With this creative piece, I sought to coerce myself into engaging with class material from a different perspective than I have yet been able. My goal was to retrace my mental steps to moments in my life that were particularly formative in my understanding of self in relation to the other. Growing up as a white Anglo-Saxon protestant male in a racially scarred city has provided me a unique platform from which to engage this material, and I think this process was one of healing for me on a number of different levels. Exploring this relationship between self and other through the lens of my own past has allowed me not only to understand more fully who I am today but to really engage with the trajectory that has led me here. There are a lot of moments in my past that I don’t understand, and several of them are featured in this project. When I set out to complete this project, I hoped to analyze these memories until I could wrestle their meanings from them, but having completed this assignment, I realize that it was fruitless to aim at a complete understanding of my past. Rather, I think that it was in acknowledging it and being comfortable with the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the proud moments and the shameful ones, that this project began to be an enlightening one. Additionally, while this project began as a semi-autobiographical short story, I quickly realized that I could not help but write in the form of a memoir. This is such an intensely personal project that combining it with fictional elements seemed somehow insincere; my memories, in effect, coerced me into this particular genre, and for that, I am very thankful. Writing on such a personal platform has allowed me to explore my past, examine the scars, and become comfortable with the individual I am today.

Looking critically at this work, it is important to note a few things in particular. First, the memories shorten in length as I reach further back into my past. This is because those memories that are older are naturally a bit thinner than those in the recent past. This is not to deny the richness of those memories, as some of the most powerful moments in my past exist in the periphery of my memory. The project follows a disjointed path, hopping from one memory to another, regressively reaching into older the memories. Adopting a casual, first-person tone, the memoir seeks to present the memories in the language of the mind in which they exist, allowing the reader to step into those memories. However, it is important to note that these memories are being recounted by an individual with a particular agenda, and so the events that are portrayed are exhibited from a limited perspective. Everything in the stories is presented exactly as it exists in the mind of the author, but this is not necessarily how it occurred in reality. The mind has a tendency to distort memories to fit a particular trajectory that it believes exists. Employing a stream-of-consciousness style, this work replicates the disjointed nature of my thought-process, recounting events and feelings associatively, representing perhaps a more honest account of the ways in which I conceive my past. The other is necessary for the self to exist, and so this project seeks to make sense of my self in regards to the others of my past.
Beaches of Finisterre, 2014

We woke up that last morning with just one thing in mind—the sooner we started hiking, the sooner we would be done hiking for good. We had come 541 miles in thirty-three days and I just couldn’t fucking take it anymore, but it’s always a little easier when you can see the finish line, if only in your head. Sure, this Camino had been one of the best experiences of my life, and life on the road still had for me considerable appeal, but the blisters—oh the blisters, let me tell you. And the knee pain. I’ve torn my ACL three times now and have had as many surgeries, and that baby had been screaming at me for weeks. Well today was the last day, and it promised to be a short one. We only had nine miles till we would reach Finisterre, end of the world in Spanish or something like that, little coastal fishing village. I think it’s the westernmost point of Europe so that’s why it’s called that.

Anyways, the entire hike that morning was on these cliffs along the sea and we were walking like men on a mission. That mission for me was to trade this present mission for one that involved sitting on the beach and seeing who could drink the most sangria before their stomach exploded. Seemed to always be a distinct possibility with this want-to-be Spanish wine acid.

Anways, the hike. It was an absolutely gorgeous morning, and these dolphins were having some sort of secret meeting in this cove that we could see immediately below us, gleaming all silver in the sun, jumping in and out of the blue-black water as they discussed whatever it is that dolphins talk about. It must be important whatever it is, them having to jump out of the water at exactly the same time just to get a couple words out. I really like dolphins. They seem to have a heightened sensitivity to the promises of life. I stole that line from Fitzgerald—one that he wrote about Gatsby—but I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t mind.

So we trotted up to the first beach in Finisterre, feeling pretty invigorated by the prospect of being mere steps away from the physical completion of this month-long journey. I was out in front of everybody else, trying maybe a little too hard to get that feeling of conclusion I’d been fishing for since Santiago. Time slowed down a little bit and some Hans Zimmer song was playing in the back of my head, and I was thinking about everything that had happened over the past thirty-three days, and Doris, and Mark, and would we ever see them again, and the sea gulls up above me, caw cawing, and cawing, and hiding something from me. That same thing that had been hidden from me my entire life. Like when you hear everyone talking in the kitchen and you walk in to see what the fuss is about and
everyone drops dead silent. I was okay with it now. I didn’t need to know. Blistered toes buried with the bugs in the sand, wind barely making its way through my dirt-gelled hair, the sunlight tangled in the ocean waves - it all felt like enough.

