

New Poetry by Cheney Crow: “The Grey Phone”



ON MY STREET / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The Grey Phone

The Tet Offensive, 1968

Lights on, lights off.

The scrambler phone howled
on my father's desk
during Vietnam.
Mostly late at night.

Somewhere, the enemy.

A regular sequence
for dads on my street.
First the phones, grey with no dial,
a red light blazing with its siren howl.

Somewhere, the enemy.

Then the ruffle of staff cars
pulling up to collect the men
on our silent, guarded
street. Lights on, lights off.

Keeping us safe.

The deep rumble of inboard motors
at the dock. Three blocks away,
the boat drove the men across the Potomac,
a machine gun mounted mid-deck.
The Tet offensive.

Keeping us safe.

They did their best. It wasn't enough.
My father shook his head that politicians
would try what the French under DeGaulle
couldn't manage in twenty years.

Somewhere, the enemy.

One father on our street had two sons:
one went as a pilot. The other, conscientious
objector, chose oceanography.
He loved them equally. We played chess.
One father died. Also one son.

Somewhere, the enemy.

I played guitar and sang folk songs at hospitals,
ward to ward, for air-evacuated wounded,
the most severe. Hard to look at, but
some of them smiled at a teenage girl.

Nixon ended the draft to be more popular.
Politicians do things like that.

Keeping us safe.

All the dads on my street were against the war.
They threatened to resign en masse
unless we got our prisoners back.
Lights on, lights off.

Somewhere, the enemy.

Nixon ended the draft to be more popular.
Politicians do things like that.
All the dads on my street were generals.
They did their best. It wasn't enough.