

THOMAS O'GRADY

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.