Poem: Intra-face

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Intra-face
By Ericka Johnson

'Twas three weeks before Christmas
And pretty damn dark
Up north here in Sweden
As I walked through the park.

I was thinking of how
To theoretically base
A medical simulator
And its intra-face;

A tool to teach students
The pelvic exam
With organs and diodes
But no diaphragm.

When doing a study
On how I could teach
I realized the box came
With inserts for each

Type of womb and some ovaries
But even more odd
With a fat pad to mimic
A large woman's bod [y].

Place the thin fat pad
Which came in one piece
Below the abdominal
Skin and – voilà!
You're obese!

It looked like a mouse pad,
Insertable foam
But centimetre thin
And shaped like a dome.

I thought of the women,
Those termed as 'obese'
And thought, it'd take dozens
Of inserts, at least

To model their middles
And properly hide
Their wombs and their ovaries
Deep there inside.'

So I asked the designer
At a factory in Kent
How one little fat pad
Such bulk could represent.

And her answer surprised me.
Quite matter-of-fact,
She explained how the body
Is not so compact.

When fat is kept warm
And enclosed in a space
The cells are real fluid
In movable ways.

And most fat in a woman
Who's been asked to lie
On her back on the table
Slides out of the way.

So the fat pad's a model
Of fat, as it were
When known in the practice
Of examining her.

The pad doesn't simulate
Fat on command.
It simulates
Fat as it's felt by the hands.

And nor is the simulator
A model of bones
Of bodies or organs
It simulates 'known'.

To think all this through
I returned to my books
And to feminist science studies
And its various hooks

I applied the term taken
From Karen Barad
'intra-action' – how objects
are not to be had

But rather are compotes
Both the *hows* and the *whats*
Of the tools used to know them
And discursive cuts.

So the body as modelled
Is not its own 'thing',
Ontologically separate
From medicine's zing

Instead, that same body
Can only be known
Through techniques and instruments.
It can't stand alone.

And when it is modelled
What's placed in that wax
Is the practice of knowing it.
Practises, not facts.

So my point with this fat pad
Is merely to say
When talking of simulators
We have to give way

And think of a body
As a knowledge phenomenon
A product of practice
And what it's been done on.

It isn't the fat that
We're trying to model.
It's how the fat's felt.
How it wiggles and wobbles

And how it behaves
During a specific ordeal.
Not what it might be
But how it might feel.

The body, the doctor
Anatomist, wax
Are entangled and "Intra".
Distinctions are hacks.

To think of the model
As representational
Ignores that its agency
Is really relational.

So instead of an interface
Which connotes units,
With representation

Objectified bits

I posit an 'intra-face'
With contours of doing,
Of knowing the body
And contexts ensuing.

And one implication
This insight might give
Is that medical models
Model the body we live

And the way that our doctors
Or anatomy Profs
Can know what our body is
Requires Philosophs.

The term of validity
Ought to be tossed.
And models realistic
Is another one crossed.

At least till we grapple
With accepting the thought
That both of these terms
Without practise are fraught.

A simulator mimics
The way that we know
It's an intra-face for us.
Now let's hope for some snow...