SL

Short

Self-Defense

Sydney Lea

The jury appeared to accept Mr. Rittenhouse's explanation that he had acted reasonably to defend himself during demonstrations.

I copied that down from the *The New York Times* on a Sunday six years ago, and it's strange I should have done so. As a rule, especially in the Trump era, on Sundays I try to ignore the headlines and connected op-eds with hooks like *Social Fabric Frays*, *Polarization Rages*, *Requiem for Democracy*, and so on.

Rather, no matter the tingle of guilt in my gut, I turn to a given day's sports pages, although I'm simultaneously and perversely tempted to scan the latest obits too. I always compare the dead men's and women's ages to mine, and I search for clues to chronic conditions that I don't have, requests that in lieu of flowers, maybe, mourners send donations to the American Lung Association or whatever.

Death can wait. I'm happy I gave up smoking years back, of course, and so I can climb stairs without overly taxing myself — no, not as though on wings, nor as though I charged from a ship to storm a beachhead as my dad and other heroes did, but with strength enough to sustain a reasonably vigorous rhythm on the steps.

> *There is a tide in the affairs of men which,*
> *Taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.*
> *Omitted, all the voyage of their life*
> *Is bound in shallows and in miseries.*

So said murderous Brutus, the bastard. It's another oddity, that this passage, which I memorized in my teens, should occur to me this morning. I've watched the passing by of the flood he means, even if my share of attendant miseries has been relatively small, smaller perhaps indeed than most of my friends'.

Shallows, however ... That's a different matter.

My Sunday is clear and sunny and bright, but I hear a voice that weirdly comprises the voices of my sterner teachers and above all of my mother as she exhorts me to greater effort, telling me tales — some, I'm sure, invented out of whole cloth — of lives lost in those very shallows. Would I ever arrive at any measure of gravitas? I'm not sure I did, and even at 83 years old, that uncertainty continues to haunt me. To think it's too late to apply myself now makes for a small pang in my soul.

It's not easy to forget such a disgrace, as its recurrence to my thinking demonstrates, and downright impossible to suppress the fact that, if the homicidal boy had been black, he'd be rotting in jail for the rest of his life as I jot all this down — or as likely, dead.

For the moment, it takes all the application I can summon anyhow to put him out of mind, that Illinois kid referred to in that passage from the *Times*. He was acquitted of killing two men and wounding a third with a military rifle in alleged self-defense. It's not easy to forget such a disgrace, as its recurrence to my thinking demonstrates, and downright impossible to suppress the fact that, if the homicidal boy had been black, he'd be rotting in jail for the rest of his life as I jot all this down — or as likely, dead.

Back to what I was saying before I wandered. Having finished my Sunday breakfast, the one unhealthy one I permit myself per week, replete with grease and salt, I now have ample time for those sports pages. I can consider not so much the fortunes of my teams, on which I'm up to date, as of their traditional rivals, on whom since well before reaching the age of that rifle-packing kid I've wished only misfortune.

I'm an old man now, 83, and the hope of my younger years that I might do something to help repair society's flagrant injustices, my idealist's hope that more of my fellow citizens might be included in our deluded, firearm-toting, drug-addicted, justified-war-conducting nation's purported democracy, that the country might actually deserve to be called democratic — all that seems to have come to little, indeed seems farther to seek than at any point in my long life.

Yes, I'm an old man, so do me a favor. Let me alone to be glad if, on any Sunday, I read that the Yankees or Cowboys or Lakers lost.

Sydney Lea served as Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. The author of 23 books, he was the 2021 recipient of his home state's most prestigious artist's distinction: the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. A former Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Poets' Prize, he is the founding editor of the *New England Review*.