

OPERATING SYSTEMS

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JOE PAN

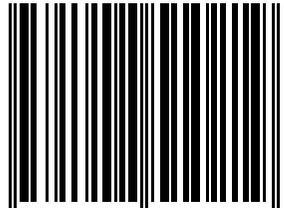
JOE PAN

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Also by Joe Pan

Poetry

The Art Is a Lonely Hunter
Soffritto
Hi c cu ps
Autobiomythography & Gallery

Anthology

Brooklyn Poets Anthology (Co-editor, with Jason Koo)

Operating Systems

V.

Ode to the
MQ-9 Reaper

ODE TO THE MQ-9 REAPER

*Log*OS (circa 2010-2012)*

I.

(I dreamt you up in third grade.) Ultra-cool & promo slick, a predatory dart zip-lining threads of nimbi, unmanned, over darkling continents, your bot-brain a paragon of focus & yet mechanizedly desireless, as self-aware as silverware, & thus incapable of cruelty when delivering laser-guided missiles calibrated to fountain a small bus full of explosives into a contained puff above a crowded marketplace, or slip eel-like through a cave's oculate within the Hindu Kush. Your blurry, thermal aerial view beset with squared crosshairs a rookie war director's owlet dream: oblivious vermin swept up with gestural efficiency from heights that confer the necessary filmic distance of omniscience, as if each strike were a warrant fulfilled by reason abiding divine instruction: Michelangelo's God fist-bumping Adam. Edited & packaged, a select few videoed assaults ship to media outlets as evidence, an impressive staging intent to show a public what humdrum work war's become—locate, track, eviscerate. Replicate. From these spare scenes of bombed & reconfigured wreckages of cars & buildings ghosting though a dusty plume arrives a satisfying vengeance for the loss of Sgt. Elias from *Platoon*, those spry young Wolverines in *Red Dawn*, & my uncle's waking battle dreams (of the Vietnam variety) that go unmentioned in advertisements peddling the mastery of thumb-numbing single-shooter POV games for Xbox & PlayStation as a skill set, with once implausible credits transferable to active military duty. O to be gamers & destroyers, with each ethereal tick a countdown aria to roadside decimation, or the anticipated signal of microwavable pizza—

I'm on YouTube again watching a task force seize a desert outpost, the offal opulence of awful ordinance as witnessed by a documentarian's hand-held, an eye unsteady in its capturing, but never insecure. By firefight an anecdotal oral history begins developing its authors, these servicemen & -women who user-posted comments identify as members of *Generation Kill*. Soldiers passing soccer balls to poor kids an errant attempt to dupe a viewer into moral alliance & engage the heart's surrender, but as the camera goes downrange, the images shiver with heat & a sudden dubstep beat drops its discharge of epinephrine, pumps us for the possibility of a shootout & invasive human plumage: gut-shots,

headshots, *Hajji* hematomas (& never a dead American), the BBC-style coverage devolving into Bang-Bang Club badassery, moments spliced for detachment via destabilizing rapidity. The first tank shot a Globe theatric to begin the operatic picaresque: *Pafghanirag: the Musical*. Ubi sunt & heretofore? *Let the bodies hit the floor*. Dulce et decorum est? *You wanted in and now you're here*. / *Driven by hate, consumed by fear*. The tanks roll in, the tanks roll out. But Reaper, where they cannot go, you can—& suddenly we're Superman! Eye in the sky, womb with a view. You whizz to the rescue, my childhood A.I. dream's apotheosis as *M.Q. Joe*, as a voice narrating the hunt regurgitates post-Towers ideologies—the kind of stuff we get from news sources instead of news—& a superstructure emerges, with themes equating book learnedness with subversive otherness, & might with right, which Heaven atones, advocating our patriotic, righteous will-to-power.

& I get why we heart the hype. Your sleek iBomb design is *haute Apple* adorable: the extended wingspan, the ball turret cam. Viewed full-frontal, Hellfire missiles hang loosely clamped to the horizon of your asterisk body, itself a fusion of X-Wing Fighter & a *Lambda*-class Imperial Shuttle from *Star Wars*, a sexy sort of curvilinear Geek Goddess whose forehead slope recalls the stately dolphin fish, rear propeller the whirr of a rubber-banded planophore. Behold our Indian Springs Sphinx, riddled with weapons. But your work is deadly serious: to split atmospheres & genealogies alike, & do to human beings what bunker busters do to basements. In my child's mind you were precise, able to de-install a dictator as effortlessly as any computer virus, a typed command & *poof*, *democracy*. But the reality is always trickier: while 'bugsplatting' the enemy you also kill civilians, & often, a fact that crass reporters reduce to food metaphor (*in order to make an omelet*) & zealots to allegory (*God makes his omelets with American cheese*), but a truth remains: when targeting al-Qaeda, jihadists, Taliban, ISIS, you snatch the heads off schoolchildren. Actual little kids, with families smothered in radii of blast circles & a bloody sampling of bystanders. The Brookings Institution puts your civilian-to-militant kill ratio in Pakistan at 10:1. Possibly. New America Foundation says 1:6. Maybe. Actual numbers unavailable. I click from collateral damage to Google Maps, satellite zoom to downtown, & comb rooftops for the faintest fraction of your form hovering Ground Zero because I've read you minnow those twin blue columns of memorial light as New York's newest National Guard. I can't help but imagine what future recon missions Cuomo might commission. Will you one day sweep & clear meth labs? Will you whistle just above our neighborhoods, a goodly beat cop who when alerted turns bag snatchers into smatterings of gore a blogged cartoon Giuliani might welcome as graffiti? Or would you just zap terrorists?

& could we as Americans stomach accidents? A collapsed school gym, a Park Slope bar, the IFC, NYU, or BAM? In my dream you spiral slowly overhead in a droning corona of mechanized security, attentive as any parent. Are you the border patrol or the border? In your harmonious hum I hear George Carlin proselytizing on flamethrowers, a confluence of human ingenuity (*How do I throw fire from here—*) & what our culture embraces as a necessary wickedness (*—on people over there?*), as if the bargain struck with sentience was having to fulfill its graver innovations. Will the ramifications of your exploits serve as a parable, or dictate foreign policy? Do robot assassins outstrip the honor of our enemy, or us? This is not, I think, an academic question, unless we really wish to own the role of a global hobgoblin, dining expansively at the expense of others, crematoriums stirring in our cocktails.

