

CRAIG BUCHNER

Fish
Cough



FISH COUGH

A NOVEL

CRAIG BUCHNER

Praise for Fish Cough

Craig Buchner has written a strange and powerful novel, a story that flares and zooms at the reader like the meteor shower that dazzles and bewilders our heroes, Thom and Howard. For all its otherworldly aspects, *Fish Cough* is a story about animals trying to make sense of the chaos around, and inside them, about love as the ultimate force of disequilibrium, and the ultimate source of hope. Brilliant.

Steve Almond, author of
All the Secrets of the World

Meteorites and great fires, pet squirrels and bottle caps with secret codes, good and evil, drama and comedy, anger and grief and love, yes, mostly love, like the works of George Saunders or Lorrie Moore that depict the warped madness of these modern times as a means for us to see ourselves clearer, Craig Buchner's *Fish Cough* is a wildly imaginative, deeply thoughtful, and potently-moving riot of a novel.

Alan Heathcock, author of *VOLT* and *40*

Fish Cough is a strikingly original fable of apocalypse that surprises by its focus on ordinary life – the way we continue to love and struggle to find meaning and connection even in the midst of the End. It rang very true to me.

Dan Chaon, author of *Sleepwalk*

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Hello from Portland, Oregon, U.S.A

For Delphine

Prologue

Smoke shaped like a fish head hung over the warehouse. Pumper trucks and police cruisers flashed red and blue strobe lights, and volunteer firefighters crisscrossed the lot with choreographed precision. The blaze had been extinguished from the loading dock—all that remained. Soon the wind picked up, unanchoring the coal-black smoke, the fish head cloud making glacial progress. It would soon dissolve into thin air as if it had never existed.

We lived in a strange world where alien objects fell from the sky and buildings could suddenly vanish. That was what had happened.

It was the first meteorite of the shower to pass through the atmosphere and touch down. At the time, no one knew that the golf ball-sized rock, by the time it pierced the transformer box on the utility pole, had once been a part of a meteoroid that measured three hundred thirty-three feet across and had traveled sixty-two million miles. At the time, no one knew that the blast of sparks caused by the meteoroid fragment zipping through the energized equipment would ignite the brittle gray leaves on the overhanging oak tree and eventually drop a small, flaming branch onto the roof of the warehouse where the maintenance crew had retarred and graveled a six square feet patch to prevent a leak, the spark causing a swift and brutal fire that raced across the surface and eventually ate its way through to the second floor's ceiling and into each room below. At the time, no one knew that the jet-black stone, as glossy as a bead of beluga caviar, that was wedged into the base of the oak tree would be the cause of so much strangeness.

Book I



Chapter 1

He looked at me for the first time in two days.

I said, “I care about you. I want us to make each other happy. I just don’t know if we do anymore.”

Howard hesitated. Then he nodded. This was good. We were communicating. The pinched hole of his mouth moved slowly. It wasn’t a smile but a glimmer. There had to be a cure for whatever was happening between us. Howard wanted something from this relationship that I wasn’t budging on—a child. In return, I wanted something that Howard held back.

Had our relationship turned into a chess match?

“I wish we could start over,” I said. “What was it even like? In the beginning.”

I know we played our moves wrong, but I wanted to try again.

Every Thursday, Crush—the closest bar to our apartment—hosted trivia night. A weekly get-together for Howard and his trivialist cohort that predated our time.

In the beginning, he’d tell me the questions his team missed. Coming home half-cocked, he’d say, “Thom, did you know that fourteen percent of people think cilantro tastes like soap?”

He’d say, “Our country was named after Amerigo Vespucci.”

He’d say, “The human body contains nine pints of blood.”

But tonight, like the night before, he didn’t say a word when he got home. Tonight, someone else spoke first.

“Thommy Salami,” Antonio said, pulling me into a bear hug.

He’d been our guest before, but this was the first time in a long time. Hair on his chest spilling out of his V-neck. Hot, stale breath on my ear as he said, “You smell magnifico.”

But he smelled like cigarettes and gin.

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Howard shrugged and held up his palms. A classic “Don’t ask me” gesture.

“Everyone drinking?” Antonio asked.

I poured whiskey into Howard’s silver-rimmed tumblers. The metal was faded from the dishwasher.

“Congrats on getting engaged,” I said, still wondering why Howard brought him home.

“Oh, that,” he said. “That one didn’t stick. But congrats to you both,” Antonio continued. “Half a decade together. But Howard says you need a little variété. And with this, what is it called, the lion-something. That meteor shower, right, maybe a big ole rock is going to wipe us out like the dinosaurs. So, for tonight, let’s all *carpe diem*.”

“The Leonids,” I said. “That’s the name of it.”

“Yes, that’s exactly it,” Antonio said. “Maybe none of us have much time if the worst... well.”

Howard grimaced. “What do you say?” he was talking only to me.

“I mean,” I said. “I’m not opposed.”

Then Howard grabbed Antonio’s belt. Until recently, Howard considered himself a top. We blamed his inability to perform on stress: we made too little money, we worked too many hours, we planned too many evenings. Routine killed romance.

This was all so unlike Howard.

“Finally,” Antonio said, reaching for me. He found that spot on my neck to kiss.

Down on his knees, Howard unzipped my jeans, then he backed away slowly like a bombmaker who had just triggered something of unfathomable power.

Without saying a word, he waited for us to start.

I wondered what an animal watching us through the window would think of us sweating and grunting. It was all for pure

pleasure, although that wasn't entirely true. It was to pretend our sex life was something else. Something that hadn't vanished.

Howard left us. I didn't hear him anywhere.

Antonio grabbed my hips as I lowered onto his lap. I pushed down, and Antonio lifted me. I bucked back. He heaved again, but I put him in his place. He tried again, but I wouldn't let him. Forced him into me. Now. This time together. Uncontainable energy building. I sensed the familiarity of coming. I did it to him.

His hands released my hips, and I felt him unload.

But I kept going.

"Thommy," he said. "Thom! Stop."

But I didn't, and I slammed against him. I wanted it back. Howard and I. Our past. Our youth. All of it. But it was gone, and this was the last of it. A few teaspoons of sweat and cum from another man. I went berserk. I wanted to break him off. When this ends, it all ends.

"Jesus, man, stop!" Antonio said.

He shoved my hips, and breathlessly I apologized; but I wasn't sorry.

I fell onto the bed next to him.

I said, "I got carried away."

"No kidding," Antonio said, searching for his clothes.

Howard returned, looking at the mess of sheets and shirts and socks.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"I need to get going," Antonio said.

"You don't want another drink?" I asked.

When the house was quiet, Howard and I stripped the bed. Together we tucked the clean sheets under the mattress and fluffed the comforter. Howard slid under the covers first.

"It wasn't like it used to be," I said.

Howard shook his head.

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I said, "This wasn't only about me. You did this for you, too, right?"

But he looked away. He wasn't shy; he just didn't want to admit the real reason.

"You didn't even want to try?"

He pulled the blankets to his chin like a child too nervous to speak. I slid my hand down his chest.

"Let me give it a go," I said.

He closed his eyes and bit his lip, as my fingers swam through his pubic hair. I gave him a tug. Then another.

"What is it?" I asked. "Does it feel good or no?"

Howard shook his head. Was that a tear on his cheek?

"I don't think it's a bad thing," I said, resting my hand on his stomach.

He nodded—trying to agree with me.

I kissed his cheek and held my face against his. But he was frozen. Like a block of ice. I wanted to save him. To thaw him out. But this was all we had. This moment. Because this was the last moment it was ever this good—and it wasn't good at all.