

Eulogy

by Olivia Gagan

Elizabeth Wurtzel 1967 ——— 2020



**'My rage is my retinue.
My rage is a filthy velveteen train I drag around with me, carelessly.
It is my ruby tiara.
It is my rainbow and my pot of gold.... My rage is my conscience.
I insist on my right to feel.'**

Elizabeth Wurtzel was an American journalist, lawyer and writer, best known for *Prozac Nation*, her confessional memoir of growing up with chronic depression and being an early user of Prozac after the drug hit the U.S. market in 1987.

Born in New York City in 1967, Wurtzel went to Harvard at 18, by which point she had already spent eight years grappling with what was later diagnosed as bipolar disorder. On graduating, she became pop critic for *The New Yorker* and *New York Magazine*, dated voraciously, and wrote what would become *Prozac Nation*.

Male tales of misspent youth are nothing new. But Wurtzel's chronicles of an angry young woman wrestling with chronic grief was met with both praise and widespread criticism when it was published in 1994.

Wurtzel felt her stories were worth telling, a self-belief that led to outpourings of scorn and resentment from newspaper book reviewers. 'Sylvia Plath with the ego of Madonna,' one critic sneered. Wurtzel took it as a compliment.

She later said: 'I've often felt like I don't need anybody else to be on my side because I'm on my side. I do think that's un-

usual in people, but I think it's especially unusual in women.' And yet this was the person who originally wanted the title of *Prozac Nation* to be 'I Hate Myself and I Want to Die'.

Wurtzel's inconsistencies made her human to some, a subject of ridicule to others. She was acutely aware of her own contradictions. She was furiously smart, yet capable of wild moves. She blew a book advance on a Birkin bag. She stayed living in her apartment after a stalker repeatedly showed up at her doorway.

Prozac Nation inducted Wurtzel in a canon of young, unapologetic female writers who transmuted their pain into prose; only her book came out at a time when conversations around mental illness and antidepressants in the U.S. were still in their infancy.

Women documenting their sexual, emotional, psychological and pharmaceutical misadventures has since become a defining Millennial genre. The success of *Girls*, *Fleabag* and *Animals* all owe something to Wurtzel, who found her audience, two decades earlier, far less receptive.

Nevertheless, she continued to chart each

stage of her life in writing. The publication of her second book, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* coincided with a spiral into cocaine and Ritalin addiction, which became the stuff of her next work, *More, Now, Again: A Memoir of Addiction*.

Her life was full of second, third and fourth acts. At 39, she retrained as a lawyer, passing the New York State Bar in 2010 and specialising in intellectual property law. At 47, she married for the first time.

An unchanging theme was a yearning to understand her relationship with her estranged father. Her first article was published in *Seventeen* magazine when she was 16. It was about Donald Wurtzel, the man she believed to be her parent. One of her final articles was about him too—and how she found out, in the twilight months of her life, that he was not her father at all.

Wurtzel wrote to survive. 'I was born with a mind that is compromised by preternatural unhappiness, and I might have died very young or done very little,' she later wrote. 'Instead, I made a career out of my emotions.'

Elizabeth died in January 2020 of metastatic breast cancer. She was 52.