II.

As a boy sweating it out in the swampy Florida ruins of the Space Coast, I conceived also the Extreme Frisbee, which when tossed onto a lawn levels a concentric blast horizontally, mowing the yard & thus finishing my chore, an easy circumvention of a nagging task I found torturous in humidity. Would the Air Force be interested in my toy version of the "daisy cutter"? It's unnerving, three decades in the rearview, my easy fascination with destruction. I can't say if it was fed by video games, toons, the assumptive natural tendencies of boys, or incidental fallout from grandparents who worked for NASA at the Cape, where I once met Ronald Reagan during an era of Cold War initiatives—rockets, satellites, weaponry, plutonium payloads; beach protesters' signs reading: *We Want to Grow Not Glow!* At ten I watched the shuttle Challenger craze a curious Y overhead as we paused in playing duck-duck-goose on the school's soccer field, our harmless game made instantly ridiculous, sickening perhaps, to our teachers, though I'd rather imagine our sport as analgesic to the abrupt cracks forming in their logic, a hopeful premonition (even as they instantly foresaw a future of layoffs & foreclosures, ransacked tourism & a raised crime rate, an anti-Oz ushered in by faulty O-rings) of enduring life—which touches me now, resting on this bench in McCarren Park & watching a group of latino kids batting around a diamond, a few of whom might one day serve overseas. In this Spring of uprisings & genocide & war—baseball. A juxtaposition one may enjoy like an itch on the back of the throat. But a better part of living is loving what we have worked & fought for when we can afford the having of it. Some say we fight for this opportunity alone. Others say to fight at all perverts the having. I see the boy pitcher catching the HEAT end of an RPG-7 in a few years, & think, *Play ball. Enjoy this having*. I worry, Reaper, you're nothing but the latest incarnation of defensive bulwark designed to keep our

leaders from having any skin in the game, a flying watchtower for One-Percenters. But that's my irreverence speaking, as it's obvious you were designed primarily as punctuation, a stop-gap for sentences like, "I'm going to plant an atomic bomb (Reaper) in (Reaper) your (Reaper) city." & to keep young adults from shipping out & having to bear the brutal brunt of difficult decisions. But I find the remoteness of your remote control indicative of certain opaque policy makers, a reticence toward disclosure adopted by governments & gatekeepers (fretful as any circus flea-handler) who decide some truths are just too harsh/heady/hairy for a public. Your lofty hands-off approach feeds into that, & I imagine a subsequent generation envisioning war as raining droplets onto water beetles—bloodless because we do not see the blood, effortless because we do not see the effort—and so a simpler thing than the arduous recurring task of engaging in diplomacy. A not-so-futuristic, non-irregular Tuesday: coffee, WiFi iTunes, Netflix *South Park* reruns in an open tab, your successor drone narrowing on its target, requests a confirmation, & is approved by the same sugared finger that seconds ago tested the relative squishiness of two types of jelly donut.

III.

Here's a line announcing a strong desire to reference Blue Oyster Cult in this poem, or pepper in a bit more humor for digestion, but the shitstorm in my head's pushing my levity button sublingual as my mammalian cortex indexes lines for a Codex (disseminating tips on how to better agitate an ulcer) entitled *Driving a Blunt Point Down a Dark Road, With a Wandering Eye for Wildlife & a Certain Recurring Fear*. Dear Reaper, I interrogate to better know aspects of myself, it seems. My inquiry into the meaning of your presence has made for incessant consternation, ineffective sleep, a line by Karl Krauss my rare dreaming's epigraph, "In case of doubt, choose in favor of what is correct." & around me the world becoming a sudden dustbin for metaphors, e.g., these El Beit coffee cups stacked into one another lip-to-lip like largemouth bass of similar size attempting to swallow whole their counterparts, perhaps the symbolic error of my arrogance, choking on a subject more immense than my wheedling could wend; a caricature, an enigmatic reach beyond my grasping. Outside June ferments its special brand of Brooklyn light, summoning dog-walkers & buskers & strollers to the park overlooking the motley chopper barges of the East River & Manhattan's bric-a-brac skyline, & all the stylized lines I've erased in pursuit of you are monumental failings I can't shake, & share with friends over café beers & small plates of chorizo & applesauce, speaking of guilt for having not reached an ethical conclusion of you, as my internal editor broods & kicks, distrustful of poems that approach polemic, & rightly so. I could bend like the palm tree, ruffled

by opposing winds, yet breaking neither way; or play the twin-faced Janus who, given variations on a score, sings a garbled contrapuntal tune. But still each night I return to you, clouded with resentment, the questions I pose echoing as personal indictments: If I accept you as a net positive, must I then accept the death penalty, for which the cohesive moral arguments by either side I find by turns compelling & absurd? When if anytime is absolutism, in law or life, viable? & what of fallibility, stamped on every birth certificate? Is human error error's most humane defense? If war (as the poor) will always be with us (or us), should preemptive forgiveness accompany any loyalty we bestow upon our government, however begrudgingly? Is skepticism our better patriotism? *Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching.*

IV.

The case made for your creation was utilitarian, with a catch. As an instrument sacrificing nothing of itself, you are a tool, Reaper—a dumb bucket of brimstone & nothing more. But in your work there's sacrifice, to be sure. Not the mundane daily forfeits made by people carving out their own identities with virtues like humility & patience—a guile amounting to a certain manufacturing of spirit—but with swift certitude in servitude, sacrificing the lives of others in our name. To deprive war of warfare's casualties (on our side, of course)—its main malignant property (to paraphrase Žižek)—is reiterated as your goal, & yet civilian casualties excluded from military updates discount the lives of victims whose freedom we're told is in part the reason why we fight, no? Surely *liberation* doesn't mean from life. Or are we expected to believe their desire for democracy (if indeed this is desired) denotes a predilection, an implicit willingness, for self-sacrifice in service of a greater good, this devotion somehow empirically antithetical to that of suicide bombers? ๐_๐. #OverheardInDC. To usurp a suffering voice with ventriloquism or shush it with cover-up is the handiwork of dictators, dickheads, & directors of propaganda. A modicum of respect is paid by invoking a revoked life when reporting a victory, losses both targeted & untargeted. Shame is America's great barometer: it lets us know when we've crossed a line. Recall LBJ's reaction to Cronkite's condemnation of troops in Vietnam. We know sacrifice well enough: we've seen our citizens endure batons & hoses, suffer the lunacy of cops & crowds, or the indignity of being unjustly jailed & even murdered in the fierce nonviolent battles of giving of oneself. But what do you relinquish, Reaper? What do we lose by using you? Your advocates serve up spin like hors d'oeuvres—buttery, but with a bitter aftertaste—as detractors clamor eagerly for central space on aggregate news sites, Op-Ed columns marginalized & funneled through the foreign press. Each time you slip across an international

