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