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QUALITIES OF STARLIGHT

By Gabriel Jason Dean

QUALITIES OF STARLIGHT

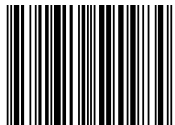
Drama/Comedy. By Gabriel Jason Dean. Cast: 2m., 2w. Theo Turner is a young cosmologist on the verge. But Theo's "big bang" isn't theoretical. His universe explodes when he and his wife travel to the Appalachian South to visit his parents with news of an impending adoption, only to discover that Theo's aging parents are now meth addicts. Science crashes violently into nature, identities shift, memories speak and the future can only be won by renegotiating the past. The cosmos is no more wondrous than a troubled human family improvising its path into the future. *Unit set. One int. and one ext. set. Approximate running time: 130 minutes. Code: QHD.*

"If you're looking for a night filled with family dysfunction, theoretical astronomy, and a look at the strength of bonds of love and family, go check it out!" —DCMetro TheaterArts

"Well drawn characters with a great deal of humor. ... The dialogue is rich and colloquial." —www.broadwayworld.com

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Qualities of Starlight

By

Gabriel Jason Dean

“At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers,
and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair
and learned to live with it happily.”

—Flannery O’Connor



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The first draft of *Qualities of Starlight* premiered on July 8, 2010, produced by The Essential Theatre in Atlanta, Ga.; Peter Hardy, artistic director.

CAST

Rose..... Patricia French
Junior..... Daniel Burnley
Theo Matt Felten
Polly Kelly Criss Felten
John Lee Alex Van
Lizard Nina Kyle

PRODUCTION TEAM

Director Peter Hardy
Scenic Design..... Roy Howington
Lighting Design Trish Harris
Costume Design..... Jane Kroessig
Props Design Kathy Manning
Sound Design Spencer Stephens
Puppet Construction..... Amy Strickland

A subsequent draft premiered on June 12, 2012, produced by CulturalDC's Source Festival in Washington D.C.; Jenny McConnell Frederick, artistic director.

CAST

Rose..... Vanessa Bradchulis
Junior..... Jim Epstein
Theo Daniel J. Corey
Polly Katie Nigsh-Fairfax

PRODUCTION TEAM

Director Sasha Brätt
Stage Manager Patrick Magill

Rehearsal Stage Manager.....Rebecca Griffith
Scenic Design.....Robbie Hayes
Lighting Design Bob Gandy
Costume Design Katie Touart
Props Design Patti Kalil
Sound Design Veronica Lancaster

The final version premiered on May 25, 2013, produced by
The VORTEX in Austin, Texas; Bonnie Cullum, producing
artistic director.

CAST

Rose.....Jennifer Underwood
Junior.....Dennis Bailey
Theo Toby Minor
Polly Andreá Suzanne Rebecca Smith

PRODUCTION TEAM

Director Rudy Ramirez
Asst. Director Karen Rodriguez
Stage Manager Tamara L. Farley
Scenic Design.....Ann Marie Gordon
Lighting Design Patrick Anthony
Costume Design Michelle Symons
Props Design Helen Parish
Sound DesignDavid DeMaris
DramaturgNatashia Lindsey

FOREWORD

There are plays that you love, and then there are plays that teach you what you love about theatre. The play you love resonates personally, appealing to your history, your interests and your tastes. The play that teaches you what you love doesn't come to meet you; you must step outside of your own small circle of imagination and experience to meet it. When I read *Qualities of Starlight*, I stepped outside of my experience as a city-born, city-bred queer Latino to meet Gabriel Jason Dean's play inside its double-wide trailer in the Georgia hills, and it taught me that what I really love are stories about people fighting through their fear, their resentment, their pride, their despair and their addictions to love one another. That's the story I want to tell.

Take the moment when Theo and Polly announce that they are adopting a child. Junior voices his misgivings (to put it mildly), but Rose looks at Polly, and sees in her face that her daughter-in-law is the reason why her granddaughter will not be her flesh and blood, and says:

ROSE. Junior, shut your goddamn mouth.

JUNIOR. Language, woman! The lord is listening!

ROSE. Well, Jesus and all his angels are about to hear me rip you a new asshole, honey! You don't know what you're talking about so just shut the fuck up!