border illegally to snuff a serial killer, the debates erupt, each side tending garden with the unimpeachable words of our forefathers, proven pesticides for fighting any weed or rhizome of rebuke. On the airwaves Senators, Representatives, & talking heads unite to enact a dance of prefabricated sound bites & slogans a Fifties adman might concoct to ameliorate “the befuddled masses,” teaching us where to focus our newly engaged feelings: on the nationalistic *Pride* for our military’s *Ingenuity*; the *Bravery* in making these difficult *Choices*; the *Talent & Teamwork*; the restored *Honor* in having doled out *Justice*. Phrases that imbued with righteous overtones subdue & collapse their subject, trivialize with jargon the power of authentic expression, & with the pompous authority of the politico, attribute a successful campaign to our fighting spirit, heaven-forged & exclusively American. Well firstly, Senator, nice tie. Lieberman called & wants his smirk back. & so we’re clear, I find it slightly fucking irksome to be addressed as a collaborator in some monumental decision in which I had no direct say, & livid because I have a stake. In your speech against the enemy, are we the jurors, or the injured seeking justice? Looking out into the cameras, do you imagine the solemn, braided faces of a million confessors staring back, each troubled by a grief only your full pardon could relieve, being as we share in this responsibility? Do you stick to boilerplate clichés because language is a terminal for vagary & connotation, & our polling preferences remain a known unknown? Even if I shared your plan of action, the rhetoric smacks of self-glorifying punditry, as if you’d commandeered the bomb yourself & rode the goddamn thing to earth like Major Kong. This aint you vs the hippie-dippies, so stop trying to out-man-handle gravitas. One dead Head doesn’t curtail much less abolish a terrorist movement, so let’s talk turkey: the drone tactic of picking off bad guys one by one is feasible but expensive (\$3k/hr); they’re prone to crashes, slip-ups, have a flight hang-time of *Space Jam* Jordan on two days’ rest & methamphetamine, & are practical merely as an application for hunting higher-ups who’ve had their covers blown by errant errand boys—a strategy that relies on runs-walked-in-on-balks to win. If it boils down to body count, Senator, let’s discuss the flimsy bags of foulness: the body, as person, conflux of ideas, protein chains in congregation, a thin material: not the kind we halyard up a pole or drape over a coffin, but a living instance we either value or devalue with our actions. To keep the number of combatants-to-civilians killed out of your podium romp & rhapsody amounts to whitewashing in the name of foreign relations, does it not? (No need to wake the Far Right Czar-side of Karzai.) If ever our leaders & .gov devalue bodies, undermining each our own mind’s dominion, we’ll lend our heart’s ears & eyes elsewhere, to be clued in by what vanguard follows the tag-team comic smackdown of Stewart & Colbert, the nebulous panopticon of WikiLeaks, or the ambitious wave of Anonymous grey-

hat hackers who post their findings online mere ticks after your talk. Transparency is a form of objectivity, & truth a noumenon: by this I mean, we know bias exists, so share your bias, & allow us to judge its worth. We need to know those running our machines are functioning well, as well, & in good service. We need to know that even if wars find us unavoidably involved, as with an attack on our harbors, or a match scratched across Europe, though there may never be consensus, clarity at least will guide our certainty in how we will advance & why & at what cost. Make no mistake, your exploits (grave music) attract songbirds & whistle-blowers: smartphone photojournalists, bloggers on crusade, a child’s text arriving on devices instantaneously. To stubbornly refuse to share with your constituents the hard facts & steer clear from implementing policies marshaling forthrightness, you lose a not-negligible portion of public trust; & find it worthwhile: as popular feedback during election cycles could consign a \$10 million Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) deemed ineffective to the scrap heap. Phrases meant to assuage us, detailing the perils of compromised National Security, would be fair *if* we’d requested preliminary attack coordinates, communication logs, data that endangers operatives, etc., but what most are after is POTUS’ justifications (heavily footnoted), a casualty count, & an honest conversation. Bear in mind what roosts in darkness awakens in darkness. Some folks, unable to parse fact from fiction, feeling resentful, duped, & mishandled, will invest attention, energy, & money in commiserating charlatans who entertain conspiracy & preach a radical, bigoted, insular fascism that fetishizes your failures, Senator. It’s sad to watch such distrust flourish. It frustrates me, upends my mental furniture. When folks demand what lecherous voices demand they demand of you, it will be in equal measure to what they feel you’ve withheld. On all sides, animosity for government grows, the perception being it conceals only to illustrate its power. Evidence itself must be evidenced. Clamoring for graphic images of our own war dead are the people who sought out pics of bin Laden’s corpse (& Saddam’s gallows plunge, captured by a grainy camera phone; & Qaddafi beaten & sodomized & hood-strapped like a deer & driven through the angry streets), if not to placate their own disbelief, momentarily, then to finalize another draft of current history. Perhaps it’s fair to push past tastefulness & ask for images of our fighting dead; those who suggest it could prompt fewer military actions are probably correct, but then expect a surge in websites devoted primarily to gruesome battle porn, with faces recognizable—an unfiltered horror show no PBS documentary by Burns could fully mitigate for mass consumption, nor a le Carré novel stew in its juices, feeding out the pearls. Some things can be engaged but not encapsulated; slip our definitions; shift their natural structures when being observed, making it difficult to weigh the potential outcomes of any approach. Shock wedds us to understanding,

& sometimes mothers empathy (or trauma), & empathy activism, or a paralyzing awe, aware how little we can help. Shock enjoys the lifespan of a fruit fly, empathy the fig wasp, yet pitted in each, abuzz, a plot for ultimate change. If nourished too frequently by either, however, we numb to them. But if left unfed in intervals, we risk fostering conditions for bleak distortions of the soul, the rank solipsism of corruption, fear-mongering, isolationism, genocide. Best I think to arm ourselves with compassion, a word for love's morality, & an activity to be pursued to the point of effortlessness. To share in the suffering of another (our enemy (our idea of our enemy)) gives us a stake in their welfare & survival, our shared breaths & burials. This isn't breaking news. *History is a coroner's cold slab / the rise & fall of nations on display / & though the body is a bloody mess / its examination brings clarity.* So what does it matter what wrapping we box our rationalizations in, or the fingered reason we ribbon our bows about, if peace is the desired end result? & we cannot have peace without understanding. If the other suffers, we must suffer knowing. If it's wrong, we stop.

