Excerpts from Group Writing Undertaking in the Renaissance Unit: The study of Marco Polo's brought with it opportunities for writing about many different locations, events and people. For the most part, the students told the overall story of his life and journey by writing different sections and combining these into a full story.

Abigail*:*

A trumpet rang out through the quiet ocean air. "Pirates have been spotted?" I thought. My whole body was trembling. I had known that we had fallen behind the rest of the fleet last night but I had no idea that we would encounter pirates! In my short couple of years of working for the captain of this ship I have never seen pirates up close, but I have heard many tales from the rest of the crew about them.

I rushed as quickly as I could and grabbed a crossbow and some arrows, with my sword at my side, just in case the pirates boarded. I grabbed some cloth and started ripping it into strips, just like the others with bows were doing. Then I followed them and lit the arrows on fire. I got into a position where I could see an enemy ship coming closer, its red and black flags waving in the wind. My hands trembled with my crossbow in my hand. "Fire!" Our captain called. I took a deep breath in, and concentrated, and I fired.

"We got a hit!" a sailor exclaimed. Mine had missed. We kept firing at them and they fired back at us. I could see my fellow bowmen being picked off one by one. I was sweating and shaking even more, and just as I was about to fire another arrow, an arrow struck me in the chest. It hurt so badly but I knew that this was a fatal shot. Blood sprayed out everywhere and I collapsed to the ground in a puddle of my own blood, thinking of the family I didn't have any more, the friends I will never see again, and the captain I had been so loyal to.

I heard shouts of joy coming from those who were not in poor condition. The fleet must have come back and scared the pirates away. I was glad that everyone else on the ship was safe. Then I died.

Joshua:

"ALL HANDS ON DECK!" Yelled the captain.

"Oh what now?" I Thought

"ONE OF THE SHIPS HAS BROKEN AWAY FROM THE FLEET; LETS MAKE IT OURS!"

"What?" I thought. What was the captain talking about? Then it hit me. The group of ships we had been following, that's what the captain was talking about. "AYE, AYE, CAPTAIN!" I Yelled back and ran for the weaponry over where the rest of the crew was getting bows. I grabbed one and ran back to the front of the ship. "READY, AIM, FIRE!!!" The first mate yelled and I did, too.

We could hear the satisfying shouts of the other ships crew. "AGAIN!" someone yelled, and so the volley of arrows continued. But the sailors had fire arrows of their own and one hit me in the arm.

"AGH" I yelled as I fell but I got right back up and kept firing. Other crew members went down: Joe, Donald Drumpe (I never liked him anyway). And then Hickory Clinton Stabbed him in the back . But the rest of us kept firing as we kept gaining on them.

"ALRIGHT BOYS START GETTING READY TO BOARD!"

"Wait what's that?" asked Daran. "It's the fleet; they turned around!" Shouted someone "TURN THE SHIP AROUND!" Yelled the man in the crows nest so we did. Even as I write this 30 years later, I still remember The excitement of the chase and the disappointment of turning away..

Hazel

I shift uncomfortably on the camel's back. I loathe the desert. It's nothing but rolling dunes stretching in every direction, seemingly endless, with not one plant or animal in sight. The sun beats down relentlessly. There is barely any breeze, and it just blows the hot air around or picks up sand. It's boring! Nobody wants to talk and there is nothing interesting to look at to pass the time. The night is the only time we have to relax and not be under the scorching sun. I sit by Marco as we tell stories, sing and eat dinner. The food is not as good as what's in Venezia, but it's not bad. Oh, the stories! I love to listen to traders' tales from far off places. I grin because I'm going to one of those far off places, Cathay! After dinner, we settle down to sleep. I sigh as I snuggle deeper in my blanket. I look up. Thousands of stars glitter across the sky, and then I hear it. It sounds like voices calling out! I see Marco get up and I sit up to ask what he's doing, but then Marco's Padre says, "Marco, what are you doing?" Marco doesn't seem to hear him because he starts walking toward the unseen voices. "Marco!" Again, Marco doesn't hear. "MARCO!!" Niccolo shouts.

"I hear voices padre! People need help. Those are voices calling," says Marco.

"No," says Niccolo. "It is not the voices of men, at least. They warned me, in Lop, not to listen. Those who follow the sounds of those voices – whatever the are – wander without end and perish in the wilderness. Voices – yes I hear them. Maybe it is the ghosts of those who died out here in the waste. Maybe it is only the wind. Shut your ears, son! Do not listen!"

