

the only life Victoria was willing to admit began with her arrival at Ellis Island.<sup>28</sup> “It was the happiest day for me,” she once confided to her husband. “Leaving Ellis Island I felt like I could finally survive on my own” (27). On rare occasions Virginia questioned her mother about her past, but Victoria was always adamant: “Don’t ask, I don’t want to talk about it” (136). Virginia resented her mother, a cold, dry, strict woman who shrank from any word of endearment, even if it came from her husband or children, and “only showed affection when someone was sick.” She kept to herself, had no close friends, never visited her neighbors, and refused to join any Armenian groups (42). She had even refused to dance at her own wedding (25). Virginia thought her mother was devoid of any feelings. She recalls attending the commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide at the local church with her parents. The atmosphere was solemn, as members of the congregation lit candles and wept. “Hyreeg’s eyes were closed, head was bowed, his hands over forehead. Myreeg sat stiffly staring straight ahead” (50).<sup>29</sup>

Virginia pours out her frustration over the deprivations she endured growing up in Pontiac, Michigan, where she was born. Her autobiography is also a biography of her mother, a mysterious woman named Tourvanda Ahigian who became

---

<sup>28</sup> Virginia Haroutunian, *Orphan in the Sands* (N.p. [Michigan]: S.p., 1995). In her Acknowledgments, she credits her mother as co-author.

<sup>29</sup> *Hyreeg* means “father” and *Myreeg* “mother” in Armenian. These two words recur throughout this study in variant spellings. In all cases I have retained the spelling of the original texts quoted.