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The Mighty Thunderer

A man, long of build, inclines towards the table, casting a shadow over a pile of fragments. His long limbs and features are made for probing, sifting, for discovering, analysing, for extracting meaning. But he is gentle with these fragments. His slender fingers alight on each, lifting it before the light, so that each is illuminated from behind and an image is revealed. They are celluloid fragments. He is in a film archive. One fragment is long enough to thread into the projector beside him. No voice accompanies these images on their journey through the sprockets. He must invent one. And so he begins.

At the age of nine I was encouraged by my parents to learn to play netball for the local Sturt Methodist Church club near where we then lived. At the time, the church was one of the few organisations offering a sense of community to the young families who had moved into the new Housing Trust development on the then outskirts of Adelaide. My father became so caught up on the sidelines during the first match that he investigated becoming a netball coach and umpire.

Over the next ten years he coached and umpired netball for teams wherever we lived: in suburban Adelaide, the industrial city of Port Pirie in the north of the state and the towns in and around the Barossa Valley. In Port Pirie, where we lived for just six months, he had to get special dispensation to be a male umpire for a regional netball carnival held one long weekend. My mother and I still fondly remember the Devils, the local netball team of working class girls with hearts of gold, who wore hot pink and black uniforms and matching chipped nail polish, and smoked cigarettes at half time rather than partake of the more traditional orange sections.

In the Barossa Valley my father was involved in an ongoing battle of wills concerning his netball umpire's whistle. The Valley had six major towns, Kapunda, Eudunda, Tanunda, Angaston, Nuriootpa and Freeling. Each town had six or so Australian Rules football teams and a similar number of netball teams. Each weekend in winter one entire town would move to another to compete. For example, one Saturday morning six football teams and six netball teams and their families and friends would drive from Kapunda to Angaston to compete throughout the entire day. The following weekend, Nuriootpa would come to Kapunda. Cars would be parked all around the footy oval and horns would be beeped every time a goal was scored.

The trouble was that my father insisted on umpiring netball games using the same style of whistle that the football umpires used. The Mighty Thunderer, as it was named, was probably a defiant act of masculinity on his part. He refused to use the more insipid women's whistle with its peeping sound. The problem arose every time he blew his Mighty Thunderer during a netball game: the football match playing on the oval alongside would grind to a halt, thinking it was for them.

The projector's tone changes as the last section of film leaves the transport to be replaced by the white light of the projector bulb. The tall man looks up a moment and loads a DVD into the player. He makes a connection and so does she.

I am not aware of my father having ever written about the world of country netball; maybe there's a handwritten note or the beginnings of a verse still to be found amongst his papers; maybe he just ran out of time. No matter, because I have seen our experiences, our memories, in a film by someone else, who never lived in the Barossa Valley in the 1960s and who I have never met. In the film *Mullet* by Australian filmmaker David Caesar, there is a night-time scene where the prodigal son Mullet, played by Ben Mendelsohn, returns to the local sports fields in the New South Wales town of Gerringong and watches his former girlfriend, played by Susie Porter, as she practises netball for the local team.

That small moment of overhead lights, pooled on the asphalt in the dense dark of a country night; the tough, but vulnerable bare knees; the crash and burn of sandshoed feet landing and twisting on the court's rough surface; the blokes watching anonymously from the dark sidelines. It's all there in its specificity.

This sliver of film was specific to David Caesar's experience of growing up in the Gerringong area, but it was also specific to me growing up 70 kilometres north of Adelaide. And in turn, it was specific to the wider society which produced it.

He looks up, thinks a while. He takes out the black notebook and writes 'an image might represent an entire archive, just as an archive must represent the society which has shucked and hoarded its pieces'. He addresses the empty space, 'How many people here?' Silence. He turns off the light and leaves them for the night.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell (with apologies to Ross Gibson), from a story by Susan Charlton.