When you left Dad,

I stopped calling you Mom.
I invented comedic nicknames.
“Hey Lady,” I’d say in the
tradition of Jerry Lewis.
You’d try to squeeze it out of me,
to wave a magic wand and
teleport us to times of ease,
when we’d watch I Love Lucy
over dinner and ice cream,
when we’d huddle together,
me on the couch, you on
Great Grandpa’s chair,
Dad on the carpet by my side,
Together in black and white.

But when it came to Hey Lady,
you’d cry sometimes in your
truck when you’d drop me off
at Dad’s, wondering what you’d
done wrong, and I’d stare with a
blank face and wash it off with
shrugs, pseudo smiles,
and a wave goodbye, the garage
door slowly lowering until
you faded from sight.

For a while we could only watch
movies together, the trivial
dialogue replacing our own,
experiencing closeness vicariously.
Other times we’d go to lunch,
sounds of metal against plates like
echoes in empty hallways,
words spoken only for ambience,
as if in the restaurant we sat on
opposite sides of a fault line,
chewing our last bites
on different continents,
sharing only distance.
And you’d drop me off, 
kiss-smile-wave-I love you, 
the garage door lowering 
and lowering until you faded 
from sight, the sound of your 
truck rolling off, the hum of the 
engine lost in a desert of wanderers.

Later on, the phone would 
carry your voice to me, 
the mournful “bye” that 
grew raspy and regretful, 
thoughts of kissing my forehead 
before the night’s end remaining 
only as a shadow of memory.

When I finally moved off to college, 
you were on crutches, and it was 
all too dramatic, the final embrace 
before I rolled up the window 
and you were gone.

You had said your goodbye 
while turning away, sunglasses 
covering tears, that same raspy and 
regretful voice I’d heard on the 
phone as if in time we’d be 
connected only in sound waves.

And time perpetuated itself, 
new marriages for old, 
the crutches aside, sunglasses off, 
a new ability to say goodbye. 
But a stinging feeling lingers 
that you will cultivate remorse 
like a crop, that even if I 
call you Mom, deep down I’ll 
still be quoting Jerry Lewis.