After a few minutes that felt like a few hours, some shouting and splashing from the ocean behind me punctured the little bubble of silence that I had wandered into, and suddenly the journey was over. It left as quickly as it had come there at the top of the Pyrenees with the lightning and the hail and the British guy’s chocolate. It took me a few seconds to realize what was going on, and I probably looked like an asshole standing there all confused, while they were dragging this dead guy up onto the beach, but I half-ran, half-stumbled over there where Hogan and Jake were pulling this steel-stiff figure from the water, rigor mortis Peter whispered to me.

Bone-white skin, purple tongue, distorted hands reaching up to the sky, reaching for something. Maybe the gulls, I don’t know. Maybe he knew there was something being hidden from him too. Maybe the sand and the wind and the ocean just weren’t enough.

Anyways, his friends seemed to think it awful selfish of him to just up and die like that, so they kept beating his chest in desperation, in anger at themselves, in anger at him, and crying all the while. The Hans Zimmer background music in the back of my head was replaced with the siren of an old paramedic truck, sobbing and shouts of anger, and the gulls ever cawing, and cawing, and knowing, and hiding it. If I ever find one, I will kill it, so I can get on with my life, and regain my composure and control of the thoughts of my own mind. I don’t want to know. I don’t need to know anymore. Maybe when I die, I will, like that Spanish diver, but for now I don’t. Presumptuous little fuckers.

Pete said it was a heart attack. Diving for those expensive shells, rare delicacy I suppose, and had a heart attack underwater. Took his friends a few minutes before they realized he wasn’t coming up for air. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen a dead man face to face, except for that time my Uncle Steve made me look at my grandfather in his coffin at the funeral. I ran away after I saw what he was showing me. Not this man - I looked this man in the face. I saw the fear in his eyes and the vomit on his chin and somehow I knew him.
Nashville, TN, 2012

Have you ever had to sing for a sandwich? Roger had. Well he had and he hadn’t. He got a sandwich and then he sang - in that order - but the immediacy with which he started singing after scarfing down his turkey sub seemed to suggest that he saw the two things as going hand in hand. A sad little transaction, age old in its terms - a poor, travel-weary bard with nothing to give but a couple of outdated tunes in exchange for a few scraps of bread. I felt like a dubiously benevolent King Arthur perched in that polka-dotted 1970’s lounge chair in the lobby of my dorm as Roger sang a few old Gospel hymns with chunks of processed meat spewing out of his mouth as I looked on in mounting amusement.

Roger was the homeless man who limped around midtown Nashville telling people that he needed a couple bucks to grab something to eat. Funny how often he was hungry. I had a rule when it came to homeless people asking for money - offer to get them food but don’t give them the actual money - cause you know they might go buy alcohol or drugs or something like that. I know that’s a little presumptuous on my part and that not all homeless dudes are looking to score some crack, but I figured it was a pretty reasonable rule. Tonight didn’t promise to look much different.

- Hey ther boy, canya spare five dollars, I needa put somethin’ in my belly.
- Sure man, I can spare five bucks, I’m actually gunna go get food right now, I lied. Why don’t you just come with me.

Now 99% of the time people would make up some excuse why they didn’t have the time right now and that I should just give them cash so they could buy the food when it fit into their busy schedule of asking more people for money. But I had my rule, and I stuck to it. But tonight I think Roger may have sensed that I had this rule that I stuck to and he readily acquiesced to the terms of engagement.

- Hmm I can do that, was on the menu tonight?
- Good question. I think I’m going to get a turkey sandwich at my dorm you like sandwiches?

Who the hell doesn’t like sandwiches of course Roger likes sandwiches. Dumb question.

- Did you say turkey? What’re we waitin’ for?
We crossed over 21st avenue and then slowly made our way across campus on the ten-minute walk back to my dorm on the other side of campus. Roger started rambling on about how he used to be a Professor at Vanderbilt in the Fine Arts department and that he remembered working in this building and that, providing names that I had never heard for any building on campus, much less the ones to which he was ascribing these names. Still it was a relatively enjoyable walk - a painfully slow one though. Roger had some sort of leg defect that turned one of his legs into a giant stick of salami, just kind of sliding behind him as the other one did all the work. Come to think of it, he kind of looked like a black hunchback of Notre Dame - except you know, with a salami leg.

So around twenty minutes after I had run into Roger, we walked up the steps into my dorm. I know I said it was just a ten-minute walk, but the going was slow with Roger. It wasn’t just the fact that he had a limp - Roger seemed to subscribe to a slower pace of life in everything that he did - the painfully deliberate way he talked, the methodical precision of his eating, the mellifluous drawl with which he poured out those old gospel hymns. And to be honest, something about Roger just seemed made sense - I mean as nonsensical as our conversation was on the walk to my dorm, I began to realize more and more that Roger had something figured out that I didn’t - and after a while, it started to dig at me. The dropping water and the solid stone.

