Stopping in Rock Barra
—for Walter

Appraising the vernacular—those
centre-gabled homes so native
to this place—we drove like tourists
east then north along backroads
red as rust. Past ditches rich
with Queen Anne’s lace, through
mauve-crested lakes of lupins,
we trusted our quixotic common
sense to guide us to that rumoured
(not-quite-fabled) site—a fence,
a field, a foursquare hut:
the Island house primeval.

Stopping once to step off your
ancestral land, a plot now lost
to goldenrod and mustard

(how quickly weeds take root
to fill out any vacant space),
we stopped again to recreate

that pose my camera-wary
forebears struck nearly fourscore
years before: a candid shot
at Bear River station (my mother's
father had been agent there),
now ready to implode.

*Tempus edax rerum,* we took
to heart (a hint of Ovid
in the air)—and if not ravenous

*Time* then what devours all things?—
until we stopped once more, at last,
at that exotic structure:

a world apart, an age away,
preserved as if in a photograph—
even the central flue intact,

its mortared stone (no doubt quarried
from that very patch of ruddy earth)
rock-solid as the Delphic stump.

The birds themselves—skylarking
kestrels, the first I had ever seen—
seemed almost oracular

in their acrobatic flights of fancy
script above that steadfast roof:
enduring proof, we had to believe,

of how sometimes mortal work—
a wall, a threshold, mortised beams
(an image wrought in words?)—

can override what Fate has writ.
Ecstatic creatures! Next morning,
I found one dead of a broken neck.