The Button Boy by Matt Annis

Doug finished cutting the chain-link fence. Puffing a little, he dropped the pliers and tried to flex
away the cramp in his fingers. He trespassed, stamping down the nettles as he went…
She was a land ship, half-buried by earth and history. A 143ft white mast set into the concrete, held
steady by ratwires. A proud hilltop ship overlooking the Orwell and the Stour; and longing for the sea
beyond Landguard Point. Home to generations of aspiring nozzers. They called her the stone frigate.
The Ganges. She was the fifth to bear the name, named for the fourth which first sailed to Mumbai
and later became Tenedos, Indus, Impregnable, and finally the sturdy floorboards of Ipswich town
hall. The figurehead was true, but that grand white spire has once belonged to HMS Cordelia. All the
same, she would always be the Ganges to him, his first, long before Ajax. Long before the gunfire of
the Graf Spee turned turrets to dust, which now his lungs so painfully recalled.
It was a barren scrubland scarred by old foundations. Hollow halls, once teeming with life now
haunted by glimpses of faded paint. Doug pulled the wide collar of his blue parker over his mouth to
stifle a cough, and stopped for a moment to survey the darkening clouds…
The nozzers used to climb the mast. It was a ceremony born of peace. If a ship came into port with
its crew manning the mast, in the rigging and across the spars, arms wide like paper-chain dolls, then
they weren’t manning the guns. He’d been a button boy, the one who stood at the very top. The
wooden button was a few inches thick and a foot wide, with only a lightning conductor to clasp by
the knees. Yet it was never demanded, he wanted to do it, to show off. It took strength, courage,
and constitution. Old Sailors considered it an honour to say. ‘I was a button boy.’
…The mast was broken. Partially uncoupled. Cracked and weathered. Mould worked the wood and
the ropes. Skeletal fragments of the yardarms lay scattered on the concrete. The button was gone.
Doug picked his way through the scraps and the weeds. He gently rested one hand against the mast
and rubbed his chest with the other. Suddenly the pain stopped. Doug looked up and knew that he’d
go aloft…
When he reached lubber’s hole and the devil’s elbow the clouds shifted. The land felt more distant,
yet more familiar. He spied the brightly coloured figurehead beneath and listened to uncanny voices
echoing from the hillside. At mid-mast there seemed to be less disrepair, and looking down he
thought he saw old billets restored. By the half-moon, clambering to the topgallant, there was no
doubt, he saw another time; he lived in memory. At last, stood upon the button, he marvelled as the
land melted into the sea, and from the misty water a ship rose up to join its mast.
…Doug was home.