

Shiny Object

by Bradley Wester



I changed colors like an exotic bird as I walked up the aisle at my eighth-grade graduation wearing a shimmering, iridescent green Nehru suit, its Mandarin collar not dissimilar to the clerical collarette worn by the priest handing out diplomas. But rather than an ecclesiastical reference, my collar made a counterculture one. The Beatles had recently returned from India with this exotic attire as the ultimate statement in Mod style. It was 1969, and my mother bought the suit with a discount from the boutique department store where she worked selling cosmetics.

I attended a Catholic school in a conservative suburb of New Orleans, where, except for graduation day, I was required to wear a khaki uniform every day for eight

years. The suit finally set me apart, placing me in a rarified space I would attempt to occupy for the rest of my life—a shiny space where I could attract people while keeping them at a safe distance.

My shine obsession may have started with the water, held back by levees, surrounding the below-sea-level city of New Orleans like a mirror, that invisible but foreboding waterline waiting for the next catastrophic storm to bisect and reflect the city and its people. I spent much of my unconscious youthful energy keeping my head above it while looking into its imagined depths in search of myself. The upside-down, unbreathable world inside this water-mirror felt more like home. Out of its depths, I could occasionally rise, watery, reptilian, resplendent, as I did at fourteen in my shiny, iridescent green Nehru suit. A liberating act, which, in my mind, still represents the moment I began to leave conformity behind.

Standard color or pigment absorbs or reflects light waves. In iridescence—what we see as ‘shine’—light waves combine and react, increasing or decreasing vibrancy, then changing hue as the iridescent object moves. This is called ‘interference.’ While no one is certain how iridescence evolved in nature, it’s considered a feature that helps attract sexual partners of the same species. Its structure sheds water and reduces friction—like duck feathers. More recently, biologists have suggested that the alluring effect of iridescence has a purpose beyond mating, that it can also shield against enemies. For example, in the butterfly kingdom, iridescence camouflages its wearer from predators, the strategy to literally dazzle and confuse them.

Humans have adopted similar strategies. In a case of shielding identity, the homosexual closet is a camouflage prison where its occupant exists in public space—overwhelmingly heterosexual space—while remaining effectively invisible: safe from the straight predator. It makes sense that French artists invented early camouflage during World War I, designs to disguise and hide equipment and positions. What percentage of these artists, or ‘camouflage officers,’ were homosexual? Who better at *‘the art of concealing that something is being concealed’* than a closeted homosexual artist? The defining principle: deception.

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For at least four more years at my conservative all-boys Catholic high school, I would have to camouflage, hide in plain sight. I learned to distract my family, fellow students, and teachers with achievements, shiny reflective surfaces in which they could see themselves. For others, my shiny surfaces would dazzle and confuse them, a deflection from what I knew people wouldn't like about me. I drew their likeness; I made good grades; I acted in plays. I stayed in constant motion, a moving target. If my iridescence failed to dazzle and confuse, at least a diversified phalanx of admirers could slow my enemy down while I made my escape.

I was the shortest boy in my freshman year, 4' 11", with dark curly brown hair and blue eyes. He was tall, eventually six feet, with red hair, green eyes, and a prominent nose and jaw—a new standard of beauty, entirely unlike anyone I had known. I saw Liam on the first day of Freshman class at his locker. We slammed our locker doors shut at the same time. He came my way, his walk a kind of rhythmic lope—long, sinuous limbs, the body of a long-distance runner. As he passed, I froze. Our eyes met, and he smiled. I fell instantly in love, a secret I would keep for four long years.

Liam and I joined the marching band during our freshman year. We both played the drums. Handsome in our militaristic uniforms, I got stuck with the cymbals while Liam, one of the guys, a golden boy, became the star drummer. I could never hope to be within his orbit. So I quit band my sophomore year to focus on art and theatre, where I could excel because I couldn't stand being mediocre at anything, especially in front of Liam. By senior year, I had developed my brand of Queer-shine-camouflage so well that I was known and respected by the student body for winning drama awards, placing my cartoons in the school paper, and painting the school mascot on the locker room door. Dazzle. Confuse.

