

## 4 Poems by Charles Rammekamp

### Fleet Marriage, 1750

Jack's ship'd just come in.  
He'd been away at sea most of a year  
and he was ready to be jolly.  
We met at a public-house at Radcliffe,  
one thing leading to another,  
we was soon on our way  
with four other sailors and their women  
to a quick-marriage chapel in Mayfair  
over near the Fleet Prison.

I won't say it was the best marriage ever,  
but no worse than me mam's and pa's;  
we got along fine for a while  
until Jack got restless and went back to sea.

Me, I had to go back to whoring.  
It was either that, begging or public charity,  
and I sure wasn't going to work  
no ten- and twelve-hour days at no factory job.

Jack said he loved me,  
when he went.  
I said yeah, I know.

## Elizabeth Moore Gives Birth

I was on the *Goliath* that night  
the British attacked Napoleon's fleet.  
Just over seven months pregnant,  
I went into labor anyway –  
all that noise, the vibration of the guns,  
bringing it on as if opening a hatch.  
The surgeon grudgingly granted Mary French permission  
to come to the orlop deck  
where I lay on a heap of cloth, convulsing and crying,  
the pain so big I thought I'd surely explode  
like one of the cannon above,  
but most of the women –  
not to mention the surgeon and all of his mates –  
busy attending wounded men crammed into the surgeon's quarters  
like a mass of writhing eels,  
all the furniture and partitions moved to make room  
for those bleeding, screaming, moaning men.

My baby survived, and so did I.  
But not my Robert.  
He was shot fighting up on the gun decks,  
both legs and half his guts gone to the sea.  
He lived another month before dying,  
but, delirious, out of his mind, whimpering,  
I don't know if he ever knew  
our son John'd been born.

## Arthur Wallis Unmanned

The *Fletcher* was already headed home from India  
when we discovered Arthur weren't the mucker  
we'd took him for all along.

In Cuddalore the captain took a fancy  
to one of the native gals.

He forgot to draw the curtains and caught Arthur  
watching through the cabin window, when,  
as he put it, he was "going to embrace a lady."

Captain ordered the Boatswain to flog Arthur  
a dozen lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails,  
and it was when he was stripped to the waist  
we saw that pair of cat-heads  
swinging from Arthur's chest.

I'd noticed Arthur bleeding before  
but figured it to be the clap,  
infected like most of us on the ship,  
not the woman's monthly scarlet crusade.

Once we found out about Arthur,  
you had to stand in line most nights  
to get some of that,  
all the way back to Plymouth,  
Arthur crying like a girl.

## Hannah O'Shaughnessy Exposes Herself

I'd already spent five years as a marine,  
sailing to the West Indies, Tahiti, India,  
taken as able by me mates,  
but when that press gang picked me up  
walking along the streets of Plymouth  
dressed in my man's clothing,  
then tossed me into a stinking cell  
in a crimping shop on the waterfront  
to await a ship's assignment,  
rats scurrying over my hands and feet,  
brushing my face, hardly any light,  
I started to panic,  
feeling closed-in on all sides,  
and I told them I was a lady,  
Hannah O'Shaughnessy, from Ireland.

They still didn't believe me,  
or at least claimed they didn't,  
and I pulled down me breeches,  
like I expect they were waiting for me to do,  
showed them my minge.

I prefer being a man,  
but when I saw my liberty was at stake,  
I figured it was my only way out,  
like a trump card in a game of skat below decks.