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.

Reprieved 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.