V.

The soldier relinquishes his body for the greater body. The conscientious objector relinquishes her body for the greater body. The terrorist relinquishes his body for the greater body. The martyr relinquishes her body for the greater body. Reaper, you relinquish nothing but another's body & our name. You respect not & want for nothing, & if by terrible error you misfire, you have no hands for blood to be on.

VI.

When Abraham took his only son Isaac to carry wood up Mount Moriah, which Samaritans (of the good ilk) believe was Mount Gerizim, in the West Bank, to do what his god had commanded, which was to bind his son & slit his throat, for proof of loyalty, it was always easy to imagine the scene as developed for Hollywood, a Warner Brothers production, where the complexities of devotion, split between familial love & a higher purpose, could be played out by actors we admired, whom we knew the studio would never allow to die onscreen, under a purpling sky & thunder & broad orchestral strokes that signaled a grave decision & torment of the spirit. What's more difficult to imagine is how a country father could make that climb up a path of white rock, fig & olive trees arriving in clumps, air smelling of the herbs of his own childhood, perhaps—oregano, thyme—these brambles at his feet, as his son asks, repeatedly, what it is they are planning to sacrifice using all this wood, & having to hold that secret in for the whole duration, which would feel like an

infestation of the brain, knowing the hot knife at his thigh will soon be under his son's chin, the smooth skin found there, & that he will have to puncture or slit or in some way force this tool into this boy in a manner that would bleed him out like a goat, not yet knowing some force will stop him, knowing only that to do this he must prepare himself, empty himself of feeling & so become that tool of his lord, given to the invisible hand, & sacrifice himself in order to sacrifice his son. & what child, tucked under the covers, listening as their own father reads this bedtime story to them from a book opened many times before, doesn't imagine themselves Isaac?

VII.

Recently, among the industrial vestiges of Bushwick, I found myself in a white box some entrepreneurial do-it-yourselfers had carved into an art gallery, & found mixed in with the post-grad work informed by the subtle forms of Lin & Beuys, the hard-wrought whimsicalness of Anderson & Baldessari, two flat screen TVs hanging side by side on the wall, where I watched a fluttering arthropod buzz onlookers in McCarren Park as the other screen detailed its aerial imaging as layered onto a satellite view of Google Maps. As chance would have it, the artist was there & gave me a rundown of his work. *I saw this in a dream*, I said, feeling slightly ridiculous. *Me too*, he said. *I'm intrigued by drones*, I said. *It's all that I can think of*, he said. The drone was strung above us, its articulated exoskeleton & elbow cameras not quite so menacing in repose. Onscreen we watched it wobble along a swarming path remotely set by iPhone. *It won't need you soon*, I said. *That's the point*, he replied. *How long did it take to design?* I asked. *It's a kit*, he said. *You can buy your own online*. I told him of this poem, how in using a received form, an irregular ode (which I've wrecked) to receive your form, I'd moved beyond a place of comfort & the sonic permutations of lyric wanderlust I usually trust to gather what it grows, & into a mode of formal speculation. *These things will do that to you*, he said, as if I were hard-wired to follow tension to intention. *Why just last week a company approached me asking if I could outfit this thing with a thermal cam.*

VIII.

The Terra Wasp. The Aqua Wasp. The Gnat. The Raven. The Fire Scout. The Dragon Eye. The DarkStar. The Desert Hawks. The Gray Eagle. The Global Hawk. The Hunter. The Sentinel. The Prowler. The Shadow. The Predator. The Reaper. The Avengers.

sbhbbbbb

The Terra Wasp. The Aqua Wasp. The Gnat. The Raven. The Fire Scout. The Dragon Eye. The DarkStar. The Desert Hawks. The Gray Eagle. The Global Hawk. The Hunter. The Sentinel. The Prowler. The Shadow. The Predator. The Reaper. The Avengers.

qua patet orbis—
dehydrated wreaths on rose-
water-colored sand.

The Terra Wasp. The Aqua Wasp. The Gnat. The Raven. The Fire Scout. The Dragon Eye. The DarkStar. The Desert Hawks. The Gray Eagle. The Global Hawk. The Hunter. The Sentinel. The Prowler. The Shadow. The Predator. The Reaper. The Avengers.

The avatar will enter the theater	(The geek test egg)
a theater: trawler of heaven,	(The punk egret)
Shakespearean thug.	(Ghastly went the twerp)

The Terra Wasp. The Aqua Wasp. The Gnat. The Raven. The Fire Scout. The Dragon Eye. The DarkStar. The Desert Hawks. The Gray Eagle. The Global Hawk. The Hunter. The Sentinel. The Prowler. The Shadow. The Predator. The Reaper. The Avengers.

IX.

