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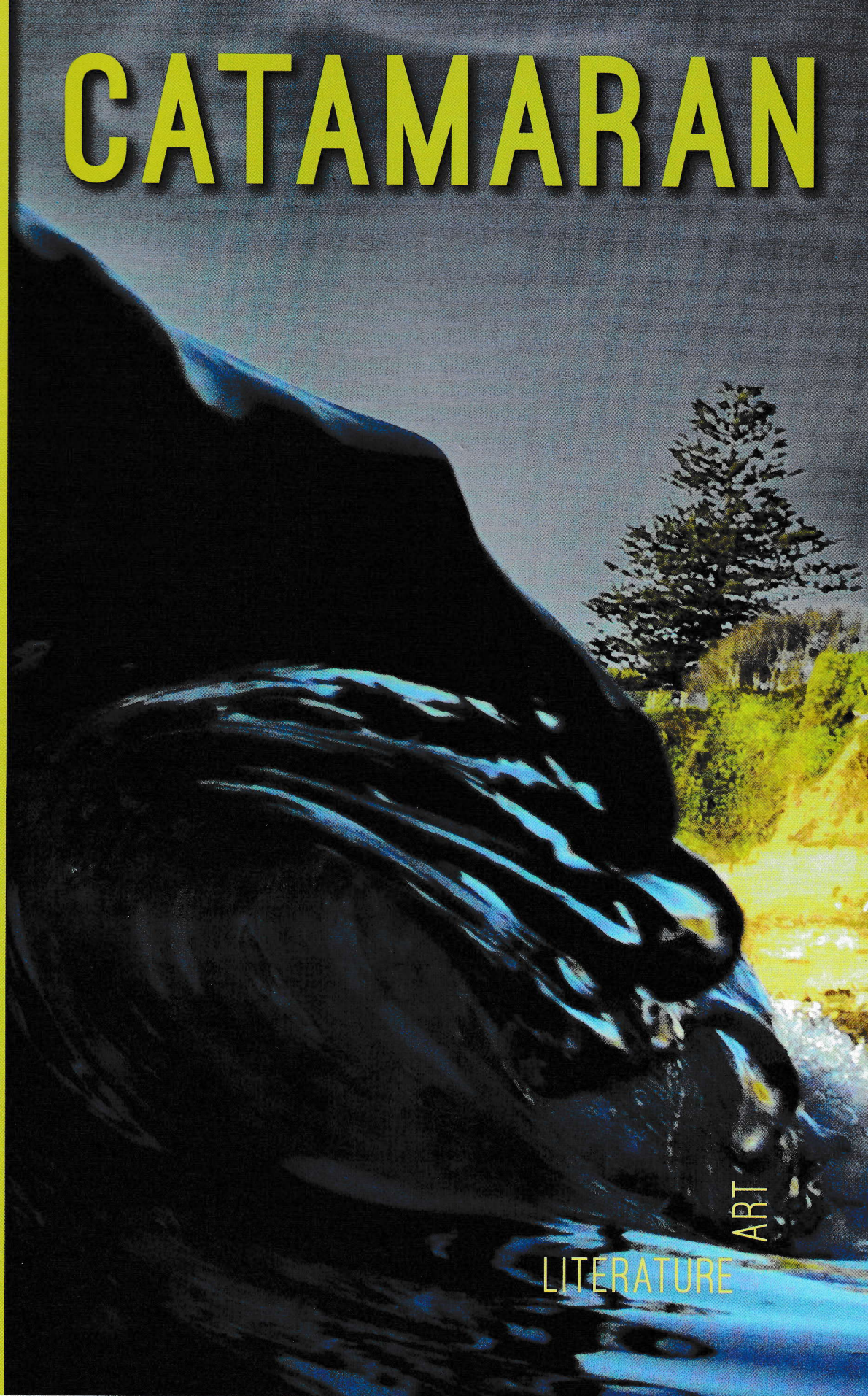
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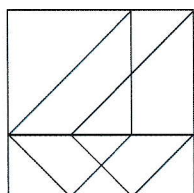


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TIM CAMPBELL

To Hold a Horse

From Carmichael,
California, to Costa Rica

I glared up the road at my rented horse, Pajaro, my saddle sitting naked in a mocking perch upon her back. We stood motionless, stuck like sweating statues in the hot Costa Rican sun. Her return stare—head lifted, nostrils flared, ears peaked sharply like radar—told me that she was contemplating a break for freedom. Ever since my arrival in the village as a Peace Corps volunteer, Pajaro's life had taken a turn toward drudgery, lugging me around on hot tropical afternoons instead of grazing in the shade. I showed little interest in her as well, except for transport. If I lost this standoff, she'd be even harder to corral. Even worse, the campesinos, whose trust I needed to earn to get things done in the village, would confirm their suspicions about the abilities of this Peace Corps guy.

