for Silvey, for whom Eden was no garden
It begins like this
“Where are you from?”
“Here.”
“No, I mean, where are you from?”

As a child growing up in the seventies and early eighties in New York, Wisconsin, and Northern Virginia, there was something about my skin color and hair texture that snagged the attention of white children and adults. Their need to make sense of me—to make something of sense out of nonsensical me—was pressing. My existence was a ripple in an otherwise smooth sheet. They needed to iron it down.

[The truth is, I’m not really from here.]
[The truth is, that’s not what they were asking.]
The truth is, they were asking, "Why are you so different from what I know? So unclassifiable?"

There's love at first sight. There's American at first sight. And from dozens of "where are you from" interactions with Americans over the years, I've learned that American at first sight is about looks—primarily skin color and hair texture—not nationality.

I am the wooly-haired, medium-brown-skinned offspring typical when Blacks and whites have sex, which was considered illegal activity in seventeen of the fifty "united" states in 1966.

Nineteen sixty-six was the year before the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Loving v. Virginia that the laws preventing interracial marriage were unconstitutional, and 1966 was the year in which my Black father and white mother, an African American doctor and a British teacher who met in West Africa, chose to go ahead and get married anyway. They married in Accra, Ghana. I was born to them in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1967.

I come from people who broke the rules. Chose to live lives outside the box. Chose hope over hate as the arc of history was forced to bend a bit more toward justice. I am the goo in the melting pot.

Rhetorically championed.
Theoretically accepted.
Actually suspect.
In places hated.
Despised.

In the lead-up to the 2008 presidential election a persona stepped to the forefront of public consciousness, that of the "Real American."

More than an individual you want to have a beer with, more than the everyman "Joe the Plumber," the "Real American" is code for an entire era when men like Andy Griffith ran Mayberry or John Wayne swaggered through a western town. When white men cloaked in clothes of real or perceived authority could take what they believed was rightfully theirs with an air of ownership to the opportunity, to the land, to the people, and of belonging at the center of the situation, whatever it was. A time when the word "he" meant all genders. When "normal" and "regular" meant "white."

This fictional character—the Real American—became a talisman, a lifeline to a more halcyon past for some white men and women bewildered by capitalism's demand for low-paid laborers and by the rising tide of legal and regulatory equality that dared to lift others' boats. They looked around at us the others knocking at the door of the hiring manager, the landlord, the admissions dean, the local restaurant. Looked frantically around and began to see fewer—less—of themselves.

Nursed by a milk of white supremacy fed to them as what was natural, right, and good for them, these whites believed the rest of us were interlopers, thieves at the door, threatening to take what was not ours. They grew incensed at the growing number of us others who refused to accept our place at the bottom of America's ladder underneath even the most lowly of whites.

These "Real Americans" found a voice in their candidates, grew in number, became a mob who raised slogans, signs, fists, and arms. Who long to make America great—

normal
regular
white
again.
These newly emboldened “Real Americans” issue angry orders to the rest of us: “If you don’t like it, go back to where you came from.”

There is no back to where I came from.

You stole my homeland from me. 
Me from my homeland, I mean. 
I don’t even know where it is. 
Literally.

I came from Silvey.

I am the untalled, unpaid, unrepented damages of one of America’s founding crimes. I come from people who endured the psycho-cultural genocide of slavery, reconstruction, and Jim Crow. Who began to find a place here really only quite recently amid strides toward effecting a more perfect union, of liberty and justice for all.

I am Silvey’s great-great-great-great-granddaughter. She was a slave who worked on a plantation in the late 1700s in Charleston, South Carolina, the harbor town through which close to one in two African slaves entered America over the centuries. Silvey bore three children by her master, Joshua Eden, by which I mean he raped her; there is no consent in slavery. Silvey’s daughter Silvia was born in 1785, and Joshua freed Silvey, Silvia, and their other children some years later. Silvia gave birth to a son named Joshua in 1810. Joshua had a son named Joshua Jr., born in 1845. His daughter, Evelyn, was born in 1896. Evelyn bore my father, George, in 1918. And I was born to him in 1967.

The original Americans are the natives whose land was invaded then stolen by the Europeans. Those descended from the Europeans, the ones who came on ships to the New World, like to think they are the original Americans. But I’m from a third set—from those brought here on different ships over different waters, those whose sweat and muscle were the engine of the American economy for over two hundred years, whose blood and tears watered America’s ground. I come from them.

I come from people who survived what America did to them.

Ain’t I a Real American?
When the amorphous mob harrumphs about the needs and rights of "Real Americans," they don't picture me. People like me. But is anyone more a product of America than those of us formed by America in an angry war with herself?

This is rhetorical. Theoretical. Of course we are not more than. We're less than, not even equal to. The remainder of an imperfect equation. The child who wasn't supposed to exist. The undesired other. The bastard child of illegitimate rules who dares even to be.

The contradiction of being "less than" in a nation whose forming documents speak of liberty and justice for all plagued me for much of my young adult life.

I'm so American it hurts.