is going to happen. My friends were like, No no no, I think he's going to do this, and I think you actually need to think about this part. And I think it was really important to me, especially as a white writer, to get collaborative voices and talk to my friends of color about, like, the Brandon Teena story, for example. That was a collaborative effort, because it was pointed out to me that C. Riley Snorton wrote in *Black on Both Sides* that one of Brandon's friends was a Black man and was also killed that night. If I had never opened myself up to collaboration, I would've never learned that, I would have never been able to write about that, I would've had the same white-washed story of Brandon being the only one who died that night. So it just means that everything is your writing if you want it to be, and you can just embrace it and open yourself to, like, your world as a writer is not that deep. Right? You can have an idea and you can fully believe in it and think it's great but then also be open to other people's opinions of it, and it can be okay if people think differently or if you're pointed in a new direction or if you're wrong. That's all part of it. And it's collaboration. I think of my friend Larissa, who helped me so much with *Ponyboy*. I had to do a lot of edits, and she was on the phone with me every day, just being like, What if this happened? I think you could do this. You know? And I'm sure I'm insufferable in some ways when I'm editing a book. But luckily I have friends who are down for it and here for it.

Graham: You mean when you're editing too you're also talking to all your friends about the book?

Duncan: Not all of them, but yeah. I have one friend in mind when I'm in the editorial process who I really trust who always helps me. She's in my acknowledgements. She's one of the best editors I've ever met. She really gets it.

Graham: What do you think makes a good editor?

Duncan: She's critical. She's quick. She already foresees the implications of a sentence. Does that make sense? Like, I'll write a sentence: this simple thing happened. And she's like, But actually later on you say this thing, so that contradicts that. She already has the whole manuscript in her head at one time in this way that's sort of startling. She can already anticipate the ripple effects of a sentence in this way that I find astounding. She's also a visual artist, so she has really sort of distinct ideas and can visualize the work in a way I feel like I can't.

Graham: So you've been on both sides of the writing process as a writer and as an editor. How do you approach that relationship? I guess as an editor now.

Duncan: Well, I love editing. I love it so much. I find it so exciting to be involved in somebody's draft, because I know how it feels to be in that vulnerable place, opening up your work to somebody else. So from a starting point, there's a lot of momentum, because I'm just excited somebody's let me in. I'm flattered. Like, Oh you want me to …? I'm like a kid. I'm excited. And it's really cool because so much of editing for me is of course reading it and making line edits, but a lot of editing is just thinking. It's reading the word once and taking the day and thinking it over as you go through your life and then reading it again and thinking more. Giving someone the generosity of your time, I think, is the big thing about being an editor. It's like that Simone Weil quote that love is attention. Being an editor is actually just giving someone really focused attention. And a lot of writers never get that, so to get to do that for somebody feels really special. Because it's what someone did for me before, right? It's that same thing I was saying before about recovery—you just give away the thing that was given to you. Because I don't know. I felt, as a writer, so alone in my work. And I still feel like writing is kind of lonely. So the editing I do is trying to break that up. Because I really enjoy editing. I really enjoy talking to the people I'm editing for, like, an hour on Zoom every day. Like, And then this, and what about this? You know? I love that. So it's a little selfish, because I love doing it. But I think it helps other people too, or at least I hope it does.

Graham: Yeah. I mean that, I really relate to that feeling of the solitary aspect of writing and needing workshops or people to talk with about. It becomes more of a dialogue.

Duncan: Totally. And the dialogue, the material makes really interesting things. I don't know. Maybe there's a way we can be isolated and write. I mean, some people really do just go out in the woods and write their book.

Graham: Well, I guess there are workshops designed for that, where you can go in the summer and sit in a room and just work on a draft.

Duncan: I did one of those. It wasn't super isolated, but I did a residency like that and I was like, I feel like I need to go to the grocery store. I feel like I need to—

Graham: Interact with someone, yeah.

Duncan: I mean, there's a million ways to write, right? Anyone can do it any way. But I've always found the collaborative effort of it is really fun. It's really fun.

Graham: Have you collaborated in a more literal sense? I guess you're collaborating on this workshop.

Duncan: Yeah, and then Slanted House was a lot of collaboration. And then my friend, Marcus Scott Williams, he wrote a book called *Say Less*, which he positioned as a mixtape. And he published a sample of mine in his book. He has a similar approach about it being collaborative. He's prolific, also. He wrote this book called *Sparse Black Whimsy* that's just incredible. And also, I write emails to the writers I like. It's even just my peers, like my friend Casra, for example,

they're a writer I really like, and so I'll just send them a really long email every once in a while saying, This is what I'm reading, this is what I'm thinking about, it reminded me of your work here, it made me think of this. I'm always trying to reach out and engage.

Graham: What are you reading right now that you're excited about?

Duncan: I got this book called *The History of Madness and Civilization*. I forgot the author's name. I rarely read nonfiction. But it's really good. It's interesting because lunacy was already metabolized and integrated in the Church. If you think about saints, they're all sort of lunatics, right? There was already a place for this channeled lunacy to thrive in the Church. So I think about that. I think, Oh yeah, saints were just lunatics. There's that famous Bernini sculpture where Saint Teresa of Avila, she's laying down in ecstasy and her heart is being pierced by the love of God. You know? God's love piercing your heart and pulsing through you intravenously feels like a gorgeous lunacy. So I'm reading that and thinking about that. And then I got the new Robert Gluck, *About Ed*, which I haven't started yet but I'm really excited to read that. What else is on my nightstand? Oh, another book about madness called *Philosophy of Psychotic Thinking*, which I haven't started but looks really good.

