

ERIC TRETHERWEY

A Disaster of War

after Francisco Goya

Since he is held aloft by a tree,
skewered on a skewed bitter cross
and backgrounded by carnal lumps of flesh,
we might see him as another butchered Christ,
though lacking power to redeem anything.

Close your eyes and envision the image here
that Goya bore witness to: a lopped, leafless,
forked tree, one branch cut off a couple of feet
from the crotch. On the smaller branch,
the upright one, the man's body is spiked,

the sharpened tip exiting from his back
between the shoulder blades, having entered
him through the anus. Was he still alive
when they stripped him, impaled him?
Does it matter? The body's right arm

is completely severed just above the elbow,
a stump on an accursed stump, the amputation
perhaps no more than someone's offhand gesture,
an afterthought. And there is also the face,
the unforgettably anguished face, contorted,
eyes squeezed shut as if to deny being,
to affirm that whatever is human is beside the point,
the neck twisted toward us who can do nothing
for him, not even hear the animal howl,
that final scream that tells us what we are.