Ten minutes earlier, Pajaro had jerked the reins free from their tether and trotted giddily a hundred yards up the rocky road. She was delighted to be liberated and eager to be back at her customary grazing on grasses and the tart guayabas that lay strewn about a lone tree in her wet pasture. But now she had reached a closed gate, where she knew her avenues of escape were cut off by steep slopes, a swiftly moving stream, and barbed-wire fences playing over the foothills. Her only recourse was to head back down the rock-strewn road past me.

I had already learned in my first months of volunteerism that chasing Pajaro would come to nothing. Only lumps of sugar would get her over her sense of freedom and into the bridle; without the sweets, she would chase away with a horsey chuckle.

I needed Pajaro to get to campesinos living in far-flung plots around the village. It lay at the center of a land reform colony where a couple hundred peasants nurtured coffee trees on the verdant hillsides. From the village center, roads little more than dirt tracks branched out in three directions, penetrating the rolling hills and fertile green mountains. Campesinos needed better roads and water, and Pajaro was my only way to keep in touch with them.

I was returning from a visit to a small peasant farm along one of those roads when Pajaro made her break. As I held her gaze on the road, my mind searched back to earliest days of learning horsemanship—of riding bareback, of animal control and self-control—while growing up on our two acres on the edge of Carmichael, California.

* * *

My dad lifted me up like a light packsaddle onto the broad back of our two-year-old chestnut, Nelly. My legs stuck straight out across Nelly's broad beam like toothpicks in a potato. She seemed impossibly wide and far off the ground. Sitting on top of Nelly reminded me of sitting on the three-room chicken coop behind our house: my view improved greatly. But the chicken coop would never move. I wondered deeply about the pure mechanics of controlling a big animal, a stable structure holding all that mass so high in the air, yet able to move so swiftly across our pastures.

My dad looped a thick cotton rope around Nelly's muzzle, tied a single half hitch on the left, and handed me the trailing end. It was just long enough for me to hold in both hands. I sat with bare necessities: no bit, a one-sided halter, no saddle.

"You can have a saddle when you learn to ride," my dad said.

I sat dumbly, awaiting further instruction. The sun beat down through the cottonwoods overhead. The heat drove cottonwoody gasses and scintillas into the summer sky. Fibers and aromas sailed about like tiny emissaries. They floated over Nelly's mane and drifted far down the sloping green pasture, over the water standpipe, on toward the black walnut trees, dissolving off into the squat valley oaks beyond the fence and the creek a half mile away.

Nelly shifted her weight, and I experienced the first uncontrolled movement of a large mammal beneath me. Even my little frame felt the effects of torque with Nelly's every small motion—an ominous shift for me, filled with unimaginable potential, yet little more than a sigh for her. My presence on her back was of no moment whatsoever.

"Indian children grip with their legs and steer with the horse's mane," my dad said in a matter-of-fact way. This imparted little comfort, since my legs were in no position to grip anything. I grasped the rope halter more tightly. "How do I make her go?" I asked, partly hoping, I remember, that maybe there was no way to make her go without a bit, a proper halter, reins, and a saddle.

Dad smiled up at me from under his fisherman's cap. He said nothing as we walked slowly along the wood fence beneath the cottonwood, stepped up on the lowermost boards, and tore a small branch from the tree. He stripped away a few of the offshooting stalks until the limber main

stem, now naked, fanned out with smaller stems toward the end, some with peripheral leaves still attached.

He returned to my side and handed up the switch. "Here," he said, "use this. Don't hit her hard, and remember, whatever happens, you're the boss."

I was scarcely able to fathom the meaning of these words, feeling more like Piglet, at the small, confused bottom end of things, than the confident Christopher Robin. I felt even less certain about the meaning of the words that followed: "Never let the horse think it is in control. You're in charge, no matter what."