With that, Rose crosses her tiny, cluttered living room to take Polly in her arms. In so many other plays, Rose would've turned away from Polly, questioned her, urged her son to leave her. Not here. Not in Gabe Dean's house. I was ride-or-die for Rose when I pictured Polly in her arms. I wanted what was best for her, and, as the play went on, for Polly, Theo and even Junior. When you want the best for a character, their triumphs lift you up, and their tragedies break your heart. That's good theatre.

In the spirit of wanting what's best for them, I offer Gabe's own wisdom for anyone producing this play. When Gabe told me he wanted me to direct *Qualities of Starlight*, I asked him, "How can I ruin your play?" Gabe answered, "Make them into caricatures. Play them for laughs." Poor, rural white folk constitute one of the few remaining groups that people can make fun of without being called out for their assumptions, their stereotyping and their prejudice. I would be lying if I said that I had never put on an Appalachian accent and played stupid. Stupid, however, has no place in *Qualities of Starlight*. Rose and Junior are two intelligent people (Junior, I suspect, was the kid who was too smart for his own good and learned to hate school because of it) who put aside their dreams to raise a remarkably intelligent child, one they loved not wisely but too well, who took their dreams with him when he left. Who wouldn't want a hit of something to take that kind of pain away? Gabe has dedicated a big part of his life to telling the stories of people like Rose and Junior, the denizens of Attapuligus County, haunted and haunting figures like the ones he grew up with. They're funny as hell, but this play works best when we stop laughing like people who make fun of them and start laughing like people who know them.

I recently lost the scar I got working on this play: a thin, curved line from when I fell on one of Junior's lawnmowers. I don't advise any of you to fall on lawnmowers, but I hope that you let yourself get covered in dirt and blood and deer funk, that you swallow the meth and stab at the lizards and find yourself wired and exhausted at the end, staring up at the stars. And if you get discouraged, imagine me as Rose, telling you how this play scared me and shook me and made me feel like this would be the show that proved I couldn't handle it, only to feel higher than heaven on opening night. Open up and trust yourself. You're gonna be a damned fine mama.

Rudy Ramirez
Associate Artistic Director
The VORTEX (Austin, Texas)

With love to Jess,
who believed in me before anyone else.

This play is dedicated to the memory of
Elizabeth Rose Dean.

Qualities of Starlight

CHARACTERS

ROSE TURNER: 54, mother.

JUNIOR TURNER: 55, father.

THEODORE TURNER: 35, their son.

POLLY TURNER: 34, his wife.

SETTING

The interior and exterior of the Turner's double-wide trailer in a valley in Attapulcus.

The year is 2008.

RUN TIME

2 hours, 10 minutes with a 15-minute intermission.

NOTES

- / indicates interruption
- < > indicates a beat
- ... indicates stammer or trailing off of thought
- in the middle of a line, indicates a shift in thought
- at the end of a line, indicates that the next line should flow without pause
- (Silence.) an opportunity for the unspoken

SCENES

- Scene 1: Quickie
- Scene 2: Babies
- Scene 3: Reservations
- Scene 4: Hooked
- Scene 5: Butter
- Scene 6: Expansion
- Scene 7: Contraction
- Scene 8: Wept

Qualities of Starlight

1. QUICKIE

(The sky is the color of bruises.

Dusk stars shine above the Turner double-wide, casting hazy illumination on the whole valley.

Inside, the double-wide is a museum of junk. There's a half-filled fish tank with a few desperate goldfish. There are stacks of books—mostly romance novels and magazines like TV Guides and National Geographics. There are half-filled garbage bags with unknown contents—full of treasure, not trash. There are stacks of computer monitors against one wall and here and there a few interesting antiques that are probably worth much less than you'd think.

There's what might be a dining room table covered in lawnmower parts, and somewhere on the table there's a praying hands napkin holder—sans napkins—but you can't see that just yet.

The carpet's matted in places, and where it's torn, it's patched together with duct tape.

Framed and unframed photos of THEO as a child and teenager hang on one wall—awkward sports photos, prom, a photo of THEO and his mom, ROSE, taken at La Plaza Mayor, Madrid.

There's a black and white photo of a dark eyed man with a thick mop of black hair and cherubic cheeks. This is John Lee, ROSE's father.

Also, there's a velvet Elvis.