The line “(Ghastly went the twerp)” was first conceived as “(Petty wrath, this length of West),” among other improbable incarnations, plus or minus a few switched-out letters; ultimately I chose the former to fit an evolving characterization of you as unexpected bird of prey. Treating the historical list of drones as layered anagram was just another attempt to chip you from stone, a time-intensive experiment to hone (home) in on the idea of you using a formal device of creative constraint not unlike meter, or a Matthew Barney bungee chord. & if by certain measures it fails, I’ll accept that. But let it be a failure with transparency: here are my word choices, here a soliloquy trope that allows for this presence of mind, the delights & false turns I’ve made, the frictions & fractious phrasing & varying musics. & this stanza of *Kora in Hell-ish* afterthoughts is part of that. Relationships need their breathers,

their steps back, in order to assess what has been achieved, what is still at stake; it’s exhausting, this swarm technique I’ve employed to both encapsulate & out you. I’ve heard *Moby-Dick* described as Melville’s own attempt to capture in language the whale’s essential ‘thingness’—fleeting form, elusive essence—by framing events preceding & surrounding its hunt, its hunters’ histories, & the industry relying upon its animal fats & oils. We get a minor telling of its impact, & sense the authorial hand creeping in at the sides. He divulges the secrets of its anatomy, charts its behavior in an attempt to elucidate a nature, collects salty anecdotes & myths to better keep it buoyed about a surface of referential symbolism. & still the whale evades totality; the trap is tripped but nothing caught. Where in a whale exists a whale? What core thingness among parts? If not a sum of facts & traits & qualia, if irreducible to cross-section, if un-pin-down-able by narrative, imagistic, or lexical triangulation, then how does one account for it? It is a phantom object: the closer you look, the less you see. Melville must have enjoyed the slip of it, lurching at so many angles. *Gospel of Ishmael*, *Book of Second Job*, a testament concerning a depleted man conspiring to kill what he cannot capture nor contain: not a physical Leviathan, but a bitter logic of injustice & vengeance trafficking within. Had Ahab early on harpooned his psyche’s cachalot, wrenched the jaw from it, flensed & minced it & laid it bare before maritime birds who’d take it in their gullets & disperse, his crew & himself might have lived longer, but then we’d be left with no lesson by which to mark our moral lives, which shows the truer whale for which Melville used Ahab as the bait, & for which I use Melville, so that a discussion might invoke possession, & the impossibility of possessing you. & I say it aloud to myself, & say it another way, that language is mere iron fillings betraying a magnetic field, exposing one aspect of a thing (a force) by its properties. I desire but will never hold the atomic fact of you in my brain. You are too quick & I lack the stamina, the knowledge, the knowhow. I use imperfect tools. In the end I have just myself alone in a room with words & images, & hope of their effectiveness.

To begin with this:

Writ into its programming a complex theory of the heavens & the earth, & a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that the Reaper in its own self was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; whose mysteries not even itself could read.

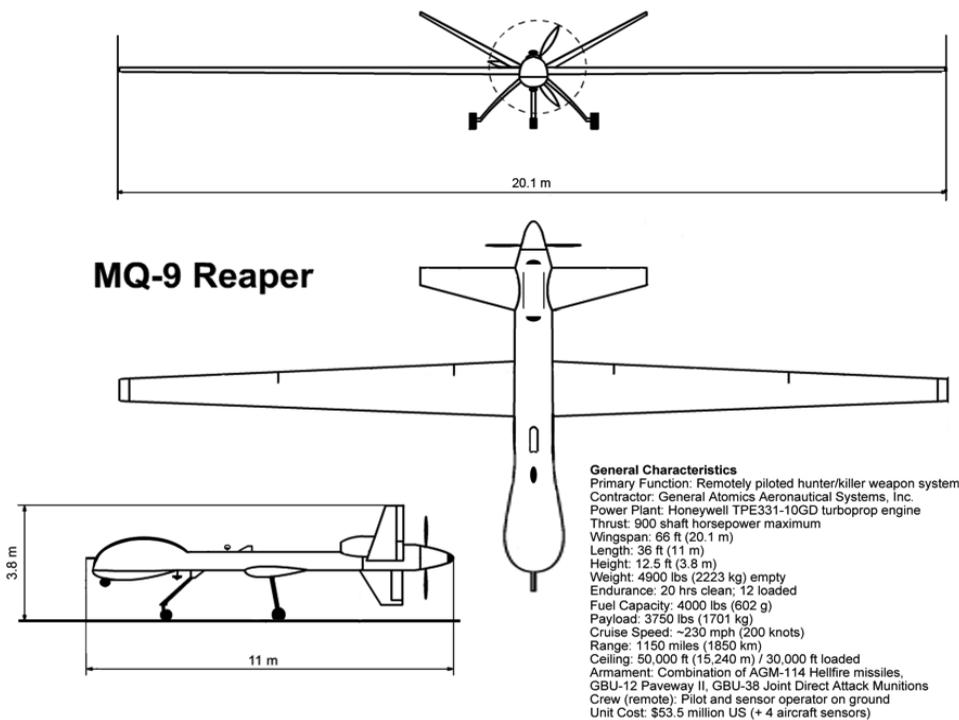
mindful of my own biases & beliefs:

This is what you've been shaped for, Reaper! to chase these white whales, for both sides of man, & under all sides of earth, until they spout black blood for Rolls, Infiniti, Audi.

while altogether trying to avoid this:

All that most maddens & torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews & cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life & thought; all evil, to crazy Me [Your Humble Investigator] were visibly personified, & made practically assailable in the Reaper. He piled upon the Reaper's white hump the sum of all general rage & hate felt by his whole race from earliest ancestors down; & then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his fucking hot heart's shell upon it.

X. General Characteristics of the MQ-9 Reaper Drone



XI.

Personality strikes target specific high-level individuals. *Signature* strikes are strikes against suspicious confluences of people (suspected terrorists, sympathizers, training camps) based on vague factors like age & location. The bulk of strikes are Signatures. *Disruption* strikes are “crowd kill” Signature strikes operating with direct evidence of a threat to national security. For each type there is no opportunity for surrender. There is no due process. The dewdrop world is but a dewdrop world. & yet. & yet.

XII.

To realize the air purifier I've recently purchased to cleanse my house of dust particles comes from the same company (Honeywell) that designed your turboprop engine: Factory 1: Remotely piloted hunter/killer weapon. Factory 2: Relief for asthmatics.

XIII.

A poet-teacher of mine rolled in late for class once & sat, hands folded on the table we all shared, looking out upon us as if we were each Persephone in her garden, victims of a future kidnapping, & said, 'I've just read we're making nuclear weapons small enough to fit in suitcases. If there was ever a time to be arrested in protest, this is it.' & we each, separately & in unconscious unison, almost imperceptibly, did not move. Befuddled by the unreality of the news & our mentor's expectations, we weighed the pros & cons of sudden activism, anticipating an impulsive flash of filial courage even as we prayed for a collective cooling. Instead, dawdling & nodding agreeably, we opted out, dragging our naked helium heads from a smoggy cloud-cover of disgrace to embark upon the lessons of the day, of which there were many.

