After
Saltpetre has been spent

Sarah Pirrie, 4 July 2025, Larrakia Country, Darwin, Northern Territory

Fourth of July

Independence Day for America, in Darwin, the war games have already commenced as large aircraft warp across the sky. Blisteringly loud, the sound rumbles inside your body, obliterating all conversations, listening, breeze in trees, and birdcalls for mating territory. Walking the wrack, this time around the corner from the East Point cove to Bundilla beach, interrupted by boat ramps, and denominations of sea-activation clubs (Ski, Sail and Trailer Boat). This morning's lapping waves are gently accumulating the event of a few days before. Independence Day for Darwinians invites the liberty of fireworks. On beaches, backyards and suburban roads, a collection of pyrotechnics fills the night with noise, sparkle and hazy bene/violence.

Fireworks are banned nationally, of course. Only they are not for Territory Day. It is a confidence game that evaluates the risk to life and limb, the ability of hospitals and veterinary clinics, the access to the fire brigade water hoses and the clean-up after party crew. Gunpowder and fireworks have the exact origins. Our contemporary love of fireworks blunts our senses between war and peace; a normalisation of what is manufactured for our pleasure and defence. Modern fireworks are a practice drill, a thrilling spectacle of noise and illumination of the night sky.

The first of July in Darwin is within the Larrakia seasonal cycle of Dinidjanggama, with heavy dew, no rain, and no run-off. On the fourth of July, the fireworks, their paper, concrete and plastic detritus reappear on our beaches as rewashed materials left behind three days ago. Plastic capsules that are cylindrical and spherical, or more obviously, plastic black grenades and red helicopter blades, often withstand the force of the explosion and can be found in perfect condition, years later. Ubiquitous to our coastline, these plastic ballistics accumulate over many Territory Days. They have no time stamp and are not accounted for beyond the acute act.

When the fireworks are lit, the explosion tears at the tightly coiled layers of cardboard, which burn and break into smaller pieces. These fragments peel out in spirals and become strewn on the beach as small ruins of their cylindrical structure. On the fourth of July, they appear at the shore edge as saturated brown, strangely alive in their repetition, aligning with mangrove tree bark, similar in colour and shape.

The middle wrackline from a previous higher tide also contains these forms. Time to dry, they have lightened and hardened. The light breeze has dusted them with sand, and they have become bisque-like parchment, entropic in colour if not form.

Concrete Ballast.

Fireworks are packed with explosive chemistry to make colour and form. The cardboard tubing is filled at the base with concrete materials that remain long after the sparkling dissolves in the sky. Small chalk-like plugs act as a weight to allow the firework to stand independently. They are packed as a wet matter that dries to a cylindrical shape with a flat bottom. These forms may be incorrectly classified as a shell or coral on the beach wrackline. Made using sand, they return to the beach, joining locally sedimented coral and sponges.

Cardboard Cylinders

Cylindrical cardboard is the form-giving structure for fireworks. Packed together in bundles or as separate singular actions, they are finished with their decorative banner that combines hyperbolic advertising and tiny print warnings. The psychoanalysis of fireworks names would be a fascinating study. Brands include *Fusion*, *Dominator*, *Greatwall*, and *Dynamite*. Associations are both ancient, origin stories of fireworks from the Chinese Tang and Song Dynasties, popularised through the Ming Dynasty. *Greatwall* fireworks joins popularised contemporary war games –*Star Wars*, *Titan War*, *Machine Wraith*– and geopolitical postering of "big, beautiful wall". The marketing continues with packaged collections from the less expensive three to fifteen-dollar range of *Bumble Bees*, and *666 Satan's Fury*, to the mid-range thirty to ninety *Blow Jobs*, *Ball Breaker*, *Bucket of Fun*, *Bad Neighbour* and *Earthquake Multishot*. Reflecting the real-world geopolitics, expensive one-hundred-dollar-and-counting fireworks include *Peace Keepers Multishot*, *Fusion Mass Detonation* and *Pro-Class Container Load*. As the price increases, so too does the overt military bluster and hypermasculine violence.

Paper Disk

At the top of each firework is a disk of cardboard that threads the fuse and contains the explosive matter. By design or inadvertence, these disks with holes in their centre distinguish themselves along the wrackline as perfect paper coin shapes. The distinct disks play counterpoint to the miniature excavations made by wrack inhabitants. Crab holes are surrounded by circular sand piles, which fabricate the number and proportion of paper coins when viewed in the early morning light.

Daoist storyteller Master Zhuang follows the unending process of change as transformations in energy, shape, life and death1. Walter Benjamin wrote, "perception of similarity is in every case

bound to a flashing up". Saltpetre (Potassium nitrate) and charcoal combine to flash-up a dialectical image that anticipates in the compositionalist wrackline the present by the past.

Funerary Rite

Further along the beach, at regular intervals, where the high tides reach, are burnt remains assembled as a formal point of disposal. To clean up the beaches, the remains are burnt, removed or left to be washed away. Here, the coin offerings are combined with any considerable remains of the assembled firework. Grey and white ashes; ghost states that they dissolve into powder and blow away when touched. In the still air of a Darwin dry season, the remains slowly dissipate, waiting for the next high tide.

1. Idema, W. (2014). The Resurrected Skeleton: From Zhuangzi to Lu Xun. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/idem16504
2. Benjamin, W. (1996). *Selected writings Volume 1 1927-1934*(Vol. 2). Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, P695