Graham: Can you just say a little bit more about your poetry? What are the things you find yourself writing about in your poems?

Duncan: Well, I have a poem coming out soon in this London publication called The Erotic Review. It's a relaunch of an old publication. I have a poem in there called "Aspiring Himbo," which I guess is about wishing I could be a himbo but that I'm fated to maybe be a big thinker instead of wishing I could just be a thoughtless floater. Maybe I'm meant to be really grappling with it and thinking about it. So I try to write poems about things I don't see reflected. Like, this dream of being a himbo, I've never read a poem about that, so I tried to write it. And then I wrote this poem, which maybe you read at Hannah's event or heard me read at Hannah's event, about Henry Miller fucking me. It's an imagined interview where he ends up having sex with me, and the whole interview is me being like, I'm not meant to like you. And then, I don't know, I wrote this poem about "the big him," which is who I'm calling this daddy dom that I was in a relationship with for a really long time. It's about—or at least I think it's about, I don't know if this comes across—freeing myself from pathologizing those types of relationships. And being like, it's not actually—and this is something I think about transsexuality too and also loving power dynamics in relationships—it's actually not subversive or punk or anything. I actually deeply crave normality. And these facets of who I am are actually just naturalized facets of human experience. And to call being trans or call being into BDSM being subversive is to make it something it isn't. That's what I'm trying to say. I don't know. Maybe it came across in the poem. But I don't want to engage in weaponizing therapy-speak to pathologize myself and my desires. That actually being trans is pretty normal. There aren't a ton of us. I think we're—what? —0.7% of the population or something like that in the States? But it's pretty normal to not identify with the gender you were assigned at birth. It's pretty normal to want to engage in power dynamics in your relationships. Right? There's nothing really that weird or subversive about it.

Graham: You're saying that using terms like subversive is actually just further othering people?

Duncan: Yeah, or just that it's something it's not. Like, there are things that are truly subversive, and I just feel like being trans is not. It's actually deeply boring. Like, I'm just a boring, gay man. It's not really interesting. I'm attracted to people's genders. I'm interested in people's genders. But my own gender, I'm like, I don't know, it feels kind of boring, babes. I don't know.

Graham: That actually reminds me of Jane Delynn because in that book [*Leash*], the narrator is really embarrassed, like, Here I am in this situation finally having pretty extreme sex, and my desires are just kind of cliche, I just want the things that everybody else wants.

Duncan: And that, admitting the normalcy in who you are, I think is also a spiritual acceptance. Like, I'm actually not… I mean, there are some people—I'm sure you know people—who are fortified activists who are really subversive and active in this world in a way we really need. I genuinely believe we need everybody. We need them. Me, being a white trans guy who's gay, I don't think I'm very subversive, I just don't. But I just disagree with this idea that being on HRT is biohacking, or it's punk or something. I'm just like, For me, in my lived experience, it's just like I have to take this thing so that I can be at ground level with everybody. It doesn't feel like, Yeah, fuck them! I'm doing this reactionary thing. It feels like, Oh no, this is a spiritual relationship I have with myself, where I know who I am and this thing helps me arrive in a room with my heart open. Because I recently had, like, four weeks without my T—-which I know is normal for some people, but I'm usually really on it—and I just had this really humbling experience where I was like, Whoa, I actually need this. This actually is crucial for me, like I said, for entering a room with my heart open. This thing actually makes me more compassionate and loving and open and embodied. I was on it for so long that I was like, I don't need it. Like, Whatever, I still take T but I don't need it. And I had the humbling experience recently where I was like, Oh yeah, I guess I do need that.

Graham: Yeah, you felt the difference.

Duncan: Oh totally. Totally. So it's sort of that notion of, It's so punk to do HRT, I'm just like, I don't know…

Graham: Well, that's kind of a *Testo Junkie* idea. I'm really drawn to the idea of the auto-guinea pig in that book, I guess, this notion that you can kind of experiment with yourself and you can decide for yourself how to use these tools in order to feel closer to yourself or more at home in yourself.

Duncan: Yeah, they're just tools. I also find it interesting and also boring, in a way … I mean, I think the way Preciado lays it out is not boring. Preciado's book is very exciting. The mix of narrative and theory is so cool. Also, such a clear book.

Graham: You mean ideologically?

Duncan: Yeah, it's just so precise. I kind of lost my thought…

Graham: You said, It's interesting and boring.

Duncan: Ha. Of course I did. No, I don't know. It's interesting and boring. I guess what I'm trying to communicate is—

Graham: The punk, biohacking stuff is, you feel…

Duncan: I guess it's a little played out, maybe. And I guess it resonates for some people, and that's important. But I just feel like being trans is a very normal human experience, like being an addict is a very human experience, like being bipolar, which I am, is a very human experience. Everything I am that I'm meant to think is making me separate, it doesn't. It just affirms my humanness, is all it does. I'm not different from anybody else.

Graham: Great. Maybe we can just stop there.

Duncan: Cool.

Graham: Cool, thank you so much.

Duncan: Thank you, Jay.