



This in-class activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with [C. Dale Young](#) and [Emilia Phillips](#). For more information, please see www.lightboxpoetry.com.

Mysteries of the Body

In his Lightbox interview, poet-physician C. Dale Young describes the many connections he sees between the mysteries of medicine and the mysteries of poetry: “The mysteries are no more profound in medicine than in poetry. I question, and I doubt, and I think.” In this in-class activity, we’ll question, doubt, and think about the realms of knowledge we bring to understand what is mysterious, what is intelligible, and what is inexplicable about the human body.

Part I

Read two poems by C. Dale Young: “Torn” and “Eclipse” out loud as a class. Discuss what you observe in the poems, specifically how the poet (who is a doctor himself) seems to understand the body. What information in the poems comes from observation? What comes from medical knowledge? Where does the language feel sure-footed or factual? How does the speaker of the poem handle things he or she doesn’t know, things the speaker remains uncertain about? What mysteries about the body do you think are implied from these moments?

Part II

Looking at your observations, reflect on what poetry might learn from ways of looking, ways of presenting information, and ways of understanding the body found in medicine. Which of these strategies, narrative or formal, can you see at work in C. Dale Young’s poems? Share these as a class, and be sure to keep a list.

Part III

To enlarge and to challenge our findings, let’s observe the workings of other poems, which also deal with the body’s mysteries. You might choose from the following list, or supplement with others:

[“In the Surgical Theatre” by Dana Levin](#)

[Excerpt from “Cancer Winter” by Marilyn Hacker](#)

[“Reading Ovid at the Plastic Surgeon’s” by Emilia Phillips](#)

[“Hospital Writing Workshop” by Rafael Campo](#)

[“Handy Guide” by Dean Young](#)



As a class or in groups, read these poems out loud and discuss where they feel similar to and where they feel different from the C. Dale Young poems you've read, in terms of how they understand the body and in terms of how they present and explore medical knowledge. What other strategies might you add to the class list?

Part IV

Now, in your notebook, think about what mystifies you about the body. These might be basic questions about the functions of a body (for instance, how is food digested, how do fingernails grow), which you might find an answer to from research, or these might be larger or more complex (the possibilities of gene editing, the ethics of cloning, why some people seem suddenly cured from otherwise incurable diseases). These mysteries could come from your experience with your own body, from your other classes and readings in science, from stories of your family and friends, from the newspaper or TV. To use C. Dale Young's language, what do you "question, doubt, and think" about? Brainstorm some ideas how a poem might begin to address this mystery and how you might take something (a mode of questioning, terminology) from medicine to contend with it.