When asked by a reporter whether being rich had made him happy, Neil Diamond is said to have replied that money hadn’t made much of a difference in his life. “You can only spend so much money,” he said. “What are you going to do? Have two lunches?”

Asked to describe myself, I might say many things. I might say I’m a teacher or a writer, I might describe my habits or my looks, I might mention my family or the town in which I live, or the town from which I came. In any case, I would probably talk about who I am. But sometimes I think about myself in a very different way, focusing not on who I am but on who I’m not. I think about the lives I might have led, the people I might have become, had things gone differently in the past. Each of us no doubt could make a list: if my parents hadn’t moved from Connecticut when I was young; if I had gone to a different college; if I hadn’t taken that one class with that one teacher; if my girlfriend hadn’t broken up with me; if my parents hadn’t gotten a divorce; if I had taken another job; if my wife and I
hadn’t had children. . . . What would my life be like? What would I be like?

There are an unending number of lives I’m not leading, so why do I fixate on this one or that one? Why is this life the one I care about not living? I’m not a podiatrist, not a landscape designer, can’t play the flute, and haven’t married a Canadian. I don’t live in Kansas. So what? These things don’t chafe my spirit—they never occur to me. That I’m not as generous as my wife, as smart as my friend, as funny as my brother; that I’m not young. . . . These thoughts live with me, and when I leave the house they come along. When I tell you who I am not, I tell you who I am.

It’s true that I may not be telling you much about who I am. I stand slump-shouldered on the wet sidewalk as the bus lifts away, carrying with it that other me, the one who didn’t stop in the doorway of Macy’s to fish a pebble from his shoe, and who now sits in comfort, retrieving his phone from his pocket and wedging the earbuds into his ears. But the bus turns the corner and he’s gone. And in any case, I don’t need an unsoaked alter ego to tell me I’m impatient and don’t like getting caught in the rain. At other times, though, my imagined selves linger longer and say more. In the pages to come, I let them linger, and listen to what they say.

The philosopher Bernard Williams calls the thought that I might have been someone else “very primitive.” He means that it’s a fundamental, basement-level thought, a thought about what it is to be a person at all. But it’s so fundamental that we often overlook it; we build other thoughts on top of it, and so hide it. When Williams goes on to call this thought “very real,” then, it’s with an air of insistence, as if he needed to remind himself that it’s true. This combination of obviousness and obscurity makes unled lives hard to write about. Sometimes my thoughts have
seemed to resonate more deeply than I could say; at other times, they’ve seemed too dull to write down. No wonder, given the difficulties, that I’ve turned to literature. Psychologists and philosophers have studied unled lives, but creative writers know them best. These lives trouble the way language ordinarily works—trouble our pronouns, our diction, our syntax, the tone and cadences of our phrases—and writers find their opportunities in our trouble. Indeed, unled lives have given modern literature one of its great themes—or so I hope to show.

Of course, you might say that all fictional characters are unrealized possibilities, living lives unled by either writers or their readers: that’s what it means to be fictional. “The characters in my novels are my unrealized possibilities,” writes Milan Kundera in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. “That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own ‘I’ ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about.” To the extent that novels give us stories about how things really are, a space opens to tell us how things might have been but are not. And so, too, with plays, films, and poems: they present to us a recognizable reality, but one not entirely ours.

Yet, if all literature and film represented unrealized possibilities, there would be no end of works that I might write about. For a long time, this thought stymied me and I couldn’t see a way forward. I found other things to work on. But I kept coming back to these unled lives—or they came back to me. And after a while, I noticed that their stories tended to have a particular shape. It shouldn’t have taken me so long: the form is there in one of the most familiar poems there is, Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” A traveler pauses to look back at two roads that diverged
in the past; now, having taken one of the roads, he compares it with the other. One person, two roads, retrospection, comparison: when I saw that this pattern underlay the poems and novels I had read and the films I had watched, writing this book suddenly seemed possible. New works I encountered—this week a story by Kathleen Collins, the week before that a lyric by Charles Simic, last month a memoir by Cory Taylor and a film by Andrew Haigh—found their places. I saw, too, that works I don’t know, but that readers might, would also find their places. I could write, and imagine an end to writing, because I could imagine how readers might continue.

In these stories there are a lot of journeys: characters leave home, drift down streams, take trains, share cabs, fly to new continents. These trips didn’t surprise me—these are stories about paths, after all. But other motifs were more puzzling. Early on I noticed that various gods kept showing up, not commanding the stage, perhaps, but hanging around in the wings. Why should this be? And why, I wondered, were these gods so often incompetent? I also wondered why characters in these stories worried so much about whether they were like other people or unique, commonplace or exceptional. It didn’t seem to be simply vanity, or solely vanity, but a more rudimentary uncertainty. What does it have to do with the thought that they might have been someone else? And, finally, why are so many of these stories violent? Why are characters so often mutilated, murdered, annihilated? Why, even when the stories are bloodless, should their language be so extreme? All the difference? Caused by the choice of a road? Really?

