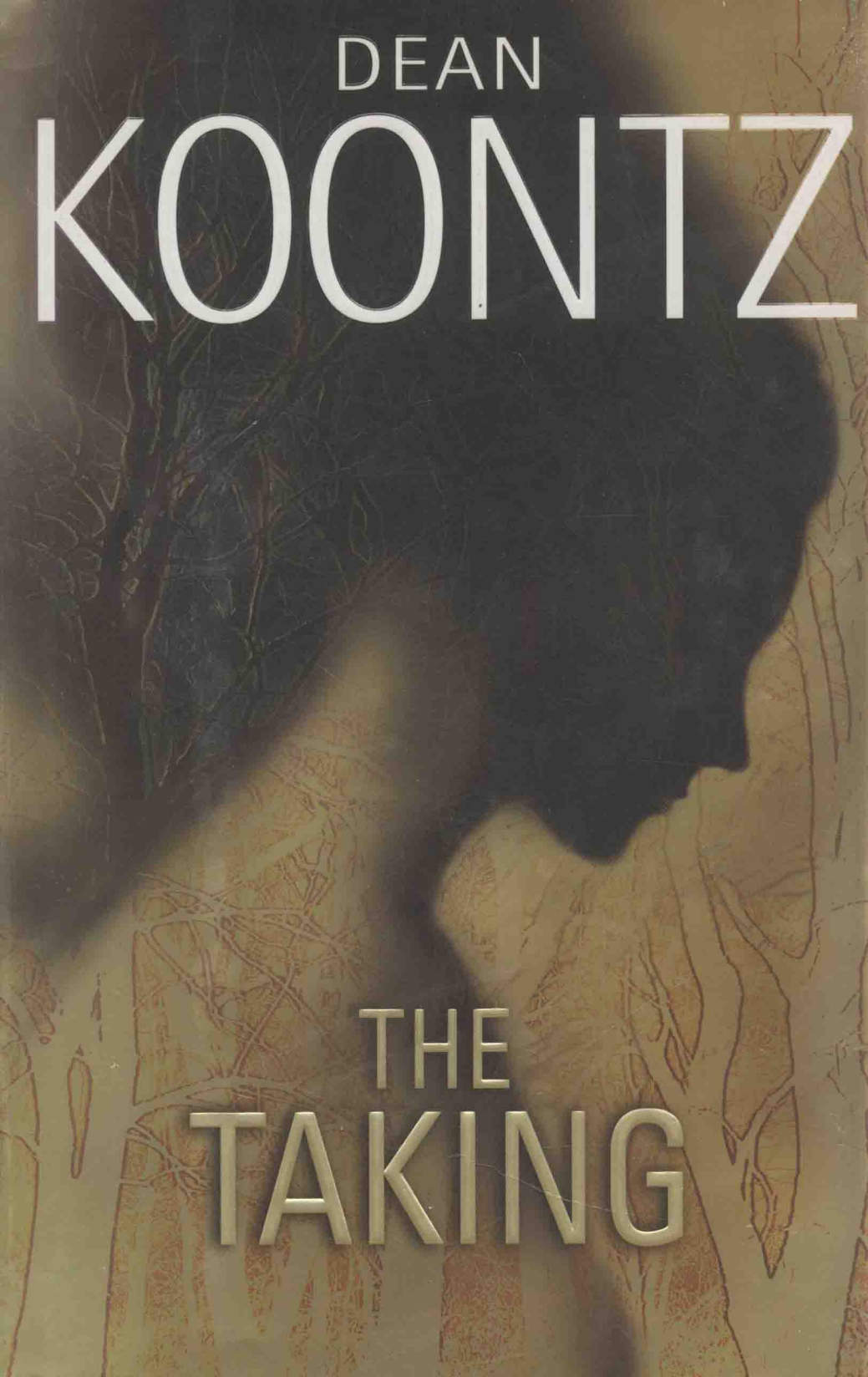
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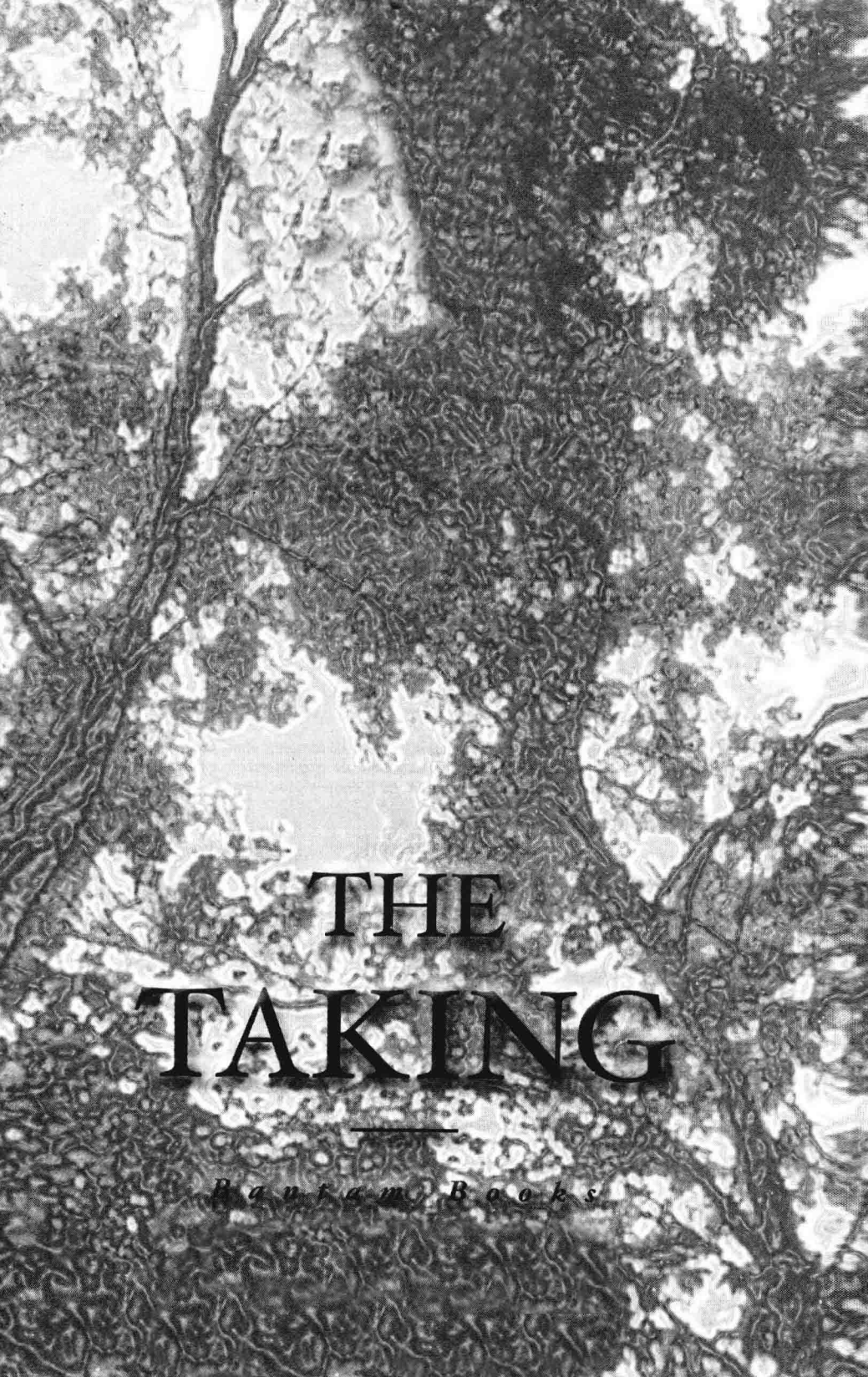
THE
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*This book is dedicated to Joe Stefko:*
*great drummer, publisher of exquisite special editions,*
*dog-lover . . . three virtues that guarantee Heaven.*
*The bad feet can be overlooked.*

