

Before

"I am the man, I suffered, I was there."

Before Whitman hunched beside—
ministering to Civil War injured,
composing vignettes, folding each

man's story into a small square,
then pinning it to his own clothes—
he killed time in Pfaff's beer cellar.

Greenwich Village. Bohemian life—
aimless as a leaf of meadow grass.
His giant heart blue-red, broken

over lost love and joblessness.
Whitman, who never enlisted,
later carrying that purpled heart

around, to battlefield hospitals,
city hospitals. To the cliff edges
of men's afterlives. Ferrying

humility and small gifts—apples,
horehound drops, pocket coins.
Lone poet, lumbering thru dim

isles, lowering one gentle hand
onto a soldier's chest. Re-filling
the emptied chambers there.

by Christine Chiosi