This anecdote became the sort of chilly nugget I'd drop in a breakfast of bourbon after pulling an all-nighter trying to fashion from a complex idea ten pure syllables of poetry, & forego the snap of sleep for slow evaporation, having failed to seize the throated moment at its inspired impetus many hours earlier. Being a disciple of impulse & self-fulfilling prophecies—the sparks of revolution, I imagined—my failures left me feeling low, if not absolutely gutted. I'd chide myself for having resorted to bibliomancy of the classics (kernels of ideas I'd pot & shake over a blue flame) & crude word-pilfering from peers & websites (whose users coined ad hoc lexicons for instantaneous appropriation, riffed-off & punned-on by others, each an arbiter of a living language) instead of relying on my own

internal devices: Mini-Hadron Connotation Collider, Hubble Logoscope. What gain was had trying to perfect a minor line? What readership lost or won? What impact? What decisive battle undercut in having not marched on the state capitol building that day to jerk a headline from some field reporter? Did I really lack initiative, or was it that I'm naturally skeptical of secondary sources? Had my crafting, the back & forth internal squabbling, sucked the marrow from a healthy, living organism? Did they ever make those goddamn suitcase bombs?

Atomic facts. How much of me, reduced, molecules rearranged, would constitute what percentage of you? If we are locked together in this natural world, of the same matter, am I responsible for your every aspect? I can't accept it. I couldn't sleep or eat an egg. I rely on borders, distinctions that separate. & yet I feel the friction of your movement. Any theory of surface contains an idea of edges, ends & beginnings, interference, commingling, restraint, subversion, how things touch & where. But here you are, albeit chemical, catapulting what amounts to lightning through my cell walls, & my imagination runs.

Any theory of surface depends upon which side of it you're on. I could sit here skipping stones all day. Or I could watch the flat side of some altogether alien subject collapse my sky in brilliant fashion, one realized blip at a time, until finally lowering to my closer investigation. Humans are surface in that we're both barrier & brane: a sovereign fortress of rectitude, when at defense; when carefree, about as permeable as rhubarb pie. When we are deep, we are as deep as what is there. *And nothing can exist except what's there.* But of course we're deeper than that, more than our reality, more than experiential filtration systems, materialism sifting through media. More than a sum of systems. My idea of you will always be more summary than sum, Reaper, even as I systematically uncoil the looping layers holding you intact, because you are the layers, & the intactness, & my desire to see you differently. I am conscious of this & yet persevere into possible idiocy. If you contain a spirit, it's our shared imagination. (Plump porcupine.) & you our Caliban: half demon heart, half twangling instrument of empire.

Consciousness exists, meaning the universe accounts for it, & so may use us, its fallible stumblebumps, to better understand its own workings, in accumulative degrees; not some five-deck shoe of blackjack arranged to perplex the number counters, but a system unfinished, which a mode of sci-fi expressionism might one day examine & illustrate. To better understand itself, the mind revisits itself in memory. The college of correlatives, where we learn of interconnectivity. The mnemonic consulate, where we work each day at failing better. This is one understanding of progress—the arboreal

dendrite in bloom, flowering receptors to receive at the synapse a radiant charge (which changes everything (shockwaves (of intelligence))). The desire for an apple, the apple in my hand. But before that, like a child's desire, the reach for what it cannot grasp. Then the grasping. To be or to be better at, & try not to be better at being worse. The memory of that learning. To better understand its own workings, the poem revisits itself through language. The impartial eye & itinerant image, how they syrup through each other's fingers, clinging each to each but never caught. How rhythm is both a wave & a trellis. How momentum expands a moment. How interruption & imperfections can tango & twist a critical mind from contempt to contemporary. How mutually exclusive ideas can intermingle in a single line without genuinely coalescing, & then in the memory genuinely coalesce. To better understand his own workings, the poet works. The blank page is a plank as thick as his world, a baseline of knowledge he'll challenge to undermine. He wets & warps it, testing for weakness. The final form is unforeseeable, a boat or a rod, or a powder keg; he's probably just ruining wood. But it's good work, & the more he works at it, the better the bender. His travels are varied—Tokyo; his tinker's heart; as far as the neighborhood bar. He studies the work of other woodwarpers, wonders over his own porous specimen. A pale sort of thing. Mostly space, at a molecular level. He never knew he knew so very little. With one plank bent he grabs another. As big as his world, but now a bit bigger. The worries of work are rejuvenating. They ready him...for more work.

What infestation is music in language? It says all the time what I don't mean to want, & better. & concentrating on you has me staring at blue until all I can see now is yellow. When the youngling woodpecker first hammers its head into a tree, does it fear it's lost its mind?

I was reading Auden when the second war with Iraq broke out. Come a year later, *September 1* was everywhere on August 29th. *Imperialism's face / And the international wrong.* My friend J—— came by & we walked with the protesters up Seventh Avenue, a thousand flag-draped coffins tracking hundreds of thousands of demonstrators toward Madison Square Garden, where the Republican National Convention had set up shop, & where on its steps well-suited clusters of our ideological opposites (our organizers assured us) watched in muted ceremony as the polychromatic orgy of hordes passed by, trumpeting their pains & grievances & tacking their secular Theses of Demands to every eardrum in earshot. But even in that wash of unity there was infighting, bickering, bad-mouthing, brutes. We were as wary of each other as we were of them, & they were of us; our joined voices a loose architecture, a toupee the wind kept disheveling. As the crowd dispersed with calls for a socialist

