BERNARDO WADE

Self Portrait as a Black Walnut Tree

Mr. George, a white man, a now-deceased man, a man we moved next door to after the divorce,

he’d leave me and my sister a few dollars allowance along with a note that said something like, love your mother, be good to her & I tried, by learning how to mow the lawn, but this was only after

he waved me down one morning, flailing his cane like he was rounding up a flock of pigeons, raising it high in the air as if he could poke holes in the sky & bless us all—in New Orleans—with rain because it was so damn hot they’d warned us, the whole city, to stay inside & protect ourselves & though we had a couple window units—we just couldn’t afford to turn them on—, I was

in the shed with Mr. George, then eighty, shuffling in his boat-sized white New Balance’s, directing me past sixty years of rusted golf clubs, yards signs & old tools to pull out the mower that wouldn’t work till we loosened the grip of the machine’s rust with my sweat, the motor’s endless teasing of almost starting, until it did & then he taught me how to mow the lines—straight and carefully—as I still do today

in the backyard—in Bloomington—with the black walnut tree tucked in the corner of the yard, it leaves so much
fragrant, tennis ball-sized nut, which looks like a lime of sorts, but harder & denser, they like to hide in the tall grass

& when I roll over them, they shoot out the machine, spilling their little brains all over the yard, spreading toxins on the other species that didn’t evolve allelopathy—a term I can’t pronounce but I’ve learned, just recently, means self-preservation—,

complicating the relationships they have with their neighbors.