

Mas Macho

When we, Veronica and I, were urban sophisticates not so very long ago, we used to play a game with our friends. There was no game board, no software and very few rules. It went by various names but was usually called, in our broken Spanish, 'Que es mas macho?' The premise was this; you take one thing and you match it against another thing and ask the question which do you think is the greater of the two? The competing items can be anything at all, people, places, vegetables, planets, anything. For instance, "Que es mas macho...broccoli or rutabaga? Then the participants would take one side or the other and propound on their various reasons for their chosen position. "Why broccoli of course, it's green, good for you and abundant." Or conversely, "A pox on broccoli, I think it tastes like old worms and besides its much more fun to say the word rutabaga." It is a player's job to convince the rest of the participants that his choice is the right one.

An evening's game would usually begin with such mundane comparisons as broccoli and rutabaga and progress through slightly more fanciful territory until, hours later the challengers were deliciously esoteric. I remember one night the game came to an abrupt end when the question was asked, "What do you think is greater, the pacific ocean or music?" That one hurt. Not only was it a lot to think about but the competing items were both universal favorites. How does one choose between two absolutes? How do you choose between beautifully powerful and powerfully beautiful? That, by the way, is one of the few rules of the game. You have to pick one or the other. No fence sitting, no apathy. As impossible as it might seem, you have to choose.

This glorious spring at the northeast corner of our home there bloomed two floriferous bushes, one an azalea and the other a honeysuckle. They have been at it for two weeks now and every morning their colors become deeper and more vivid. Every day each one of them makes the case for being the single most beautiful plant on the planet. The Azalea is the color of hot embers at the base of a well set camp fire, a scarlet-orange shade with its own internal light. It is by far the brighter of the two and its fist sized flowers are enormous when compared to the dainty honeysuckle. As for that wonderful lady, the honeysuckle is full from top to bottom with innumerable pale-pink-to-dark-fuschia blooms, jillions of them. From a distance the bush appears to be an eight foot ball of cotton candy.

The weight and number of the blossoms cause her branches to droop in an arc, out from the center, like the mid-air burst of certain pyrotechnics. And that fragrance, the fragrance will stop you dead; dead and happy to be so.

In playing the game I have gone back and forth between the two. When I look at the honeysuckle I can easily imagine it as a bunch of grapes, that's how packed it is with its own sweet produce. Pretty special, an eight foot bunch of grapes. When I look at the azalea I am transported to an Impressionist's garden. You look at some of their paintings and you think, "That color does not exist in nature." And then you see it outside your back door and realize that, in addition to inventing a color palette, Monet and Renoir were also recording what they actually saw. That color is real and I get to see it every day.

So how does one choose? I decided to watch the birds and use their preference to influence my own choice. After all, who am I to take issue with the natural denizens of this place? Bees are good at this too. So I counted the number of apian interactions with each plant and based my judgment on that. Pollinators are never wrong. Then I rated these contestants by their hardiness, their ability to stand up to pounding rain and driving winds, their resistance to heat and drought. And then I asked Veronica because she is marvelous at saying what is so and laying out appropriate reasons for why it must be thus. And then I flipped a coin.

I am both delighted and a little saddened to tell you that the honeysuckle wins, hands down. Hummingbirds love honeysuckle. Honeysuckle is their truck stop, campsite and cooler all rolled into one. The bees visit both bushes but the honeysuckle is where they hold their meetings. It has been windy here on the ridge and stormy lately. The azalea is dropping its blooms left and right while the honey-one gets fuller and fatter and sweeter. Veronica took only a second, just to show respect for the azalea, and then chose the honeysuckle. When I flipped the coin it came up heads for honeysuckle.

The overwhelming choice of those in the know is the honeysuckle but that's the wicked part of this game. Both bushes are undeniably beautiful. I want both on our grounds. I would love to have more of each. But one had to win and one had to lose and that's why the game is tough. I'll take a little break before the next round. It looks like it's going to be a rough one.

Clouds versus fruit.