*"When you're alone in the middle of the night and you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright . . ."*

—T. S. Eliot, *Fragment of an Agon*

# THE TAKING

# PART ONE

*"In my beginning is my end."*

—T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

# *I*

A FEW MINUTES PAST ONE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, a hard rain fell without warning. No thunder preceded the deluge, no wind.

The abruptness and the ferocity of the downpour had the urgent quality of a perilous storm in a dream.

Lying in bed beside her husband, Molly Sloan had been restless before the sudden cloudburst. She grew increasingly fidgety as she listened to the rush of rain.

The voices of the tempest were legion, like an angry crowd chanting in a lost language. Torrents pounded and pried at the cedar siding, at the shingles, as if seeking entrance.

September in southern California had always before been a dry month in a long season of predictable drought. Rain rarely fell after March, seldom before December.

In wet months, the rataplan of raindrops on the roof had sometimes served as a reliable remedy for insomnia. This night, however, the liquid rhythms failed to lull her into slumber, and not just because they were out of season.

For Molly, sleeplessness had too often in recent years been the price of thwarted ambition. Scorned by the sandman, she stared at the dark bed-

room ceiling, brooding about what might have been, yearning for what might never be.

By the age of twenty-eight, she had published four novels. All were well received by reviewers, but none sold in sufficient numbers to make her famous or even to guarantee that she would find an eager publisher for the next.

