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Eugene Salome (1987)

The old student union building on the Boulder campus is called the University Memorial Center. There is a large dining hall on the ground¹ floor, renamed during the Sixties for Alferd² T. Packer, the most famous cannibal in the history of the American West. I have spent entirely too much time hanging out here, and now try to avoid it, but I am passing through one afternoon and, no great surprise, encounter the eccentric [T], who has been playing chess with his cronies in the same corner of this room for the past twenty years. — He introduces me to one of his companions, an older Teutonic fellow with whom he is conversing in German, a dude who has logged some rough mileage. — The guy's name is Eugene Salome. He explains that he was the nephew of Lou, and wonders whether I have ever heard of her. — "Of course," I say, "Nietzsche wanted to marry her." — [T] interjects "Eugene was in Buchenwald." — Apparently I am supposed to respond to this, though I have no idea how. I stare at the victim blankly for a moment — crooked teeth, did they work on them with pliers? — too painfully aware of our noisy surroundings — complete cognitive dissonance, rich American college kids, poster children for entitlement who have never known hunger or pain or fear, happy and animated; they want their MTV. — "Wow," I say to him, "I hear that was quite a party school." — He thinks this is hilarious. He tells me some stories about Rilke.

¹ Of course (this is Boulder, where everything is dug into the side of a hill) if you walk in the front door you're a floor above the level you enter from the back. — But this is the *lower* ground floor.

² If this is a misspelling, it was his own.

Aristotle on pity and terror. — What else do you feel in the presence of the incommensurably tragic? — Bafflement. Disbelief. Awe.