These motifs and the simple shape of Frost’s poem organize this book. After an introduction, the first section describes the form taken by stories of unled lives, focusing on its two central features: the thought that you’re only one person and the thought
that your life has been shaped by a fork in your road. In the second section I consider the social and historical conditions that encourage this way of thinking. No doubt that when the wind slackened and the sun stood still, Odysseus had some second thoughts, and Job, too, might have found things to regret. But the number of people we are not, like the number of people we are, has grown in recent centuries. For some modern authors, unled lives have drawn on their deepest motivations and allowed them to write about what matters most to them. These writers—among them Charles Dickens, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, and Phillip Larkin—will turn up often in the pages to come. Others have written about unled lives more intermittently, as if in response to a nagging perplexity. I discuss their work, too, hoping to make plausible my claim that unled lives are a major theme of modern literature. Though I take no census—the demographics would be tricky—I’m sure that unled lives remain on the rise today. For a while I kept a list of contemporary writers and directors whom I might include in this book, a list that started with the novelist Kate Atkinson and ended with the poet Rachel Zucker: Paul Auster, Nicholson Baker, Julian Barnes, Noah Baumbach, Jesse Browner, Lucille Clifton, Michael Cunningham, Rachel Cusk. . . . But the list soon became unwieldy and I gave it up. Why should so many people today care about the people they are not?

Finally, in the third section, I consider the feelings that come with these stories. What emotions lead us to imagine our unled lives? And what emotions do those lives lead us to? That I feel regret and, sometimes, relief as I read about them didn’t surprise me. Nor did my envy or sympathy. But I have other feelings, too, harder to locate and to name. Why do I sometimes feel queasy, as if I have nausea or vertigo? Why at the same time, do I often
find myself laughing? And why, at other times, do I feel so deli-
cate and deep a tenderness? Thinking about the unrealized pos-
sibilities living in his books, Kundera felt both horror and fond-
ness. My feelings, too, have been a strange mix of the sharp and
sweet, extreme and mild.

To balance my brisk movement from poem to short story to
novel to film and back to another poem, I’ve punctuated the large
sections with three interludes, each focused on a single work: Carl
Dennis’s “The God Who Loves You,” Frank Capra’s It’s a Won-
derful Life, and Ian McEwan’s Atonement. Choosing different
sorts of work—a poem, a film, a novel—lets me consider the re-
sources and limitations of different genres. Fiction may be the
natural home for the people we are not, but as Frost’s inescap-
able poem suggests, they also flourish in poetry—something that
It’s a Wonderful Life suggests for film as well. Unlived lives have
pressed artists to explore the resources of their mediums. I ex-
pect that this challenge is part of what appealed to them. It’s ap-
pealed to me, too. Whatever its limits, criticism has its resources,
and I’ve used them as best I can to understand the lives we haven’t
led and the literature that illuminates those lives. This organ-
ization makes for a loose-limbed essay, but one orderly enough,
I hope, that readers will see ways to go forward, and promising
enough that they will want to.

Of course, in writing a book about unled lives you think about
books unwritten—all the ideas you might have included, all the
directions you could have taken, all the material you’ve left behind
in electronic folders unlikely ever to be opened again. I say little
about the importance of my theme in different national litera-
tures. I suspect that it’s more common in British than in Amer-
ican or Continental writing, but I’m not sure. I say less about film
than I would like, and nothing about drama or music. (I don’t
think Neil Diamond sang about unlived lives, but Tom T. Hall did in his perfectly pitched song “Pamela Brown”: “I’m the guy who didn’t marry pretty Pamela Brown/Educated, well-intentioned, good girl in our town./I wonder where I’d be today if she had loved me too./Probably be driving kids to school.” It’s a plangent bit of irony: “I guess I owe it all,” he says, “to Pamela Brown.”) I thought that I would write more about sexuality, but have found less than I expected. I look at stories about racial passing, but not much at race beyond that. I draw on the work of philosophers, but don’t really argue for many theses. I say little about the relation between looking back to past opportunities and forward to future ones, nothing about the relation of alternate lives to alternate history, nothing about doubles and doppelgängers . . . and so on. My belief that I’ve identified something new and in need of more thought than I can give it has been the justification I’ve given myself for these various omissions. As it is, I’ve had enough on my hands to answer the questions I’ve chosen: Why are writers so interested in that elusive, inescapable creature whom Woolf called “the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time cannot forget”? Why am I?

However much money you have, you can only have one lunch, and here it is, on the table in front of you. But, of course, there were other lunches on the menu, other lunches you might have ordered. The restaurant is busy. Waiters thread through the room, carrying plates clouded in steam, sliding them in front of others at your table, others across the room. Fork in hand, you pause and look around.
ON NOT BEING SOMEONE ELSE