markers within social units, individual though we may feel. This notion can be carried too far, of course — fiction traffics most effectively in the rendering of specific lives.

"Mourning Henry" finds the narrator prostrate on a 19th-century grave in front of a stone erected by a son named Henry to his adoptive parents. She tells Henry about her own griefs and the peculiarities of life in the late 20th century. Describing the utility of tranquilizers, she explains that "it's like having a friend inside." She finds consolation in contemplating Henry's devotion — and, eventually, in the embrace of a gravedigger.

In these first three powerful stories the high-pitched keening of the first-person narrative is in some sense directed at an audience, the sympathetic Henry, the obtuse analyst or the scorned V. O. Vernon. Subsequent stories are addressed to no one in particular — with one exception these are first-person monologues — and this lack of a buffer between the speaker and Death may account for the diffuseness of many of these stories. The narrator is so self-absorbed, so obsessed with death, that she has no time to introduce other characters — various stories mention a husband, a daughter, a son, but they are there only to confirm the narrator's roles as mother and wife. In the end, though, we know very little about her, either. She seems like a sketchy version of the hysterical Marin County housewife in "Norma Jean the Termite Queen," Ms. Ballantyne's acidly funny first novel.

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Henry James spoke of the "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" inherent in first-person narrative. It often gives away too much even as it reveals too little, leaving no space in which to insert authorial or readerly judgment. The narrator in these stories remains obscure, and there's no one else in sight. Only in the third-person "Key Largo," which concerns the decision to place a loved one in a nursing home, do we encounter characters with names and personalities.

A story called "Pelicans in Flight" features a warehouse dedicated to cryonic suspension: clients of this concern, no longer among the living, have paid thousands to have their bodies frozen in liquid nitrogen in the hope of resurrection when a cure is found for whatever killed them. One refrigeration module contains a disembodied brain, "bobbing in its liquid ice the way you'd picture pure intelligence pulsing in the farthest regions of space." This image calls James's cautionary observation to mind and suggests the limitations of these narratives, which seem largely to emanate from a brain in a vat. Solipsism reigns here. What's missing is authorial perspective — the sense that the brain behind the story knows something more than the brain ostensibly telling the story — as well as the friction of the social world, the drama of personalities brushing up against one another.

The last three stories are rambling meditations arising from the illness of a husband whose kidneys are failing. Because we are never properly introduced — he gets only a few lines and might be a plumber or a politician, a philanderer or puritan for all we learn about him — we are unable to sympathize with his ordeal.

These pieces are rife with incisive images and aphorisms: "We are fighting for our lives as insects do — clawing the air, their thin legs pedaling into nonexistence." "You think of LIFE like this now: an experiment that failed." Ms. Ballantyne is a thoughtful and stylish writer. But the specific textures of the lives in question are missing. Barely moored to the surfaces of the earth, little interested in the inhabitants, the narrative too often takes off into the ionosphere: "I am entering space, its cold regions, that black velocity where windless currents circle and collide, stealing my breath as they go."

Come back down, we would advise the author of "Life on Earth." Your talent will serve you better on the ground. □