

The Top
Houston Hodges: To Judy
June 5, 2011

He stared down at the toy top, there on the table by his bed. Shaped like a flattened acorn, like a squat heart with a flat top, like a Martian spacecraft, like a top: fashioned out of real, sure-'nough tin, with a push-spindle on top of it; pull it out, push it down, the top would spin, spin, spin! Red and green and yellow, blurring into brownish taupe as it spun, colors separating again when it slowed.

—Red like the tricycle, shiny, bright, under the Christmas tree! “Merry Christmas, Joey, three years old is time for a trike! Here’s how you turn the handlebars.”

—Green like the beautiful lawn that surprised him, at the cottage they bought after their honeymoon. Lush and inviting, but it needed mowing; a man of twenty-four needs a house with a lawn, he thought as he turned into the driveway.

—Yellow like the caution light the eighteen-wheeler did not see; turning into his lane, turning like inevitable slow-motion molasses, aiming like Armageddon at the side of the car where Marilyn always sat.

He watched the top as it spun, and slowed, and stopped, and toppled on its side.

“Oh, Mister Nichols, you and your top!” the nurse said. “How do you make it turn so long?”

“You want to know the secret?” he asked. He made that gesture of pulling up, pushing down on the spiral rod that made it spin. “The secret of the turning? —In the wind.”