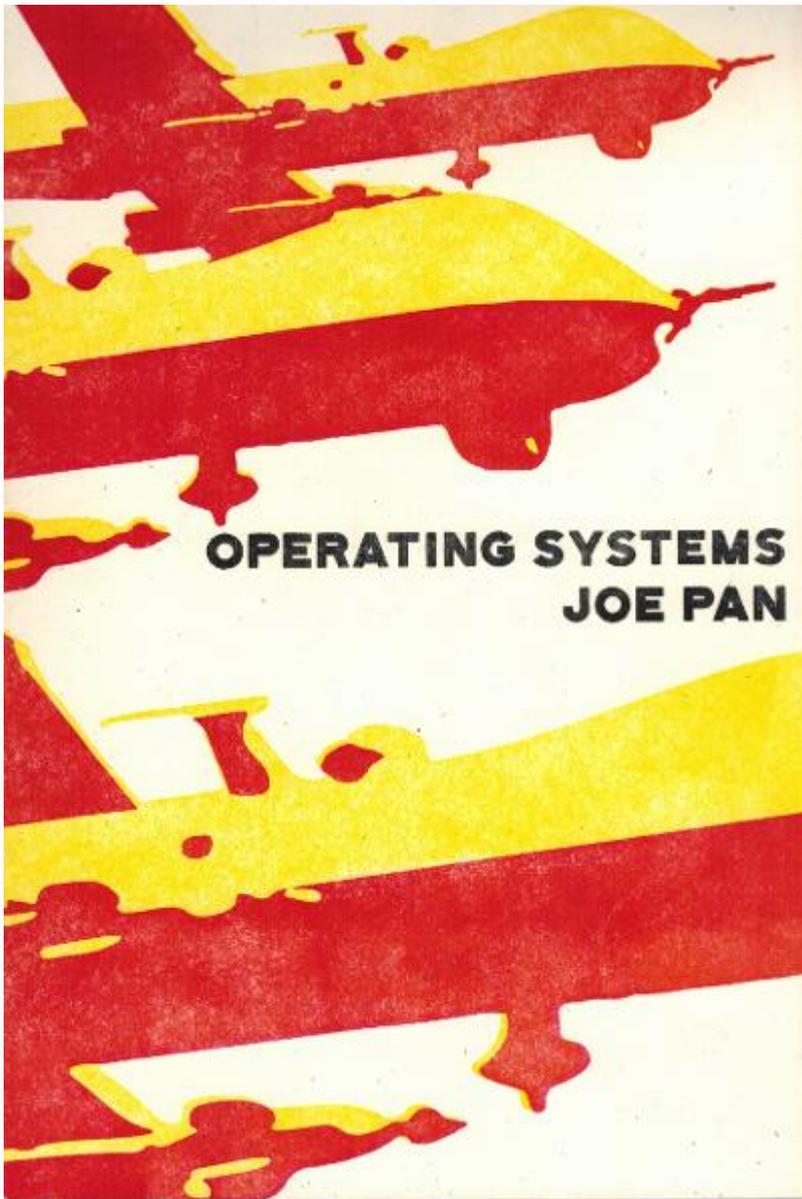# Hostile Threat Detected: Adrian Bonenberger Reviews Joe Pan's "Operating Systems"

Joe Pan popped up on many veteran writers' radars in 2014. He had recently written the first great poem about what let's call the Global War on Terror, "Ode to the MQ-9 Reaper." At that time it was possible to find the poem in pdf via [Pan's website](#); it may be that this is still the case. Many downloaded it and read it, and reread it, and were carried away by its vision and drive, and talked about it over beers

in trendy taverns. It is a powerful poem, urgent, reckless; it is also, in its own way, scored through with hope and possibility. In the MQ-9 Reaper's flight one hears the screech and wail of Hart Crane's "The Tunnel"—one also sees the flash of a seagull's wings, turning over the Brooklyn Bridge and out to sea:

& 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 & 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.

The MQ-9 Reaper is a type of drone capable of firing missiles. It was well known to soldiers who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan between 2005-2012, and also to people who played the video game "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2."

"Ode to the MQ-9 Reaper" is simultaneously the drone itself—its physical characteristics, an accounting of its capabilities, its uses—and a way of looking at the world when one is an American. The poem is an exploration of the specific type of systemic power capable of producing a thing like a drone. It begins with the narrator's third-grade, childhood self dreaming the Reaper into existence, and then wanders through the past and present, shifting perspectives and narrators to catalogue the ways in which seeing and thinking about the Reaper has come to dominate modern life.

As a collection of poetry, "Operating Systems" elaborates on the Ode (the collection's final and ultimate poem) as an extended preface, delving into how people think about and communicate with the world around them. Written mostly in free verse, "Operating Systems" offers an unsparing look at how

people live in a world predicated on well-meaning urges, and desire, and hope, and need. It is less a manual than a guidebook to a world where subjectivity and perspective shift along with the narrator. Each poem is a formula for a moment in time, a mechanism by which that moment plays out.

The collection is organized into five sections of six, six, five, seven, and one poem, respectively. Each poem is assigned an OS or "Operating System" in code, that offers some insight into the poem's meaning and tone, from the serious (*Thanat*OS*) to the whimsical (*Whack*OS*). It's meticulously organized, which helps orient readers on the one hand, and gives one a sense of confidence and security that Pan's poetry is deliberate, in addition to beautiful. One can sometimes become lost in a collection of poetry, especially when it is sincerely felt and written; Pan is one of those rare poets who balances the intense emotions he evokes with careful attention to how each poem's construction.

In spite of the overarching concern driving the collection—the worry that when we aren't using operating systems to govern our own behavior, we have given over our agency to a series of literal operating systems that choose our friends, and our news, and the things we buy, the poetry we read and (worst of all) the wars we fight—in spite of that all, "Operating Systems" maintains a dogged optimism. In poems like In "Tattoos," where a garden thrush that endures the stings of bees for a meal becomes an avatar for desire, and "Bedford Avenue L," where Pan shows how in spite of the formulaic modes of language and mechanics of social interactions, the impulse to help or assist others can be sufficient in a moment of crisis:

This is the moment I tell you you will be okay
& this is the moment you say no.
I do not know who I am
& this is the moment you say no.
I do not know who I am telling this to.

I do not know myself in this moment,
& I do not know you. But hey buddy, hold on.

This underlying redemption exists in the Ode as well, as when its narrator discusses one of the oldest operating systems to appear in the book: the story of Abraham and Isaac on the mountain, envisioned from the perspective of a son having the story read to him in bed by his father.

"Operating Systems" should be read and considered at length. It is not easy or accessible, in contrast with the systems that almost everyone uses to facilitate the minutiae of their daily lives. If much of life is an effort to simplify communication, and the acquisition of those things that bring people satisfaction, isn't it necessary and good occasionally to step back with a good collection of poetry, to pose the question?