

Guido van der Werve Where the Heart Is: the journeys and gestures of Guido van der Werve Amy Sherlock

It is said that as Alexander the Great lay dying, stricken with fever in the halls of conquered Babylon, he made a final request to be buried with his hands outside of his coffin. The people would then know that even a man through whose palms had passed the spoils of empires would leave the world empty handed, just as he had entered it. The cruel inevitability of human fate was not lost on a man who had gone so far and who had achieved so much; implacable death hollows out a lifetime of words and deeds, and all men are equal in the cold ground. I like to think of Alexander looking up at Nebuchadnezzar's fluted ceilings and smiling wryly at this thought.

The story of Alexander the Great forms the epic counterpoint to Guido van der Werve's film *Nummer veertien: Home* (2012), which follows the artist as he swims, bikes and runs seven-and-a-half Ironman triathlons in personal pilgrimage to his favourite composer, Frederic Chopin. Just as Alexander's body never made it back to Macedon, instead coming to rest in the Mediterranean city that bears his name, Chopin, who lived a life exiled from his native Poland, died under the grey skies of Paris, his sister returning his heart to his abandoned hometown at his request. Home is where the heart is, after all. Chopin's heart is purported to lie in the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw, a little more than 1700 kilometres from the Parisian gravestone that bears his name. Both of these mythologised death-bed requests combine aching sentimentality with a hint of slapstick literalism in just the measure favoured by Van der Werve, whose past exploits have included standing alone for 24 cold, lonely hours at the geographic North Pole (*Nummer Negen: The Day I Didn't Turn with the World*, 2007) and walking across (not-so-thin) ice ahead of, and terrifyingly close to, an enormous ice-breaking ship

that looms behind him (*Nummer Acht: Everything Is Going to be Alright*, 2007). The idea of carrying a heart to lay it to rest in home soil is impossibly romantic, but a severed heart in all its bloody, squelchy fleshiness presents a far more grisly reality. Chopin's sister's journey would have been a long one.

Van der Werve makes the journey in reverse, starting from Warsaw, via the composer's home, where he stops to fill a small silver beaker with soil from beneath a chestnut tree. He travels along the empty roads of verdant Mitteleuropa until he arrives at a flower-strewn grave in Paris, where he takes the beaker out of its protective plastic bag and sets it down. The footage of Van der Werve's dogged exertions is interwoven with roving shots of the ancient ruins of Macedon and Babylon, and of the uniform suburbs of a non-descript town that we are told is the Dutch artist's birthplace. These mingled stories unfold to a requiem mass, written by the artist himself, who trained as a classical pianist. (Writing a requiem is a parallel and no less impressive form of exertion than the artist's journey. Mozart, whose *Requiem* was played at Chopin's funeral never managed to complete it, leaving the piece unfinished at his death.)

At its heart, Van der Werve's is a humble and intensely personal gesture executed with an exaggerated and tragi-comic striving for the epic. In pairing himself with Alexander and Chopin — one with no need of a last name for introduction; the other with no need of a first — he gently mocks not only himself and his small-town beginnings, but also mankind's almost ridiculous tendency to mythologise the self, a tendency neatly summarised in the idea of the 'Ironman', with its comic-strip superhero overtones.

Awkward, deliberate interjections of farce prevent us from being swept away in the great swell of pathos in Van der Werve's combined feats. At one point, the artist steps, unscathed, out of the door of suburban terraced house that was partly destroyed by an explosion some frames ago. He is attached to a harness and hoicked gracelessly into the air by a large yellow crane. He hangs, swaying slightly, some

metres above the roof and the heads of the orchestra, which continues to play on the asphalt driveway, in a limp kind of apotheosis. Rather than terrified or beatific, he looks resigned and a little sad. He pulls the front door behind him – twice, to make sure it is properly shut – as he leaves this house that no longer has any windows. And in that second little tug of the door handle there is all the bathos of Kafka, the deadpan delivery of Gregor waking up and realising he has become a giant insect — and in that self-same moment resigning himself to the fact. Kafka's existential angst is there in Van der Werve's oeuvre, in the straight face and the futile gestures. The world keeps turning, even as the artist stands at the North Pole turning against it. Life goes on.

Bas Jan Ader, another Dutch artist to whom Van der Werve has been compared, was lost at sea while attempting to cross the Atlantic in 1975. Ader went into the beyond — as Alexander the Great would have done

when he reached the banks of the Beas River millennia before, had his men not revolted — with no thought of return. But you sense that Van der Werve's project is not about escape, or even the futility of escape. It is about what calls us back: the people that we return to. His epic journey is a tribute not just to a dead genius, but to the unfaltering devotion and love of a sister, which somehow stands as the sum of all of the gestures, major and minor, complicated, pointless, sincere and excessive, which connect us to each other. At one point early in the film he walks across a grassy riverbank with his suit on fire, looking for all the world like the figure on the cover of a certain Pink Floyd album. The name of the album? *Wish You Were Here*.

