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## **What Does That Mean?**

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After pains and panic, high fever,  
Hospitalized and hooked to tubes,  
I begin to begin to feel better.  
At last I grasp what they're watching for,  
Taking my temperature every four hours.  
They want my fever spikes to stop.  
But this night I fail their test again,  
And the next night too.

On her 4 a.m. rounds a nurse sees me weeping.  
"What's wrong?" she asks. I try to say,  
But I'm ashamed of fear, of hopelessness.  
I tell her "I just can't get better."  
Leaning toward me, pale-eyed, abrupt,  
She asks: "What does that mean to you?"  
"Maybe I'm scared." She persists:  
"Just what does that mean to you?"  
I hush. I know  
That what it means cannot be told  
To a stranger in a rush, a stranger speaking  
Catch-phrases while she casts away  
thermometer shield, strips off the pressure cuff.  
She's needed somewhere else.

I'm stuck in this bed, stalled in a mess  
Of symptoms. I'm distraught by dribbling sphincters,  
By aches, by chills, by memories,  
Night thoughts of grey rooms like this one  
Where I stood, healthy yet helpless, keeping watch.

These tears may mean that I foresee  
Years like my mother's toward the end--  
Dimming eyes, little strokes, episodes of the heart,  
A growing stock of bottles on her bedside table  
Or, do I cry for fear that like my father  
I am due for dialysis, despair?

But no. Just two days more and  
I'm dismissed, ninety-eight point six—recovering,  
A triumph of antibiotics, a happy cliché:  
It's always darkest before the dawn.

Relieved for now, unhooked  
from tubes, continent. Home free.  
For the present, I don't have to be  
My mother's daughter, nor my father's.  
I don't have to be a seer  
Of grim defeats to come. Not now.  
Not for the time being.