The reach of this exuberant and anguished book is potent, and made more so by the force of restraint. The subjects TJ Beitelman encounters here—beauty, love, sin, being, thought, felicity—are driven through the sieve of American culture, and out comes fragments, the leavings of what we were once instructed to value. Part of the edifice is gone, eroded, demeaned, cheapened, misused. At some point, however, the voice behind these deadpan yet lyrically fluid poems realizes how naïve it would be to reject outright the grace of descent, because that would erase the possibility of coming back. This is a book about coming back, coming back to being whole and wholly changed. And what a moving, intelligent, and measured book it is.

—Maurice Manning, author of *The Common Man*

*In Order to Form a More Perfect Union* is a book obsessed with divisions… narrative ones, yes—love stories end in daggers, road trips end in cliffs…but also other sorts of fissures. When Beitelman writes the word half-hearted, he means not desultory but desperately searching (in material ranging pretty much from Homer to Hollywood) for the missing half. And these breaks are, in his sensibility, “a blessed thing.” It is spectacular to watch his poems upend everything. In this book, the paint squeezes its artist from the tube. The facts are not to be believed, but you will ardently believe that they are facts.

—Darcie Dennigan, author of *Madame X*

Jam-packed with the materials of American history and culture, TJ Beitelman’s poems are wonders to behold, set loose and spinning across forms, eras, and landscapes. From hopeful new-dawn visions to dark Jeremiads to softly flowing elegies, they capture voices and ideas from the main stems of American thought, with a smart, questioning energy that’s remarkable to follow. The book ultimately leads to a rocketing road trip into American politics, music, and dreams unlike any other you’ll ever find—hilarious, mysterious, brilliant and absurd in all the right ways, just like the U.S.A.

—Jim Murphy, author of *Heaven Overland*
For Tina—sister, whole-hearted
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Acknowledgments
I

aubades
MATRUSHKA

What did you do when you made me in your image—a mere gust of a thing, no more whole than an eclipse? A supernova comes alive in a wink. Roll me over in flour, slowly. I’m boneless, tender. I’m sustenance on a Sunday: candied yams, collards, black-eyed peas and me. Chart the stars—go ahead: everything expands. Blur the lines you make when you make forever…

—But supper. Now there’s a thing. What better fate than pushing, pushing a tightening wall in increments? What better lightning could you conjure? I’m inside your insides. No place to go but down or up. I’ve tried.
MAKE ME LIKE GALILEO,

make me a plodder,
an empirical

observer, a man who spends
each day—day

after day—tracking blotches
on a magnified sun.

And when I am called
before Your tribunal

I promise to capitulate.
I will, on bended knee,

feebly renounce all
things I know to be true:

_No, there are not storms on the sun._
_The perfect hot orb spins around Us._
CHANG & ENG SUSS THE SO-CALLED TRAGEDY OF SEPARATION

As if it is a fall from Grace; as if all things disparate originated in a flash of angry, spiteful Light; as if a fissure could not be a blesséd thing. There is a misconception—that is, the warm milk of union. The move towards one another is a vestige and a scourge. The ghostly reflex of a long-lost gangrenous limb, our so-called other, better half. Remember: fusion is the rise and fall of everything. —Run like spilled mercury! Away! Away!— We visit our conjoined selves upon you, endure the pity, the big-top spotlight, the uneasy root beer floats with just one dun-breasted girl. We two are the small, black insects in a bag of wholesome grain. The string around your finger. We chime our warning in unison: This is what you could be. This is what you seek—like common beasts, absent of memory—when you seek this half-hearted thing.
We the People

Devil may care
May be a slack-
Jawed American

Drunk and don’t
We love our
Plump-lipped

 Beauties—I
Mean I—I
Love our plump-

Lipped beautiful people
Who traipse down
The broad American

Avenues arm-in-arm
And drunk and pleasant
And alive
How do you *dare*

To frame our

Constitution

To make of us

A we

This is *America*

I say to no one

In particular

This is God’s favor—

We the proud

We the full-lipped

We the beautiful

And no one in particular

Answers back
IN ORDER TO FORM A MORE PERFECT UNION

1.

In the end, there will be one single murmur from our children on the great issues: race, sex, philology.

2.

It will be this and only this: wonder. A single expression of Light. By this I mean: —Nietzsche called them bumblebees— Seekers-all will be niños con gaping maw. Jaw-dropped at the bright nature of things. Case in point:

3.

When one, unexpectedly, in a single motion, drops—simply, without aforethought, drops—his two quarters, there is the likelihood that they will run. Towards or away. Then this series of queries: is it noble to suffer alone, rolling, tired, on a serrated edge? Pray tell whether ‘tis nobler to do something else entirely: whether ‘tis nobler to be silvery; whether ‘tis nobler to be a slight, familiar heft in a palm. Is it nobler jingling in a pocket?

4.

Our children will scamper as our dreams, visions scampered.
Towards. Away. The nobility in a change purse: quarters = viceroys. Nickels something else. Dimes still another thing. Pennies, pages. Then, four score and scads ago, this brand of barbarism was abolished. In its place: Purple, majesty. (Purple?) And paper. Majesty at least. And the right to be vast and vast—

5.

I refuse to be misunderstood: When in the course of human events, it becomes evidentiary.

6.

People’s Exhibit 1-A: a quarter, consisting of various and assorted metals; one side is differentiated by an eagle, clutched arrows (13 arrows clutched; this is terribly, terribly important to the Masons); on the other, the head of a demigod: lies, cherry trees chopped; Delaware’s one true shining moment; a Martha—etc.

7.

There’s one flat shining thing that carries a nation’s weight.

8.

People’s Exhibit 1-B: a quarter. Not unlike the first. These two the accused dropped, carelessly. Deny it, you. I do not deny it. Tell me, then: where were
you on the night of the fourteenth? *I was alive.* Is that all? *Well. Could I ask for more?* No further questions.

9.

*Your Honor, might I redirect: what pledges does he make? What will he say if ever he stands hand-over-heart?*

10.

Well. It all depends on your definition of *is.*

11.

1. Chicago *is* broad-shouldered, green-rivered, a butcher.
2. Cleveland’s river *did* burn. The football team slinked away.
3. Let all the cities have football teams, long memories.
4. Let all the cities be ashamed and wear masks and yell.
5. Let them know there are lots of cities to go around.

This is what my hand would cover, if only I pledged.

12.

Francis Bellamy, Baptist-Socialist, writes the Pledge of Allegiance after whole milk and cookies one night. Before men on the moon. Before neon. Before this:

13.

Indivisible. Liberty. Invisible. All.