Her mother, Thalia, a writer of luminous prose, had been in the early years of an acclaimed career when she died of cancer at thirty. Now, sixteen years later, Thalia's books were out of print, her mark upon the world all but erased.

Molly lived with a quiet dread of following her mother into obscurity. She didn't suffer from an inordinate fear of death; rather, she was troubled by the thought of dying before achieving any lasting accomplishment.

Beside her, Neil snored softly, oblivious of the storm.

Sleep always found him within a minute of the moment when he put his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. He seldom stirred during the night; after eight hours, he woke in the same position in which he had gone to sleep—rested, invigorated.

Neil claimed that only the innocent enjoyed such perfect sleep.

Molly called it the sleep of the slacker.

Throughout their seven years of marriage, they had conducted their lives by different clocks.

She dwelled as much in the future as in the present, envisioning where she wished to go, relentlessly mapping the path that ought to lead to her high goals. Her strong mainspring was wound tight.

Neil lived in the moment. To him, the far future was next week, and he trusted time to take him there whether or not he planned the journey.

They were as different as mice and moonbeams.

Considering their contrasting natures, they shared a love that seemed unlikely. Yet love was the cord that bound them together, the sinewy fiber that gave them strength to weather disappointment, even tragedy.

During Molly's spells of insomnia, Neil's rhythmic snoring, although not loud, sometimes tested love almost as much as infidelity might have done. Now the sudden crash of pummeling rain masked the noise that he made, giving Molly a new target upon which to focus her frustration.

The roar of the storm escalated until they seemed to be inside the rumbling machinery that powered the universe.

Shortly after two o'clock, without switching on a light, Molly got out of bed. At a window that was protected from the rain by the overhanging roof, she looked through her ghostly reflection, into a windless monsoon.

Their house stood high in the San Bernardino Mountains, embraced by sugar pines, knobcone pines, and towering ponderosas with dramatic fissured bark.

Most of their neighbors were in bed at this hour. Through the shrouding trees and the incessant downpour, only a single cluster of lights could be seen on these slopes above Black Lake.

The Corrigan place. Harry Corrigan had lost Calista, his wife of thirty-five years, back in June.

During a weekend visit to her sister, Nancy, in Redondo Beach, Calista parked her Honda near an ATM to withdraw two hundred dollars. She'd been robbed, then shot in the face.

Subsequently, Nancy had been pulled from the car and shot twice. She had also been run over when the two gunmen escaped in the Honda. Now, three months after Calista's funeral, Nancy remained in a coma.

While Molly yearned for sleep, Harry Corrigan strove every night to avoid it. He said his dreams were killing him.

In the tides of the storm, the luminous windows of Harry's house seemed like the running lights of a distant vessel on a rolling sea: one of those fabled ghost ships, abandoned by passengers and crew, yet with lifeboats still secured. Untouched dinners would be found on plates in the crew's mess. In the wheelhouse, the captain's favorite pipe, warm with smoldering tobacco, would await discovery on the chart table.

Molly's imagination had been engaged; she couldn't easily shift into

neutral again. Sometimes, in the throes of insomnia, she tossed and turned into the arms of literary inspiration.

Downstairs, in her study, were five chapters of her new novel, which needed to be polished. A few hours of work on the manuscript might soothe her nerves enough to allow sleep.

Her robe draped the back of a nearby chair. She shrugged into it and knotted the belt.

Crossing to the door, she realized that she was navigating with surprising ease, considering the absence of lamplight. Her sureness in the gloom couldn't be explained entirely by the fact that she had been awake for hours, staring at the ceiling with dark-adapted eyes.

The faint light at the windows, sufficient to dilute the bedroom darkness, could not have traveled all the way from Harry Corrigan's house, three doors to the south. The true source at first eluded her.

Storm clouds hid the moon.

Outside, the landscape lights were off; the porch lights, too.

Returning to the window, she puzzled over the tinseled glimmer of the rain. A curious wet sheen made the bristling boughs of the nearest pines more visible than they should have been.

Ice? No. Stitching through the night, needles of sleet would have made a more brittle sound than the susurrant drumming of this autumn downpour.

She pressed fingertips to the windowpane. The glass was cool but not cold.

When reflecting ambient light, falling rain sometimes acquires a silvery cast. In this instance, however, no ambient light existed.

The rain itself appeared to be faintly luminescent, each drop a light-emitting crystal. The night was simultaneously veiled and revealed by skeins of vaguely fluorescent beads.

When Molly stepped out of the bedroom, into the upstairs hall, the soft glow from two domed skylights bleached the gloom from black to gray, revealing the way to the stairs. Overhead, the rainwater sheeting

down the curved Plexiglas was enlivened by radiant whorls that resembled spiral nebulae wheeling across the vault of a planetarium.