An oversized, out-of-date TV blares WWE Wrestling and dimly lights ROSE and JUNIOR, who are sleeping in two tattered, plump recliners, feet up.

ROSE has a copy of Astronomy magazine draped open atop her chest.

JUNIOR is cuddling his guitar like a woman.

A body slam on TV startles ROSE. She takes a massive breath in as though waking from the dead, uprights in a cold sweat and starts to dig in the cushions of her recliner, looking for something.)

ROSE. Where did I? OK. Gotta take out the trash. Move them stupid parts. Junior! < > The fish, the fucking fish. Junior, water the fish! Wake your ass up! < > Junior?

(JUNIOR snores.)

ROSE (*cont'd*). Pathetic.

(ROSE takes the Spain photo from the wall.

The wall behind the photo is bright white, a ghost from a time when the paint was fresh.)

ROSE (*cont'd*). Only you could ever convince me to get on a airplane. < > Shit, talking like you're dead or something.

(ROSE places the photo back on the wall, eyes the fish tank.)

ROSE (*cont'd*). The fucking fish!

(She takes JUNIOR's "Big Gulp" from the side table, takes a swig, thinks about it, moves JUNIOR's guitar elsewhere, then spits the "Big Gulp" juice on JUNIOR.)

ROSE (*cont'd*). I baptize you in the name of the holy ... the holy whatever. God, how do you drink this stuff?

JUNIOR. You a mean-spirited woman, you know that?

ROSE. Ewck, this Mountain Dew's flat as a pancake.

JUNIOR. Ain't no reason to spit it on me!

ROSE. Well, you need a bath. You stink.

JUNIOR. / I do not!

ROSE. I told you to water them fish.

JUNIOR. What?

ROSE. The fish! They gonna die if you don't water them.

JUNIOR. You're already up.

ROSE. They ain't my fucking fish!

JUNIOR. Language.

ROSE. I'll give you some language if you don't get off your ass! The boy is coming, Junior.

JUNIOR. Time is it?

ROSE. Six something. Now get up. Look alive. Water your fish. Clean something!

JUNIOR. Give me a minute, woman! Damn, can't a man get back in the world?

ROSE. Put a shirt on. You don't want Polly to see that belly.

JUNIOR (*grabbing his belly by the handful*). Hey, she married my boy. *This* is what she's got to look forward to.

ROSE. Yeah, well thank God he's better looking than you.

JUNIOR. Takes his looks after his mama.

ROSE. What are you trying to butter me up for? Put on a shirt, you fat thing.

(ROSE smiles and throws a wrinkled button-up shirt at him.

ROSE looks at the photo of John Lee.)

ROSE. Looks like his grandpa. (*Touching the photo.*) Ain't right a minister was that handsome.

JUNIOR. No, it ain't right that his *daughter* is always saying how handsome he was.

ROSE. You just jealous. (*Indicating the La Plaza Mayor photo.*) Hey, I forget, where were we in this photo?

JUNIOR. Somewheres in Europe.

ROSE. I know *that*. But where?

JUNIOR. How should I know? Ya'll didn't invite me.

ROSE. But I told you where it was.

JUNIOR. How'm I supposed to remember somewhere I never been?

ROSE. You wouldn't remember your own damned name if I didn't yell it at you a thousand times a day.

JUNIOR. Mean. Just mean.

(JUNIOR's hands are badly clawed with neuropathy, and he struggles to put on the shirt.)

JUNIOR. Why I gotta wear something with buttons?

ROSE. Your son is coming home. Look nice for a change.

JUNIOR. Help me?

ROSE. They God, what would you do without me?

JUNIOR. Stay naked.

(ROSE helps him with the shirt.)

JUNIOR flops back in the recliner.)

JUNIOR. Something's up and you know it.

ROSE. What do you mean?

JUNIOR. They just call all the sudden and say they want to come see us for a couple days. We ain't seen him in—they been married for what—

ROSE. / Five years—

JUNIOR. Going on six years now. And not a single visit home. Something's up.

ROSE. Well whatever it is, it's a damned blessing if the boy's coming home. Now get off your ass and clean something!

JUNIOR. When they getting here?

ROSE. A few minutes probably.

(JUNIOR looks around at the catastrophic mess.)

JUNIOR. A few minutes ain't gonna do this place a lot of good.

ROSE. I been telling you to clean this shit up for two days now.