paradise or a centrist uprising, & the catcalls of bankers who'd ruin us later, J— & I kept walking all the way up to Central Park, to sit on the gray slope of Umpire Rock overlooking the baseball fields, & discuss it all. *Was this for anything?* was the question, & I had within me Auden & the memory of that class some two years earlier, & figured yes, it was necessary, even as gesture or performance, because it was if nothing else good work. *All I have is a voice*. “But what purpose does it serve if it's just a party?” asked J—. Reaffirmation. A reminder of the work that came before us. Of our own work. *From the conservative dark / Into the ethical life*. Those that came came together to oppose a stupid war & unethical governing, spies & liars, & even if we didn't agree on everything, we agreed on that. *May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust, / Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair, / Show an affirming flame*. Earlier that day we'd been asked to carry a casket & declined. I wanted to be free to wander. My friend felt a deep distrust of forming any particular alliances, saying we should own our own perspectives, informed by separate experience, & gather with those differences in mind. We left the boulder & headed for the West Village, hungry & silent as we traced the fleeting afternoon to its darker avenues, alone & not alone, & passed by 52nd Street, where in 1939 a British expat sat down in a dive bar & scribbled out, not a call to action, but some observations on the horrid state of things; stealing glances at the other patrons; finding in the mirror behind green alcohol bottles the smooth, pensive face *Life* captured before it broke into waterfall; self-exiled from fame & its devotees; a lover gone to California; & trying to drink through an internal argument, he came up with this: *We must love one another or die*. & there you have it: a 32-year-old's stab at encroaching fascism, sounding more like a borrowed Beatles pick-up line, or a verse a precocious schoolboy might have penned, frustrated when other notes he sent his heart's desire met only with cheery ambivalence. *We must love one another or die*. It rings simplistic—the antidote for a threatening infection being the hope it heals itself under a bandage of utopic, willed camaraderie; as if Nazis slaughtered for lack of this. But the urgency behind the message feels genuine, & the dread that powers a powerless individual to shake low-hanging fruit from a wilting How-the-Fuck-Can-I-Stop-This tree may revitalize a desperate congregation. It's the antithesis of trying to unring the bell of war with a few diplomatic lines that act as apolitical earplugs. But even so, this plea for harmony was weirdly tardy: the storm had already begun. The question was, what to do next? Should America get involved? Form a coalition? Arrange a summit with the Germans? In this the poem is modest, as poetry is an inquisitive art, lest one forget, & to supply each question posed with an ultimate answer doesn't mean the poem is finished, just that the poet is. Finished. So Auden, though perhaps unnerved that his adopted American kin appeared content to

drink away their relatively small concerns the very day Germany invaded Poland, stopped short of saying they should rise to the political demands of the occasion, or grow a global superego. After scouting the bar's bleak-bank of depressives, whom he counted himself among, I'd bet, he found *Lost in a haunted wood / Children afraid of the night / Who have never been happy or good*. Some might argue he soured to our species, but in the poem's snowballing antipathy & verbal antagonisms tallying our faults lies the poet's true challenge—that of capturing competing ideas in cognitive dissonance, & to test & augment his findings, keeping what resonates. No Bible tract but a sparring interaction, the fevered theater of a mind unsure of its own footing. To make an open case for war might have proven unforgivable, if only to himself; but to disregard a land-grabbing psychopath would be viewed, at best, as a clarion call for his supporters & detractors alike to roll up their sleeves. Confronted with blind alleys, the poet drove the moment inward, afraid & resentful of the fear, so he might tease from his own uncertainty what troubled him of Power & the pain inflicted in its pursuit. This mapping of the atmosphere sent his brain pinballing into buttresses supporting the more incendiary claim that we were not all in it together. Together in our wickedness & decency. Together in our shared reliance on one another, which amounts to shared responsibility. & so he left the reader to the dictates of her own conscience when determining what battlefields materialized from the page, the only certainty being that in navigating this model of a model world, one is never alone. & though over the years Auden altered this poem, calling it his worst, banning it from collections & anthologies because it felt dishonest, unfinished, unclear, it mattered very much to me—munching a slice from Joe's Pizza on Carmine Street, the dream of Camus' solidarity also eking its way in there between the peppercorn & basil, the salts & oils, people-watching through the open window & wondering if struggle is our human glue, & if we build our culture largely the way we build ourselves, by wrestling with opposing views, even if some matches last a lifetime. The poem itself wasn't the protest. The walk down Seventh Avenue wasn't the protest. Our lives were the protest. Our galactic imperative of forward movement, our synapse songs & the good-work process of woodwarping. We will love without being told to. We will face our struggles & die.

XIV.

During the process of writing this last section, while my wife & I slept in the back room, someone crawled through the front window of our home (I can imagine him moving the garbage bins, smothering his smoke, slowly raising the window & in a sudden leap to his stomach, emptying himself into our lives) & stole among

other things my computer. In my living room for maybe forty seconds, listening for my stirrings, & gone. & I know that if he (assuming it was a he) had made his way to my bedroom, with whatever intentions, & I had woken to find him there, I would have, I am sure of this, used the hunting knife I keep nearby to take from this stranger first what I would have been sure he was there to take from me.

(If by some means I'd been forewarned of his intent to break in &/or do me harm, would I have been justified in preemptively storming his house & murdering him? & what about his family, in order to eliminate all possibility of witness or retaliation, the Hatfield & McCoy strategy of mutual annihilation? Any offensive form of citizen self-defense (premeditated) is an indefensible offense, punishable by law—yet somehow acceptable if carried out by our military in a foreign land. & if it slips beyond the allotted time-frame, or leaks its secrets, we'll call it war. At my most cynical I'd say whoever attacks us gifts us a new opportunity to extend ourselves.)

But then, following the fracture: forgiveness. After weeks of piecing together what was lost, (what remains irretrievable: unsaved portions of this poem, partly memorized; the sense of our safety in this place) the fear & piss gave way, opening a space for reconstruction: parsing what was manageable & not, what could be mended or not, replenished or let go. Forgiveness is not forgetting, in my experience; it is an active occurrence of memory, to be reassessed in recollection. In this way, forgiveness is not a conclusion but an ongoing effort. & it is difficult, like any exercise, because it must again tear, like a muscle, what it aims to strengthen.

& here I forgive my intruder again. I'm no guard of moral decency, Reaper. In hounding you I've slobbered & frothed, chased my own tail, left a few nasty mistakes. & whenever the desire to excoriate & repudiate you finds another climax, I must reassess: today in Yemen, our "uneasy ally," 100 soldiers marching in a parade were undone by a single suicide. On YouTube a blue stampede of uniforms rushes from the bodies, & I think, if we are not the world police, we can at least be a global sibling. How do we fight this? Education, trade, lending, community building, construction, job training—it all takes time & costs run high in both money & blood. Without reform, the region faces dictatorial theocracy. But when their children grow, how will they remember this era, us, our actions? Our imprint should be small & productive. But for now, a Band-Aid: a quick track & flyby, & while you're out, snap us some close-ups of Socotra Island, that place looks crazy beautiful.

