

One Poem

George Szirtes

The Thirties

It was the Thirties once again. Shop doors
opened on hunger and long queues for soup,
the poor, clothed by the same half-empty stores,

stood round in doorways in a ragged group;
the unemployed were drunk in railway stations,
rumours of war played on a constant loop.

The Furies were running out of patience
reduced to muttering curses and the lost
were lost in their own preoccupations.

In feral offices, the running cost
of living was calculated down to pence
by those who needed least and owned the most.

Imperial glamour was the last defence.
The cinema played all-out games of doom
on borrowed power. Even our dreams were dense,

crowding us out of every empty room.
We threw each other out for lack of rent.
We were the bust remains of what was boom.

And knowing this, that none of it was meant,
not quite precisely as the world turned out
but as a fanciful presentiment,

was of no consolation. None could doubt
what was happening. The sea was emptiness
out of which light emerged. One distant shout

and it was here, the water's fancy dress
of time as tide, the crowds along the street
jostling to hear a demagogue's address.

Where else was all the troubled world to meet?
Why was the water rushing to the door?
At whose damp walls were the loud waves to beat?