(ROSE throws the Astronomy magazine at him.)

ROSE *(cont'd)*. If you ain't gonna help me, at least educate yourself.

JUNIOR. What's this?

ROSE. What's it say?

JUNIOR *(mispronounced on purpose)*. Astronomy.

ROSE. Don't act dumber than you are. There's a whole article about Theo in there.

JUNIOR. I'll be—he's published in a *magazine*?

ROSE. Stop fooling around. If you ain't gonna bother to read it, just tell him you're proud of him. He'd probably like to hear that from you.

JUNIOR *(sitting Astronomy aside)*. We got any Tylenols left?

ROSE. I need some too. You give me a damned headache.

(ROSE gets the Tylenol, pops the top, grabs the Big Gulp, swigs it, makes a face and pushes a couple pills down.)

JUNIOR *(tongue out)*. AAAAAAHHHHHH—

(ROSE puts two pills on JUNIOR's tongue.)

JUNIOR fumbles for the straw on the Big Gulp.)

ROSE. You're helpless.

(ROSE assists him. He drinks.)

JUNIOR. We got time for a quickie?

ROSE. Is that *all* you think about?

(ROSE plants a small kiss on his lips, then breaks away.)

ROSE pulls out meth paraphernalia—pipe, lighter and a small bag of rocks—hidden in her recliner.)

ROSE. We gotta quit this shit some day.

JUNIOR. Yep.

(She packs the pipe, lights up.)

JUNIOR. Just a *little* hit, now—

ROSE. I know.

(ROSE inhales it.)

She holds the pipe for JUNIOR while he hits it.)

JUNIOR. We shouldn't say nothing to Theo about this.

ROSE. Really? 'Cause I thought I'd offer him and Polly a hit when they get here. Don't wanna be rude.

(For a second, JUNIOR thinks she's for real.)

ROSE *(cont'd)*. Damn, you're stupid.

JUNIOR. Don't play tricks on me when I'm high. I get vulnerable.

(They veg in the recliners and gawk at the TV.)

JUNIOR *(cont'd)*. Phew. This is good stuff. Where'd you get it?

ROSE. Mexicans.

JUNIOR. Ooph. Ummm.

ROSE. / Yeah.

JUNIOR. They do good work. OK, OK ... give me the skinny, pretty lady.

ROSE. What?

JUNIOR. The article about Theo. < > So I can say I'm proud.

ROSE. You got eyes. Read.

(JUNIOR grumps and turns the TV to a Christian channel. A frothy evangelist breathlessly delivers his message.)

EVANGELIST *(from the TV).*

You better make a commitment that you're gonna serve God with all your mind, all your heart, all your soul.

ROSE. Aww ... come on ... I'd rather watch wrassling than this shit.

JUNIOR. Word of God. Listen to the man, Rose. We might learn a thing or two. < > I'm hungry. When's the last / time we ate?

'Cause I'll tell you something, with what's getting ready to happen in America, you're gonna need Him.

ROSE. Turn off that windbag!

The Bible says in Revelations that when the sound of that trumpet comes, those that are in sin will be in sin still, those that are righteous will be righteous and those that are holy will be holy still.

JUNIOR. It's comforting to hear the Lord's word.

ROSE. Oh, hell.

Whatever you are, whatever your state, whenever that trumpets sounds, that's where you're gonna be.

JUNIOR. When's the last time we ate?

ROSE. I don't know.

JUNIOR. Make us some mac n' cheese. No no no no! Some eggs. I'm craving eggs. Don't eggs sound good?

ROSE. You got two hands.

JUNIOR. Funny. Ha ha.

(ROSE grabs the remote, channel surfs.)

JUNIOR *(cont'd)*. Rose! Come on, now!

(She pauses on an action movie—a car chase, shoot 'em up.)

JUNIOR *(cont'd)*. Oh, oh ... leave it here. I like this. That's Charles Bronson.

(They are transfixed.

Lights fade, sound remains.

Brakes squeal.

Then a loud thump.)

2.

BABIES

(Dusk on a country road.

*Lights reveal POLLY and THEO standing over a small deer.
Headlights beam from offstage.)*

THEO. Looks dead to me.

POLLY. Are you sure?

THEO. She's not breathing.

POLLY. How do you know it's a girl?