The student body president came by the journalism room to ask my opinion on what we, the class of '73, should leave the school.

"A mural!" I suggested.

Brother Morton, the Principal, approved my Peter Max-inspired abstract design, a milestone for this conservative Catholic boys' school. Then, soon after, Liam came by the

journalism room asking for my help decorating the school cafeteria for the senior band banquet. I could hardly believe he wanted to see me. Then he noticed my mural sketches and showed interest. I got up the courage and suggested a trade.

“Yes, I’d love to help!” he replied.

It started with paint fights, then wrestling on the scaffolding, then a tennis game after we’d worked for hours. When the mural was complete, the tennis continued—Liam picking me up for a game he always won, then stopping at 7-Eleven for a post-game Coke ICEE and brain freeze.

Once, when Liam drove me home after a game, I asked him in, knowing my parents were at work and my kid brother at school. I sat at one end of the den’s corner sectional, and he sat at the other, an ocean of right-angle between us. Finally, he asked who I would take to the senior prom.

I had been dating two girls from two schools who wanted my ring. Janelle went to the all-girls Catholic high. Denise went to the public school for girls. I played one against the other so as not to commit to either. Now that senior year arrived, I would ask one to the ring dance and one to the prom.

“Denise,” I answered Liam. “I’m taking Denise.”

“Do you want to double date?” he asked.

I had secretly and shamefully thought the only reason the beautiful popular Liam and I were friends was that classes had ended, and there were no witnesses. Our double-dating to the prom would send a message and be evidence of my new status. He wanted to double date with me! Then Liam started talking about girls and kissing. Had I ever been French kissed? How far had I gone? My heart sank. This wasn’t a date *with* Liam but a double date with him and his girlfriend. Although privileged to have so intimate a conversation with him, I felt crushed by the unbearable weight of my four years of secret love. I would forever live this lonely life.

“No, I’ve never been French kissed,” I lied. “What’s it like?”

“Well...,” he said. He looked directly at me, considered the best way to elucidate, then stood up and walked over to my side of the couch.

What happened next was a hallucinatory jolt to my senses. I felt volcanoes erupting. Islands forming. Sun settings and sun risings. Sands shifting, snows melting,

waters rushing. Seeds germinating into forests. Lionesses licking cubs. Magnificent birds riding thermals. Bees pollinating flowers opening in fast motion. Grizzly bears fishing the spawning salmon. And whoa...a great white whale breaching. All in the single moment of our tongues touching.

For the first time, I tasted genuine sweetness and grace, the potential of my every utterance, poem, and song. The ecstatic rightness of first love reciprocated, of finally being seen. The instant recognition that nature included my belonging with Liam sent shock waves through my body and triggered an immense and paradoxical release of shame.

I had been lied to. The sin did not exist.

Without a trace of awkwardness, we kissed and held each other like practiced French movie stars. Inexplicably, we proclaimed our love for one another.

Never had I become so enthusiastic about anything or anyone, ignoring the perpetual backdrop of social upheaval in our peripheral vision—the landmark decision of *Roe v. Wade* protecting the right of our sisters and girlfriends to have an abortion and, more relevant to us, the Paris Peace Accords officially ending the war in Vietnam and invalidating my draft number. Even the Watergate scandal at its crescendo didn't matter. I remember Nixon's face as he announced his dismissal of Dean and the resignations of Haldeman and Ehrlichman on Liam's mother's television the day he introduced me to her on April 30, 1973. But my life's focus in every aspect was on Liam, and he wanted me to meet his mother.

Nothing external changed for us. We would take our girlfriends dancing or to a movie, then to Café du Monde in the French Quarter for beignets and coffee. We'd end up at The Point, the end of Breakwater Drive on a spit of land hooking into Lake Pontchartrain, where generations of young lovers went to 'make out' in their cars as brackish waves crashed over the windshield during rough weather. Liam always drove because he had a coveted green 1965 Mustang, and I had an uncool yellow 1969 Opel Kadett. Making out with my girlfriend in his backseat, I would arrange our bodies such that I could view Liam with his girl. It's awful to recall the disembodied feeling of going through the motions with a young woman who wanted nothing more than for me to take it past second base. Our lips locked, her eyes closed in anticipation, mine open and

aslant, the guilt unbearable. Every so often, Liam would meet my eyes in the rearview mirror, silently confirming that in a short time, all would be well and that soon we would be kissing, naked in each other's arms.

