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If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home

SHORT STORIES BY

Pete Hsu

Winner of the Red Hen Press Fiction Award

If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home, Pete Hsu's gripping and energetic debut, tells the stories of children and young people navigating a world not made for them, where the presence of death and violence is found everywhere: Vegas casinos, birthday parties, church services, and sunny days at the beach.

Full of warmth, terror, and underhanded humor, *If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home*, Pete Hsu's debut story collection, captures the essence of surviving in a life set adrift. Children and young people navigate a world where the presence of violence and death rear themselves in everyday places: Vegas casinos, birthday parties, church services, and sunny days at the beach. Each story is a meditation on living in a world not made for us—the pervasive fear, the adaptations, the unexpected longings. A gripping and energetic debut, Hsu's writing beats with the naked rhythms of an unsettled human heart.

ADVANCE PRAISE

"Each story surprised me, over and over again, with the narratives of children and young people navigating the random dangers of their homes, the adults around them, and the absolute presence always of violence and death. But it was the sly humor, the vivid detail of forest and church and street and body, that made these stories stay with me. The voices are indelible, and the moments when the whole world turns and pivots were admirable in their magic."

—**Susan Straight**, award-winning author of a memoir, *In the Country of Women*, and eight novels, including *Highwire Moon*.

"Pete Hsu is a clear, emotionally perceptive writer. The twelve loosely connected stories in *If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home* give us intimate views into the inner lives of sensitive characters trying to find a foothold in the shifting terrain of this unpredictable, limitless world."

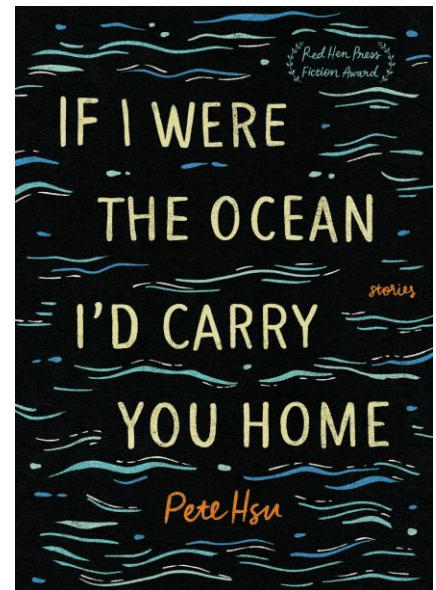
—**Steph Cha**, author of *Your House Will Pay*

"Pete Hsu's writing is assured and his stories subtle and keenly observed. *If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home* is about family and friendship and the way we run—all of us—to forget what it seems we shouldn't."

—**Natashia Deón**, author of *Grace* and *The Perishing*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pete Hsu is a Taiwanese American writer based in Pasadena, CA. He is the author of the experimental chapbook, *There is a Man* (Tolsun Books). His work has also been featured in several journals and anthologies, including Asian American Writers' Workshop's *The Margins*, *F(r)iction*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He was a 2017 PEN Center USA Emerging Voices Fellow as well as the 2017 PEN in the Community Writer in Residence.



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FROM IF I WERE THE OCEAN, I'D CARRY YOU HOME

From "MAIN & MAINE"

They know of each other in the coincidental kind of way. She is the cousin of his cousin's boyfriend. Also, they have almost the same last name. His is Chiang. Hers is Chang. All this makes it sound like they are related, but they aren't. When they first meet in real life, he sees her in the kitchen at a party. She's drinking a soda out of the can. She's got something baking in the oven, like a dessert. She takes it out. It's graham crackers and some kind of yellow sauce. It looks terrible, but she looks great, pretty like in her pictures, but pale and also shorter. Less Korean, if that makes sense, less assertive, less sociable. He guesses those kinds of things show differently in pictures.

But she moves like she's floating in water, out of time with the music, but in time with the deep, the invisible, like she's one with God or the ocean. These are the kinds of things he might say to describe someone he wants to sleep with. He does want to sleep with her. He also thinks he could be in love with her, but she isn't available and neither is he. So, he keeps his distance. He hides out in the kitchen. He drinks several beers. He keeps count in his head. Seven. That's too many. He's drunk, maybe. He's a quiet drunk. He is also a quiet sober person.

She keeps coming to talk to him as if they're flirting. He doesn't think she is good at flirting. He is not good at flirting. He doesn't know for sure that they're flirting, but she touches his arm when she talks to him. This is maybe the fourth time she's touched his arm like this. She says, "I don't know why I keep touching your arm."

He pays close attention to her exact words: "I don't know why I keep touching your arm." He tries to interpret this. He wants it to tell him that she wants to sleep with him. He also wants it to tell him how to talk to her. He wants to say things to her. He can feel his heart in his throat.

Then the moment passes.

Her boyfriend comes and joins their conversation. Her boyfriend's name is Walt Gourley. Walt is a tall, muscular Scots-Irish guy with Pokémon tattoos up and down his left arm. He likes Walt. He's a fan of Pokémon. And also, Walt talks a lot, which means he doesn't have to talk as much.

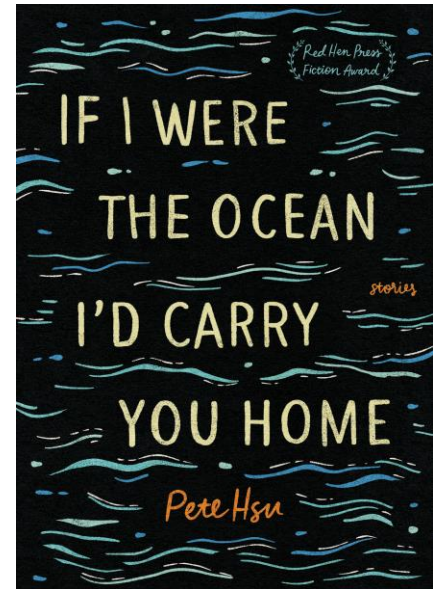
Walt says, "Who's this?"

He wonders why Walt doesn't recognize him. They go to the same school. They're almost the same major. His is Literature. Walt's is Creative Writing.

She says, "This is James Chiang's cousin."

He puts his hand out to Walt. He's about to introduce himself when Walt slaps his hand away and gives him a hug, "Hey, no way, Jimmy Chiang's cousin? I fucking love Jimmy."

Walt holds him for a long time. It's a full contact hug, chest to chest, stomach to stomach, penis to penis. He arches his back to keep their penises from touching. It doesn't help. Walt is very strong. He gives in. He relaxes. He hugs Walt back. It feels really great. He is about to lay his head on Walt's shoulder when Walt lets go, keeping one arm around his neck, Walt grabs her with the other arm so it's a Walt sandwich, him to the left and her to the right. He wonders if something sexual could happen with the three of them. It's not exactly what he wants, but he wouldn't say no either.



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