THEO. It doesn't have balls.

POLLY. Oh. Yeah. Right. I guess it doesn't.

THEO. Did you get the insurance?

POLLY. What?

THEO. For the rental car?

POLLY. I think so. Everything was so fast. I did it all online.

< > I *probably* got the insurance.

THEO. Well...you *definitely* killed this deer.

POLLY. What was I supposed to do? Drive off that ... that cliff?

THEO. It was a small *embankment*.

POLLY. Please don't correct me.

THEO. Sorry. You obviously did the right thing. Hitting the deer instead of driving off a *cliff*.

POLLY. Don't be like that.

THEO. I'm serious. Better her than us. < > So weird. There never used to be deer in this valley. Come on. Let's get out of here. I wanna get there and do this before dark.

POLLY. We can't just leave her. We have to ... bury her ... or something.

THEO. People don't do that kind of thing in the country.

POLLY. I ran her over with a Ford Fusion. The least I can do is give her a Christian burial.

THEO. It's just a deer.

(POLLY tries to pick up the deer. She struggles, manages to drag it a few feet.)

THEO (*cont'd*). What are you doing?

(Drag.)

POLLY. I can't bury her here. She'll fit ... in the trunk. I'll bury her ... at your parent's.

THEO. We can't put a deer in the trunk.

(A little more.)

POLLY. Look at the hood. The stank of deer musk isn't gonna matter at this point.

(POLLY sees blood on her hands. She backs away from the deer, repulsed, and stares at her hands, her mind elsewhere.)

THEO. Come on.

POLLY. Hmm?

THEO. Let's go.

POLLY. What if she has babies?

THEO. < > Polly. She doesn't.

POLLY. How do you know?

THEO. She's too young.

POLLY. How can you tell?

THEO. She's not big enough.

POLLY. So she's what ... an *adolescent* deer?

THEO. Probably.

POLLY. She could be a teen-mother.

(THEO giggles and POLLY tries to fight tears.)

THEO. Whoa, whoa—

POLLY. I'm sorry—

THEO. Polly, this is *just* a deer. Nothing else.

POLLY. *I know that, Theo.* Jesus. I just ... I need a second, OK?

(THEO exits toward the car, opens door offstage, shuts it, returns with a bottled water and some napkins. He washes POLLY's hands.)

THEO. Come on, Fraggles Rock. Don't get weepy. You don't wanna be all red-cheeked and puffy-eyed when we get there, right? They'll think I beat you or something.

(POLLY chuckles, sighs, pulls it together a bit.)

POLLY. You have a warped sense of humor.

THEO. It's why you love me.

POLLY. How are you so calm about all this?

THEO. I've seen dead animals before.

POLLY. Not the deer. I mean *this*. Here. The "mission."

THEO. Yeah, *calm* isn't the word I would use.

POLLY. Then what *are* you feeling?

THEO. Tired. This is our last hurdle. I just want it to be finished.

POLLY. Me too.

THEO. So let's go, shall we?

POLLY. What are we gonna tell them when they ask us why?

THEO. The truth. Same as your folks.

POLLY. You can't tell *that* kind of truth to strangers.

THEO. They're not exactly strangers.

POLLY. I barely know them.

THEO. My parents adore you.

POLLY. How do you know that?

THEO. Well ... they say "I love you" on the phone.

POLLY. That doesn't mean anything.

THEO. You know *I* love you, right?

POLLY. Sometimes.

THEO. OK ... well ... they love me. And I love you. Ergo my parents love you. It's an equation based on—

POLLY. On a Barney song?

THEO. You know what I mean.

POLLY. Yeah.

THEO. Look, I know they're not exactly what you dreamed of when you imagined your in-laws.

POLLY. I never imagined in-laws.

THEO. They'll do whatever we need them to do. They're country, but they're good people.

POLLY. / I know—

THEO. Especially Mom. And Dad ... well, he seems to have mellowed with age.

POLLY. < > I know coming back here isn't easy for you.

THEO. Yeah. Well. Don't have much of a choice, do I?

POLLY. We're so close.

(She takes his hand. They almost kiss when THEO's cellphone rings—Star Wars Darth Vader theme ringtone.)

POLLY *(cont'd)*. I thought you turned that off.

THEO. It's Rebekah. Sorry, I have to take this.