That stupid grin on my face as people walked by me, perched in my polka-dotted throne listening to Roger sing Amazing Grace, probably suggested a sense of smug superiority - and maybe it was really there but I don’t think it was. No - I don’t think I felt superior to Roger nor do I think he even had the vocabulary for such a thing as that. He just wanted a sandwich. And I just liked listening to his songs.

- Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life does cease. I shall possess within the veil, a life of joy and peace . . .
Memphis really pisses me off sometimes. I mean I have this crazy love-hate relationship with the city. It’s my city. I belong to it in so many different ways and I’d like to think that it belongs to me. But sometimes, I just can’t take it anymore. The endless procession of soccer mom Suburbans with Ole Miss license plates in my rich white neighborhood, race wars in Kroger parking lots, the droopy sad sprawl out East to get away from the bad parts of town. I mean, it’s like no one actually cares about the city – people just care about themselves. And sadly, the people make up the city. Is it the city that I hate or is it the people that live here?

I had just gotten my driver’s license and I finally had the liberty to take up all these questions with Memphis herself, right there on the Mighty Mississippi. I just sat there and talked to myself and to her and asked questions and pressed her about all the little things that had been building up in my chest – Memphis, when will you end the race wars? When will people start giving a shit, when will I start giving a shit? When will Prince Mongo win an election? When will you start standing up for what you believe in? And all the while, the river still running and flowing and the trees all around me and I don’t know if they heard me or cared or sympathized with the confusion of a sixteen year-old kid, but somehow I think they might have.

From what I’ve been told, Memphis has always been a place for complete basket cases, and maybe I was just growing into the mold. But you’d think a city full of nut jobs would be a little less content to follow the status quo. I mean as far as I could remember things had been the way they were and nobody was happy about it and the white people blamed the black people for the city’s problems and the black people blamed the white people for them and nobody was happy and everyone complained. I really didn’t get it. I didn’t want to be a cynic and say well you know that’s just the way the world works. I was too young for that shit. Memphis, get your stuff together!

But I did love Memphis too. I mean, truly. I can’t imagine growing up anywhere else and I think our problems made me who I am, all the good and the bad and the grey. Well, I’m still not convinced that there is any grey – just a whole lot of really tiny black and white. You know the most tantalizing aspect of the human condition is that you have no say in your own existence. Like none whatsoever. I mean it’s as if some giant hand grabs you from inexistence, sets you down somewhere random on the shores of culture, and says go ahead, this is where you become you. I just happened to be set down on the
shores of the Mississippi River. I mean how crazy is that when you think about it. I’m an upper class white anglo-saxon protestant male from Memphis, TN – a city where upper class white anglo-saxon protestant males have run the show since whenever the hell Memphis was founded. Why did I have to be the one born with my head up my ass? That’s not to say that I have the same kind of problems that 95% of the rest of the city deals with, but my problem was that I didn’t have to think about those problems – I mean that’s what privilege is I think, and I hated Memphis for letting me have it. I want to care! But I rarely do. I don’t really understand what I do. What I want to do, I don’t and what I don’t want to do, I do. I mean what the hell kind of life is that?

But Memphis is just the people, I think I said that earlier. As much as I want it to be the dusty magnolia leaves and the bluffs and the blues bars and barbecue, it just isn’t. Memphis is the people and I am one of them. These problems aren’t going to fix themselves and the magnolia leaves sure as hell can’t do it. I think it’s gotta start with me, with the people, but I don’t know how to begin. So I just stared into the dirty water and watched it roll on by, wondering when it started being a dirty river and where the dirt came from.
Lorraine Motel, Downtown Memphis, 2003

A sad little wreath hung on the corner of the balcony railing right in front of room 306. The white and red wreath stood out in stark relief against the turquoise door of the motel room where Martin Luther King, Jr. spent his last night before he was assassinated.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop.

My heart was beating fast, my Dad had brought me here, acting like we were going to a battlefield, real grave, real serious, and I was just confused, believing that I was supposed to know something that I didn’t. Why were we at this dirty old hotel? Who was this king that everyone kept talking about? And why would a king stay in this musty old place?

And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.

So this is the place where the king died. Shot right through the head, my Dad said, terrible way to go. A king dying right here in my city? Why would someone want to kill him?

And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

We climbed the steps to see the wreath, to stand in his footprints, to look out where the king must have been looking when he drew his final breath the world through his eyes. I was scared and I didn’t know why. I was scared for the king even though he was now long dead. What did he want? What did he stand for? Was he a good king?

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!