This piece of writing is an excerpt from *Hunger of Memory*, an autobiography by Richard Rodriguez. Born in 1944 to immigrant parents from Mexico, Rodriguez began his schooling in Sacramento, California, knowing just fifty words of English. He concluded his university education with a Ph.D. in literature, studying in a famous library in the British Museum in London, England.

In the first paragraph of this excerpt, Rodriguez refers to a line from an English poem written in the thirteenth century: “*Sumer is I-cumen in...*,” which means “Spring has come in.”
I stand in the ghetto classroom - 'the guest speaker' - attempting to lecture on the mystery of the sounds of our words to rows of diffident students. 'Don't you hear it? Listen!' The music of our words. "Sumer is icumen in. . ." And songs on the car radio. We need Aretha Franklin's voice to fill plain words with music - her life.' In the face of their empty stares, I try to create an enthusiasm. But the girls in the back row turn to watch some boy passing outside. There are flutters of smiles, waves. And someone's mouth elongates heavy, silent words through the barrier of glass. Silent words - the lips straining to shape each voiceless syllable: 'Meet mee late errr.' By the door, the instructor smiles at me, apparently hoping that I will be able to spark some enthusiasm in the class. But only one student seems to be listening. A girl, maybe fourteen. In this gray room her eyes shine with ambition. She keeps nodding and nodding at all that I say; she even takes notes. And each time I ask a question, she jerks up and down in her desk like a marionette, while her hand waves over the bowed heads of her classmates. It is myself (as a boy) I see as she faces me now (a man in my thirties).

The boy who first entered a classroom barely able to speak English, twenty years later concluded his studies in the stately quiet of the reading room in the British Museum. Thus with one sentence I can summarize my academic career. It will be harder to summarize what sort of life connects the boy to the man.

With every award, each graduation from one level of education to the next, people I'd meet would congratulate me. Their refrain always the same: 'Your parents must be very proud.' Sometimes then they'd ask me how I managed it - my 'success.'
(How?) After a while, I had several quick answers to give in reply. I'd admit, for one thing, that I went to an excellent grammar school. (My earliest teachers, the nuns, made my success their ambition.) And my brother and both my sisters were very good students. (They often brought home the shiny school trophies I came to want.) And my mother and father always encouraged me. (At every graduation they were behind the stunning flash of the camera when I turned to look at the crowd.)

As important as these factors were, however, they account inadequately for my academic advance. Nor do they suggest what an odd success I managed. For although I was a very good student, I was also a very bad student. I was a 'scholarship boy,' a certain kind of scholarship boy. Always successful, I was always unconfident. Exhilarated by my progress. Sad. I became the prized student—anxious and eager to learn. Too eager, too anxious—an imitative and unoriginal pupil. My brother and two sisters enjoyed the advantages I did, and they grew to be as successful as I, but none of them ever seemed so anxious about their schooling. A second-grade student, I was the one who came home and corrected the 'simple' grammatical mistakes of our parents. ('Two negatives make a positive.') Proudly I announced—to my family's startled silence—that a teacher had said I was losing all trace of a Spanish accent. I was oddly annoyed when I was unable to get parental help with a homework assignment. The night my father tried to help me with an arithmetic exercise, he kept reading the instructions, each time more deliberately, until I pried the textbook out of his hands, saying, 'I'll try to figure it out some more by myself.'

When I reached the third grade, I outgrew such behavior. I became more tactful, careful to keep separate the two very dif-
ferent worlds of my day. But then, with ever-increasing inten-
sity, I devoted myself to my studies. I became bookish, puzzling
to all my family. Ambition set me apart. When my brother saw
me struggling home with stacks of library books, he would
laugh, shouting: 'Hey, Four Eyes!' My father opened a closet
one day and was startled to find me inside, reading a novel.
My mother would find me reading when I was supposed to be
asleep or helping around the house or playing outside. In a
voice angry or worried or just curious, she'd ask: 'What do you
see in your books?' It became the family's joke. When I was
called and wouldn't reply, someone would say I must be hiding
under my bed with a book.

(How did I manage my success?)

What I am about to say to you has taken me more than
twenty years to admit: A primary reason for my success in the
classroom was that I couldn't forget that schooling was chang-
ing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before becom-
ing a student. That simple realization! For years I never spoke
to anyone about it. Never mentioned a thing to my family or
my teachers or classmates. From a very early age, I understood
enough, just enough about my classroom experiences to keep
what I knew repressed, hidden beneath layers of embarrassment.
Not until my last months as a graduate student, nearly
thirty years old, was it possible for me to think much about the
reasons for my academic success. Only then. At the end of my
schooling, I needed to determine how far I had moved from
my past. The adult finally confronted, and now must publicly
say, what the child shuddered from knowing and could never
admit to himself or to those many faces that smiled at his every
success.