(POLLY shoots a look at THEO: "Of course it is.")

THEO. Doctor Theo Turner.

POLLY *(under her breath)*. She knows who you are.

THEO. What? I'm catching, like, every other—No, no ... I have a minute.

(THEO walks away from POLLY.)

THEO. Yeah. < > Right ... right. < > Say that again. < > HOLY SHIT! That's fantastic! I knew it! I fucking knew it! < > When I get back. < > Hey, buy everyone a beer from me. Buy them two. < > I said buy them two. < > You too. < > All right. < > Bye.

(A long silence.)

POLLY. The telescope readings came in?

THEO. The data is completely supportive. My cyclic model is looking better and better.

POLLY. That's great.

THEO. OK, OK. I promised. I'm sorry. No more phone.
(*Robot voice.*) Powering down now.

POLLY. That girl can't fart without telling you.

THEO. She had to tell me that news.

POLLY. She's called three times. Today.

THEO. She's just doing her job. I left her with a lot to do and very little notice.

POLLY (*playful*). Is little Miss Rebekah crushing on fancy-pantsy Doctor Turner?

THEO. Don't be ridiculous. She's 23.

POLLY. You know her *exact* age?

THEO. I know Phil's and Jamal's too. Everybody on the team.

POLLY. The point is ... you shouldn't take a phone call from your hot, 23-year-old grad assistant in the middle of a conversation with me.

THEO. She's not my assistant. She's a research fellow.

POLLY. Oh my God, whatever! Every time she calls, you walk out of my earshot. Do you realize that?

THEO. I do that when anybody calls.

POLLY. < > Ever since the last one, you look at me differently.

THEO. I can't have this conversation again—

POLLY. But that's the thing. We *don't ever* have this conversation. Not fully. I try to tell you how I'm feeling—which I can't exactly articulate and so I ask how you're

feeling and, and ... you dismiss it all with a joke. You talk about work. You take a call. Anything to avoid talking about what happened. < > Do you even want this, Theo?

THEO. I can't believe you're actually asking me that.

POLLY. Just tell me. Do you want her?

THEO. I'm here, aren't I? I dropped everything at the last minute to do this.

POLLY. You missed three meetings with Kayla.

THEO. Two! I missed two.

POLLY. Whatever. You *missed* them. You know, Kayla *even* asked me if you really wanted this.

THEO. I missed those meetings for work emergencies! Jesus Christ, you'd think that a good work ethic and tenure income would count for something with this girl.

POLLY. It does, but her parents walked out on her and when you don't show up—

THEO. Are you implying that she's making us do this because I missed those meetings?

POLLY. It sends a message, Theo.

THEO. < > Why are you picking a fight with me right now?

POLLY. Because a fight gets your attention.

THEO. Well, you've succeeded. I'm listening. Say whatever else it is that you have to say.

POLLY. < > I don't even know what I want to say. I just ... I need to know you'll be there, you'll hear me ... whenever I do.

THEO. I always hear you.

POLLY. I never thought I'd want my life to be about ... dirty diapers in public restrooms, strollers, play dates. Gross. My mom *hounding* me—biological clock, Pollygirl, biological clock. It never ticked before. I never wanted this ... until I couldn't have it. Do you know how impossibly stupid that makes me feel? I mean, don't *you* feel stupid?

THEO. Stupid? No.

POLLY. Like stupid to expect that making a family should be easy?

THEO. The Germans would have a word for that. They excel at complicated emotional terms.

POLLY. Please don't make a joke.

THEO. Polly, I don't know how else to respond. What do you want me to do?

POLLY. Say something with weight. Say, "I'm sad. I hurt."

THEO. I'm sad. I hurt. Now, can we please just go and get this over with?

POLLY. Are you listening to yourself?

THEO. I mean it. I am sad. I'm hurting. And I'm dealing with it the best way I know how. Which is to keep going. To do my job. And yes, to laugh occasionally.

POLLY. Well ... your way isn't working for me.

THEO. What should I do, Polly? Just tell me. Wail and gnash my teeth? Write you a fucking poem? A sonnet? What?

(POLLY glares at him, then calmly walks to the offstage car, slams the door.

After a moment, THEO looks down at the deer and mumbles.)

THEO (*cont'd*). I'm sorry.

(Lights fade as the stars brighten.)