* * *

Those words floated up from memory as I eyed Pajaro on that mountain road. She looked back at me, as if to measure my resolve. Would I sustain my father's view of order in the animal kingdom? Her head swung effortlessly down. She seemed to be exploring whether any angle of advantage could be discerned from ground level. After a moment she came up again, and then casually swiveled her gaze off to one side and then to the rear, as if, after intense scrutiny of the Peace Corps volunteer standing in the road, she had lost interest in the face-off and found more compelling things in the trees. Birds flitted among banana palms. A lizard waddled slowly toward a cooler spot under a fallen log.

My days on horseback in Costa Rica had not always been so awkward. On many mornings like this one, I would ride along the muddy oxcart tracks winding up the steep hills to visit campesinos in their shacks on the land reform colony, where I worked at community organizing. On some afternoons, I would alternately be soaked with sweat and rain, then dried by the intermittent tropical sun, only to have my blue work shirt soaked through once again in a relentless cycle: sweat from the heat, evaporation, soaking rain, dry again, sweat once more. Along the trail Pajaro and I would ride, both steaming, like some Newtonian machine propelled by hot gasses through a primordial jungle.

At the end of the day we would arrive unwound, like spent springs of tired clocks, reaching the yard in front of my house to the sound of tiny frogs piping plaintively under the evening sky. As the hues of dusk grew darker, fireflies nestling by the tens of thousands flashed among the sugarcane stalks off in the valley across the road. Their

pinpricks of pale light dotted a fathomless black canvas untouched by the artificial shine of man's electric bulbs. Dazzled by the beauty of the scene, I would loosen the cinch, unsaddle Pajaro, and put her to pasture with little fanfare. The signaling blinked across the field in sharp, patternless displays. The miniature frogs hiding nearby would call out. On and on into the night the blinking and the piping celebrated the bliss of the day for me and signaled the end of another day of drudgery for Pajaro.

My arrival on the scene to do community development required mobility, and Pajaro's life had changed for the worse. Climbing . . . sweating . . . bearing my weight. She much preferred to munch grasses and juicy guayabas. The *tomaga* incident could have been the last straw for her.

Weeks before, in a neighboring village, a peasant had brought me a *tomaga*, a deadly pit viper. The snake was coiled tightly in a large bottle, sealed by a fruit pit stuffed into the broken opening. I had advertised money in exchange for pit vipers as part of a government program to produce antivenoms. *Tomagas* are marvelous creatures, short, greenish, frowning. Little horns over their bony eye ridges give them a menacing, ugly scowl, even by nature's generous standard. Night was coming on, storm clouds rumbled over the hillsides, and we were miles from home. Despite the precarious container, I felt obliged to accept the snake. Pajaro shied and stammered as I placed the bottle in my saddlebag.

I paid the peasant, bade farewell, and swung into the saddle. Pajaro picked her way down the darkening, muddy hillside as the storm erupted into naked assault. Sheets of rain smacked broad palms with the roar of surf. By the time we reached the main road, we were fully soaked and still had a forty minutes ride to my village.

Pajaro broke without prompting into full gallop. Perhaps she felt her speed would keep the *tomaga* at a safe distance behind her. The rain drove straight into our faces as we raced south along the rocky road. Dim figures stood framed in wooden windows and under tin porch roofs, watching with curiosity as we sped by. We made the gentle bends and easy rises in the road without slowing, saddlebags flapping wildly. I was sure the straps were secure, but also knew the snake would be very unhappy about this passage to Platanillo. I used a lantern and a long stick to

retrieve the frazzled snake from the saddlebags after Pajaro was safely enclosed in her pasture.

My faceoff with Pajaro on the road took place only a few days later. Now, Pajaro swung her head around at me once again, as if troubled by some molecule of memory about the *tomaga*. I felt a decisive moment looming.

In a blink, she burst into motion, her muzzle thrust forward in a headstrong lurch. She reached a gallop in two strides and raced forward as if determined to rid herself from servitude. Her shoulders rolled like twin cams. Stirrups flapped wildly like the broken wings of some tropical Pegasus. Rocks rolled and flew in all directions.

My muscles stiffened; my mind became a calliope of images and sounds. My brow and armpits were suddenly soaked, my mouth dry as all the moisture in my body began to seep to the sky. Pajaro was going for broke, speeding straight toward me, the whites of her eyes gaining intention, steadily more clear, her ears lay low. The thundering in my head rang louder than her pounding hooves. If I stepped aside, Pajaro would establish a new order of things.

