

The Therapist on Teleology

Excellent question, one for which there is
No simple answer. After eighteen years
Of practice, I've had no two people give
The same account of what it is they want.
One man so patiently explained his life
Would have been better with a bigger penis,
I half agreed with him; another said
He loved his wife, his car, his kids, his job,
But wished his microwave would quiet down—
It kept intoning prophecies and then
Proclaiming them fulfilled in thirty seconds.
In any case, your question brings me back
To early in my practice when a woman,
A secretary, sought me out because
She was afraid. We met for several months.
During our first appointment, she described
The new compulsion that had frightened her:
In the few weeks before she'd come to me,
Whenever she would see a colleague shred
Pieces of paper—notes or old reports,
Receipts or minor confidential files—
She'd wait until the colleague left and then
Race to the trash can, where she would begin
To rifle through it, searching for the scraps.
She'd gather them, as many as she could,
And take them home; there she would reconstruct
Whatever document or note it was,
Taping the pieces to her dinner table.

Most of it was predictably inane
(Memos that needed no response, a temp's
"I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored" penned twenty times
Across the backs of envelopes), but sometimes,
Scattered among the salvaged grocery lists
And scrawled reminders to delouse the dog,
She'd find a private message—dates for trysts,
Fraudulent trusts, that sort of thing—and once,
A short handwritten letter: *Harriet,*
Forgive me. You should take him back. Love, Frank.
I asked her what she thought of when she read
Her compilation. "Nothingness," she said.
"Its grammar, its morphology, its meaning."
She had a way with words. Before she stopped
Scheduling sessions, she described her table.
"Doctor, the surface has become uneven.
Layers of tape and paper have transformed it
Into a motley topographic map
Of secrecy and grief. I run my fingers
Over the ridges and I realize
That every vestige of significance
Will vanish." She had such a way with words.
I ask you, what did *she* want? Evidence
For blackmail? Gossip for her friends? Control?
Or just coherence, something to resist
The dissolutive train of entropy?
I still can't tell you. Nonetheless, I think
Of her disorder—even there the term
Belies itself—and wonder if she might have
Believed there was a single slip of paper,
A message, maybe just one word, that would
Justify all that searching to herself;

And I can picture her across from me,
Nervously shredding a tissue in her hands,
Then cupping and recupping it until
It looked for all the world like a white carnation.