Liam's mom had divorced twice and was single again. While kind to me, her sad detachment gave Liam much more privacy and freedom than I had. So, we spent more nights at his place. At my house, we employed a counterintuitive, audacious strategy to flout the idea that there was something shameful to our intimacy. I'd make a point to kiss my parents goodnight in my underwear like I did any other night, as though returning to my room and sleeping with another grown boy in his underwear in a twin bed was an everyday occurrence. But these were only delay tactics.

On the afternoon of my eighteenth birthday, Sunday, June 24, 1973, just a few weeks after graduation, Liam stopped by with my present, a pair of nylon bikini underwear with a bold, all-over, yellow houndstooth pattern. In the privacy of my bedroom, I immediately modeled them for him. My instant hardon, exceeding the waistband, proved the gift's success. Before he left, we made plans for the following weekend.

That evening, after my birthday dinner, I sat with the entire family in the den, secretly wearing my new favorite underwear, when the news came on with a shocking and salacious story: arson at a French Quarter nightclub! TV cameras documenting the disaster scene showed a lamplit New Orleans street corner glistening with firehose water. Sheets covered bodies. Grown men cried. Then the announcer said these words, and you could hear a pin drop: "Police say the bar is a hangout for homosexuals, and homosexuals frequently carry false identification papers, making positive identification of the victims nearly impossible...two eyewitnesses, who would not allow their faces to be shown, told WWL TV newsman Bill Elder it was arson...this is Bruce Hall, CBS News, New Orleans."

The fire occurred on the corner of Iberville and Chartres Streets, less than ten miles from where we lived and just two blocks from where my father worked. The flames engulfed the stairwell and rushed into the club. Over twenty patrons managed to escape through a rear exit leading to the roof, while thirty-two others were trapped inside and burned alive. The Upstairs Lounge arson was the deadliest fire in New Orleans in 200

years and the largest mass killing of gay people ever in the U.S.—that is, until the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016.

I felt the high-beam inner eye of each family member on me, the newscast a nightmare indictment of everything horrible they had suspected about me. In my hand were two pecans I had grabbed from the bowl on the coffee table. Slowly, and with the casualness of cracking a knuckle, I crushed the two nuts together. The sound allowed my family to look at me. I, however, did not look at them. Instead, I indifferently picked a piece of nut flesh from the broken shells and brought it to my mouth, then returned my gaze to the television set with the insouciant boredom of someone who has waited too long to watch “The Sonny and Cher Show.”

The *New Orleans States-Item* paper reported the next day, “... the heat had been so intense, many were cooked together.” Another, “...their bones entangled, seared to the floor.”

“The dead were piled knee-high near the windows in a twisted, charred mass of death—some a few feet from safety,” wrote a *Times-Picayune* reporter.

The most horrible and indelible image printed in the papers after the fire depicted a bar patron’s body, half-in, half-out of the club’s window, scorched and welded to its metal bars. His body’s charred remains were displayed for hours.

Later, the news falsely reported that “the bar was fire-bombed by a vigilante group that has declared war on homosexuals in New Orleans....”

One commentator on a live program sneered, “What do we bury them in? Fruit jars?”

The New Orleans Police Department didn’t acknowledge the fire as arson. Unsolved, the case was closed. The initial suspect, a local hustler known for his incendiary and unstable mental history, was released as unreliable. Yet he had been kicked out of the bar at least once that evening for fighting with customers. On his way out, he allegedly said, “I’m going to burn you all out!”

An unimaginable, annihilating, Queer shine.

This man married some months after the fire, then committed suicide the following year after publicly confessing to the crime on several occasions. His wife confirmed his confession and said their marriage was a sham because he was a homosexual.

When camouflage and shine malfunction.