Above this clamor, another wisp of memory emerged of my five-year-old self striking Nelly with the cottonwood switch given me by my father. Nelly had shot out from a standstill under the cottonwood, a steel pinball rocketing faster than the speed of squeal up a narrow shoot with the same spontaneous burst of energy Pajaro was now discharging toward me.

* * *

Nelly galloped straight for the far corner of the pasture. The dynamic of her pounding hooves and throbbing muscles boiled up into a calamitous roar. My legs bobbed wildly, my vision blurred, my head out of sync with my mouth, teeth clattering, the rope halter completely forgotten, my fingers locked tightly around fistfuls of mane. We crashed down the pasture slope for long minutes, my mind at the edge of terror, my body unable to find a pattern in the chaos of movement.

Then came an utter cessation of sound, a momentary lull, save for the rushing of wind passing about my ears. In an instant, we had shifted from mad, headlong pounding into a windy, soaring arc. Nelly made a gigantic leap into the air. My position on her became impossible to reckon. I could not be certain she was still beneath me. Sound

resumed once again. With a mighty thump as Nelly's hooves dug deeply into the soft, muddy turf.

Even as we approached landing, my nose dove into her mane. My lips, my chin, my cheeks and neck slid in rough caress along her spine, down her neck, and across the broad, warm swelling of her withers. As she pitched forward and planted her front hooves, I slid down her left forearm like a fire pole and miraculously hit the ground feet first, coming to a near standstill, stunned and open-mouthed, halter rope still in hand.

Nelly felt the sudden tug on her muzzle as I came to earth, and she drew up the forward motion of her hindquarters and reared to a halt. The whites of her eyes arched high around her dark-brown irises as she searched to understand the semblance of force being exerted upon her. She bent her head down and around to face me, as if to examine what sort of small thing—this small human boy—had engineered this control after all the calamity. Though shocked by this test-piloting, I realized—standing there at the foot of the water standpipe that she, and I, had just jumped—that I was still in charge, at least from her point of view.

* * *

Jumping that faucet had formed a foundation for the resolve I now felt building in the face of Pajaro's stampede. My father's words echoed once again in my head: "*In charge . . . no matter what.*"

Pajaro's silhouette shifted from barrel chest and reaching forearms to speeding freight train. Her dark mane and tail flew outward like flashing alarms. Her broad body and clattering hooves pushed dust and gravel into an upwelling tidal wave about to break over me.

My mind raced: fight or flee? My teeth clenched and my heart was flopping like a netted fish. In split-second succession, my resolve firmed up, then melted away, then renewed. I harbored a small hope that Pajaro might, at the last instant, break to one side of the narrow road. But this was balanced with the fear that she might just as easily make me part of the road. Her bearing remained intent, her gallop did not diminish, and she bore down with a throaty rumble of moving mass.

My life clearly hung on the edge of a tossed coin: either Dad was right or I would be trampled into gravel and dust.

A force inside me jutted out my arms, stiff and wooden,

like a cross, but I could not close my eyes. My father's words echoed once more in my head: "*. . . no matter what.*" I looked unflinching into Pajaro's onrushing form. She was within only a few yards, and the moment had arrived. There seemed a brief interlude of silence. In the same second it had taken her to spring into motion, Pajaro began to stop. Her forearms stiffened, her hooves pushed into the gravel, more rocks flew, dust billowed forward. Her rear hooves bit into the road; her head flew up and out at a tortured angle. The noise was jarring. In sputtering confusion, within two strides, short-stepping, nearly hopping, she had pulled to a standstill. Her momentum carried her rear end around, her body now nearly broadside to me. The reins swung forward, still playing out the forward motion of her wild break for freedom.

The whites of her eyes arched high around her dark-brown irises as she searched to understand the semblance of force being exerted upon her. She bent her head down and around to face me, as if to examine what sort of force—what sort of gringo man—had engineered this control after all the calamity.

Pajaro took me at a slow gait back to the village, I tipping my hat to neighbors here and there. In the yard, I rounded up a half dozen guayabas for Pajaro, then brushed her down for an hour before riding her bareback into the pasture.

After a forty-year career, three professional books, a doctorate in urban studies, and several million miles covered working on poverty reduction in cities around the world, **Tim Campbell** is now writing about life on the road. His most recent stories have been accepted at *The Smart Set*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, and other online journals.