

480 B.C.

*“Suddenly the piled mass of the dead gave way. An avalanche of bodies began. In the Narrows the allies scrambled rearward toward safety atop a landslide of corpses. . . . So grotesque was this sight that the Hellenic warriors . . . discontinued the press of their advance, looking on in awe as the [Persians] perished in numbers uncountable, swallowed and effaced beneath this grisly avalanche of flesh.*

from *Gates of Fire*  
Steven Pressfield

About salvation, he is on the money, Pressfield—  
He shows in *Gates of Fire* how freedom itself—  
The fragile beginning of Western democracy—  
Is saved—in 480 B.C.—  
By a band of Spartan warriors.

In a feat of Maccabean magnitude,  
300 men—each purposefully selected  
By the Spartan King Leonidas  
To stand and die  
At the narrow pass of Thermopylae—  
Hold off an enemy  
Nearly two million strong  
For a period of seven days,

During which time  
The inchoate Hellenic alliance  
Rallies enough  
To begin turning back  
The ambitious Eastern tide.

\*\*\*

When asked, what thought should win one’s mind  
When at the brink of death,  
The tried Dienekes this replied  
In words that struck direct:

“Not daughter, son nor loyal wife  
Can conquer mortal fear;  
Save brother by your side who fights  
Can galvanize your spear.

“The opposite of fear is love  
For brother put to test;  
His heart’s what you have knowledge of,  
His life makes rich your death.”

\*

Great Leonidas this apprised  
When asked, how did you choose  
The men you did to stand and die—  
The men you chose to lose:

“When the world looks to our nation  
For strength in face of doom,  
Who will offer *us* salvation?  
Dear mothers, it be you!

“Defying pain, with clear dry eyes,  
You’ll sing our heroes’ praise;  
Within the story nothing dies—  
Your love, their deeds, our way!”

\*

At last Xeones lets us see  
The source of freemen’s drive;  
An orphan, slave and wounded, he  
By choice does stand and die:

“A man will strive to be the best  
He possibly can be,  
If in his heart he knows his quest’s  
A meritocracy.”

Thus men of action live and die  
And, clear, describe their cause:  
“Go tell the brethren here we lie,  
Obedient to their laws.”

*for the firefighters, police, emergency medical personnel and armed  
forces who, in AD 2001, stood and died*

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[Note: *Gates of Fire*, Doubleday, is the title of a novel by Steven Pressfield. Dienekes, Leonidas and Xeones are three of the novel’s protagonists. The phrases “stand and die” and “the opposite of fear is love” are from Pressfield’s text.]