She descended the stairs and proceeded to the kitchen by the guidance of the curiously storm-lit windows.

Some nights, embracing rather than resisting insomnia, she brewed a pot of coffee to take to her desk in the study. Thus stoked, she wrote jagged, caffeine-sharpened prose with the realistic tone of police-interrogation transcripts.

This night, however, she intended to return eventually to bed. After switching on the light in the vent hood above the cooktop, she flavored a mug of milk with vanilla extract and cinnamon, then heated it in the microwave.

In her study, volumes of her favorite poetry and prose—Louise Glück, Donald Justice, T. S. Eliot, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Dickens—lined the walls. Occasionally, she took comfort and inspiration from a humble sense of kinship with these writers.

Most of the time, however, she felt like a pretender. Worse, a fraud.

Her mother had said that every good writer needed to be her own toughest critic. Molly edited her work with both a red pen and a metaphorical hatchet, leaving evidence of bloody suffering with the former, reducing scenes to kindling with the latter.

More than once, Neil suggested that Thalia had never said—and had not intended to imply—that worthwhile art could be carved from raw language only with self-doubt as sharp as a chisel. To Thalia, her work had also been her favorite form of play.

In a troubled culture where cream often settled on the bottom and the palest milk rose to the top, Molly knew that she was short on logic and long on superstition when she supposed that her hope for success rested upon the amount of passion, pain, and polish that she brought to her writing. Nevertheless, regarding her work, Molly remained a Puritan, finding virtue in self-flagellation.

Leaving the lamps untouched, she switched on the computer but

didn't at once sit at her desk. Instead, as the screen brightened and the signature music of the operating system welcomed her to a late-night work session, she was once more drawn to a window by the insistent rhythm of the rain.

Beyond the window lay the deep front porch. The railing and the overhanging roof framed a dark panorama of serried pines, a strangely luminous ghost forest out of a disturbing dream.

She could not look away. For reasons that she wasn't able to articulate, the scene made her uneasy.

Nature has many lessons to teach a writer of fiction. One of these is that nothing captures the imagination as quickly or as completely as does spectacle.

Blizzards, floods, volcanos, hurricanes, earthquakes: They fascinate because they nakedly reveal that Mother Nature, afflicted with bipolar disorder, is as likely to snuff us as she is to succor us. An alternately nurturing and destructive parent is the stuff of gripping drama.

Silvery cascades leafed the bronze woods, burnishing bark and bough with sterling highlights.

An unusual mineral content in the rain might have lent it this slight phosphorescence.

Or . . . having come in from the west, through the soiled air above Los Angeles and surrounding cities, perhaps the storm had washed from the atmosphere a witch's brew of pollutants that in combination gave rise to this pale, eerie radiance.

Sensing that neither explanation would prove correct, seeking a third, Molly was startled by movement on the porch. She shifted focus from the trees to the sheltered shadows immediately beyond the glass.

Low, sinuous shapes moved under the window. They were so silent, fluid, and mysterious that for a moment they seemed to be imagined: formless expressions of primal fears.

Then one, three, five of them lifted their heads and turned their yellow

eyes to the window, regarding her inquisitively. They were as real as Molly herself, though sharper of tooth.

The porch swarmed with wolves. Slinking out of the storm, up the steps, onto the pegged-pine floor, they gathered under the shelter of the roof, as though this were not a house but an ark that would soon be set safely afloat by the rising waters of a cataclysmic flood.

# 2

IN THESE MOUNTAINS, BETWEEN THE TRUE DESERT to the east and the plains to the west, wolves were long extinct. The visitation on the porch had the otherworldly quality of an apparition.

When, on closer examination, Molly realized that these beasts were coyotes—sometimes called *prairie* wolves—their behavior seemed no less remarkable than when she had mistaken them for the larger creatures of folklore and fairy tales.

As much as anything, their silence defined their strangeness. In the thrill of the chase, running down their prey, coyotes often cry with high excitement: a chilling ululation as eerie as the music of a theremin. Now they neither cried nor barked, nor even growled.

Unlike most wolves, coyotes will frequently hunt alone. When they join in packs to stalk game, they do not run as close together as do wolves.

Yet on the front porch, the individualism characteristic of their species was not in evidence. They gathered flank-to-flank, shoulder-to-shoulder, eeling among one another, no less communal than domesticated hounds, nervous and seeking reassurance from one another.

Noticing Molly at the study window, they neither shied from her nor reacted aggressively. Their shining eyes, which in the past had always impressed her as being cruel and bright with blood hunger, now appeared to be as devoid of threat as the trusting eyes of any household pet.