I kept thinking: The men burned alive are not us. We are not like them. What Liam and I have is beautiful, innocent. Ours is not the depraved, wonton, degenerate lifestyle the media shows us.

Liam and I never discussed the fire.

The following Friday, we double-dated with our girlfriends as planned and ended up in my bed. That morning I woke to the smell of bacon. On Saturday mornings, it was Dad's turn in the kitchen. I nestled my backside in the spoon of Liam's long and graceful still-sleeping body. Heaven. Then I heard the rattle of my bedroom doorknob. Quickly I scrunched as close to the wall as possible, away from Liam. I could sense my father in the room, sneaking toward the bed, where he lifted the covers slowly. My eyes shut, I imagined him looking down at Liam's body in his son's bed, naked but for his white briefs, barely an inch from his son, also bare but for a pair of yellow houndstooth bikini underwear. He gently replaced the covers and backed out of the room. A few minutes later, he knocked on the door to wake us for breakfast.

I responded with confusion and rage. How dare my father steal a look at my near-naked lover. Yet how beautiful we must have looked. But I'm guessing my father had the image of young, burned bodies on his mind. He may have even walked past the fire scene the day after it occurred on his way to the office that previous Monday morning. Were they finally removing the charred remains from the window bars in the early morning light?

I believe it is on that street corner where my relationship with my father remained for the better part of his life. Him facing the worst-case scenario of his son's first-love iridescence, confusing my distinction with my extinction and too cautious to speak of it. Me, standing behind him, facing the opposite direction into the future, resentful of my father's timidity, with an overwhelming desire to burn love bright.

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It took less than a year before Liam ended it full-stop. “We are committing a sin,” he said, “and we’re college men now.” This was a time when homosexual acts were still illegal. The blow was devastating for all my college years, and then some—my surfaces losing their luster the more shine came to resemble shame. It took the courage to come out of the closet, in incremental stages over five years, for my shine to return. And this time, from within, as nature intended.

Postscript:

It would be years before I learned the Upstairs Lounge arsonist’s name: Roger Dale Nunez. Nunez, my mother’s maiden name, and from bayou country near Abbeville—a distant relation! As I write this sentence, I am sitting in a bungalow on La Palma, one of the Spanish Canary volcanic ocean islands off the coast of West Africa, here to write this story in the land of my maternal grandfather’s ancestors. I have recently traced my mother’s family, the Nunez name, to the Canaries when in 1778, my fifth great grandfather, Manuel Felix Nunez De Villavicencio, brought his wife Josefa and his only son Estevan to the swamps of Louisiana. They and 6000 other Canarians were answering the Spanish governor’s request to help protect the New Orleans territory from imminent British invasion. They became known as the Isleños, and the Nunez name became prominent in the swampland of southern Louisiana, a patchwork of bayou communities south of New Orleans hugging the sides of the Mississippi River along its final seventy-mile stretch before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. Roger Dale Nunez rests in a cemetery on the edge of this deep swamp zone.



[Bradley Wester](#) is a [visual artist](#) and [writer](#) who lives in New York and Rhode Island. His visual artwork has been exhibited extensively in New York, other parts of the U.S., and Europe. At MoMA, in conjunction with its “Club 57” exhibition, Wester read “GenderFuck” from his agented manuscript *Artist Underwater*. His story “[Brothers Katrina](#)” won the 2016 Fresher Writing Prize (UK) for Creative Nonfiction. Wester is a contributing art writer for [Filthy Dreams](#) and [WhiteHot Magazine for Contemporary Art](#). Awards include Specialist Fulbright Japan, Visiting Artist American Academy in Rome, two MacDowell Fellowships, a Hermitage Fellow, and a Pollock-Krasner. He’s taught or lectured at RISD, Dartmouth, Tulane, CalArts, and NYU. Wester has also designed sets for “V” formerly known as

Eve Ensler, of *Vagina Monologues* fame, at LaMama, Music Theatre Group, and for producer Mike Nichols.

The image, “*DISCOlored*,” that accompanies “Shiny Object” is a digital photo by the author.