Reassess. I couldn't even keep the last sentence snark-free. Is the question, finally, what we choose to invest in, education or security? Reassess. An unrealistic

goal should be our pursuit—a march toward imperfect instances. & when you fail, we must reassess your worth. They will not forget us; who knows what will be forgiven. Re-assess. Abdul-Rahman al-Awlaki for Anwar al-Awlaki. Reassess. Marine Staff Sergeant Jeremy Smith & Navy Hospitalman Ben Rast for Fahd al-Quso. Reassess. Warnings that children might be present, disregarded by our officers. Reassess. Little Fatima of Egypt, split by the Hellfire Romeo that killed Mustafa Abu al-Yazid. & here I forgive my intruder again. & flowering in me a stance tomorrow may crush.

But it's tomorrow, & it hasn't.

I speak from one side of a gulf, the side with power, the side kept safe. I believe you save lives, in that, for a time, you can hamper the options of our enemies. I believe you will be with us a long time to come. I believe you've made the future borderless. I believe those lacking power will gain power through you. I believe you will be used to terrorize us. I see no way around it.

"Right now, for about the cost of an iPad, a person could buy a used Parrot AR Drone, a radio-control 2.4GHz receiver, and a WiFi Yellowjacket, get a Ubiquiti PowerAP N router for the distance, a cloverleaf antennae, pack it with a small amount of explosives & hover it up to any floor of the UN you wanted. & you can do that from, hell, Roosevelt Island? Maybe even Gantry Park? You don't even have to be in Manhattan."

"But people have been flying toy helicopters for years & I've never heard of anything like that happening."

"We're in the infancy of this thing. Wait 'til these get faster & more stable. Wait until you've got a thrust-vectoring jet or quadrotor some 15-year-old maps out the specs for & posts online. You put a GPS onboard, set a timer, hide it on a rooftop, & drive to Maine for lobster & an alibi."

"& we'll retaliate. Go make a thing a nothing & call it peace."
"We don't even call it that anymore."

Thanks, online forum hobbyist. Let's go make coffee for the FBI.

XV.

& so, Reaper, after a year of watching you become our go-to weapon, our Big Gun, & as news of your travels travel & make news, on NPR, in the glossy covers of major magazines, after you were infected by your first virus, after Occupy Washington staged a rally outside General Atomics in DC, & as Iran decodes your captured

sibling & scientists construct out of your ethos a robot hummingbird, I confess to finding in your present work no clear instance of what should be our greater plan— security in service of serenity. Not for dominance or disdain. Not for justice pursuing vengeance. Not for negotiating leverage. Not for show of power. Not for one & killing twenty. Not for not for. If poetry is news that stays news, I would rather this poem follow you headlong into obscurity, where you as the transfixed object & my words as what-will-suffice greet each other at a point of detonation above a thin, horizontal path to yield culturally & historically all the raw accumulative power of a hiccup.

If

not, others will be along to bind you with law & word. Other watchers. Other woodwarpers. I see no real end to our progressive ropes.

It is raining on a Sunday.

Children in flip-flops splash each other in puddles. My wife is playing the tongue drum I bought for her birthday. Outside my window, a lone gull of no consequence. Then gray, empty sky. No small luxury. We should get to the market before it closes.

ODE TO THE MQ-9 REAPER

When I first began this piece, there was a major shortage of media reporting on drones. I relied upon a handful of journalists (a few of whom I reached out to) whose investigative work helped guide my thoughts regarding unmanned aerial vehicles, specifically: Scott Shane, Mark Mazzetti, Eric Schmitt, C. J. Chivers, Michael D Shear, James Risen, Christopher Drew, Jo Becker, Glen Greenwald, Jefferson Morley, Myra MacDonald, Michael Hastings, & photographer Noor Behram. A summary I wrote on the process of creating this poem, offering further explanation as to its origins, is available in *Epiphany Magazine's* 2013 War Issue, in which this work first appeared.

“Ubi sunt” is short for “Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?” (“Where are those who were here before us?”). “Dulce et decorum est” is the title of an anti-war poem by Wilfred Owen, written in direct confrontation to Horace’s “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” (“It is sweet & proper to die for one’s country”). “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor” is a song by Drowning Pool, once used by American troops in Iraq & Afghanistan to psyche themselves up before heading out on their daily missions. The Slavoj Žižek paraphrase arrives from his essay “Passion: Regular or Decaf,” & stands along with other comments made by him in various interviews. *Kora in Hell* is a hybrid work by William Carlos Williams. The three stanzas ending part IX are revamped paragraphs from *Moby-Dick*. The image used in part X owes its initial form to an anonymous poster on Reddit; I updated the info & altered the image for my needs. The poet-teacher in part XIII is the poet Robert Hass. This section also owes a good deal to poets Robert Browning, W.H. Auden, & Jorie Graham. Anwar al-Awlaki, Fahd al-Quso, & Mustafa Abu al-Yazid were each high-level al-Qaeda militants killed by UAVs; killed also by UAVs were Marine Staff Sergeant Jeremy Smith & Navy Hospitalman Ben Rast, as well as a young girl named Fatima along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, as documented by photographer Noor Behram. The Parrot AR was the most popular quadcopter on the market at the time of this writing. The “thin, horizontal path” in the final section is a play off a John Ashbery line from his poem “What is Poetry?”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOE PAN is the author of the poetry collections *Operating Systems*, *The Art Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Soffritto*, *Hi c u ps*, and *Autobiomythography & Gallery*—five books in an ongoing series of autobiomythographies. He served as co-editor of the best-selling *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*, and his work has appeared in such venues as the *Boston Review*, *Hyperallergic*, *The New York Times*, and *The Philadelphia Review of Books*. He is publisher and editor-in-chief of Brooklyn Arts Press, an independent publishing house honored in 2016 with a National Book Award win in Poetry, as well as serving as the publisher of Augury Books, and is the founder of the services-oriented activist group Brooklyn Artists Helping.