I shiver. Turning over, I try to block out the voices and get some sleep. Every night I hear them, they remind me of story a trader told me once. A siren, a creature with two tails who lives in the water, has a voice that is so powerful, it pulls men into a trance to make them crash their ship. The desert voices are like sirens. They put people in a trance and lead them out into the sand never to be seen again. Day after day we travel and night after night I hear the haunting voices.

Denisse

Marco: The Long Hall Way

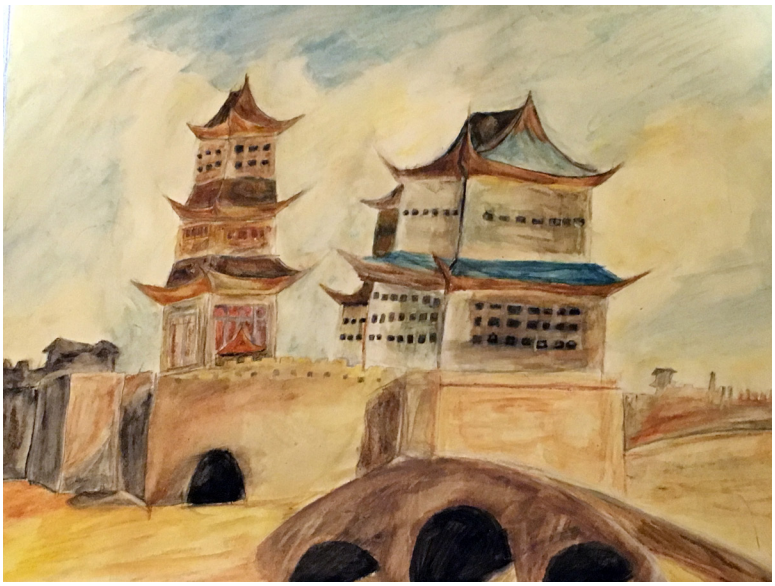
Calm down Marco, stay focused. There is no reason for me to get so nervous. This is a really long hall I'm walking through. It's got beautiful paintings and decorations. I love that painting with the horse and the man wearing a long robe with a piece of material tied around his waist, and a round hat. Also, he has a really long mustache and go-T. I love the different shades of brown. It looks really windy in the picture; I wonder what the picture's story about? Also I love how there are no sharp lines on the boarder of the picture, and the mane and tail of the horse is just disappearing in to the back round.

Was that a bug I just saw climbing the wall? Well, I hope it wasn't. It's probably my imagination. Okay, I've got to remember: bow when I come in; bow when I leave; also don't ask questions unless I'm being asked to. My hands are shaking so much. Come on hands stop shaking. Now they are sweating a lot. What can I wipe them on? I don't want the Khan to see that I wiped my hands on my robes and that they were so sweaty that they left sweat stains.

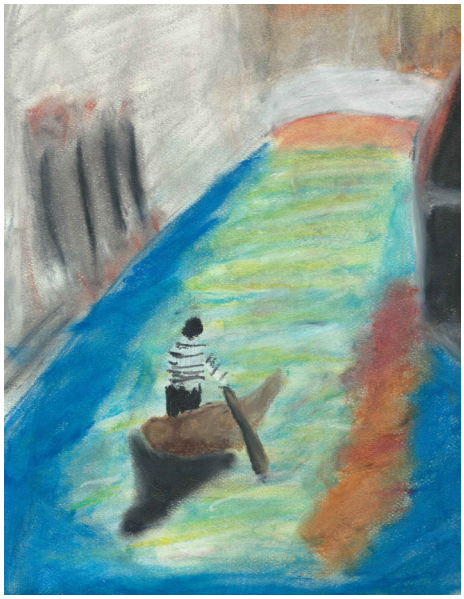
Hold on this looks different. I wonder if we are going somewhere else than before or we are just taking a different way to where I first met him, the Khan. The majordomo is quiet. I can hear the echo and rhythm of both of our feet walking at different paces. My heart is so loud, it's racing a lot faster then normal. Well, it makes sense, since I'm really nervous. Huh, I never realized how . . .Thud! Whoa, what was that? It sounded like someone dropped, or knocked over something, I wonder what it was. Oh yeah, I meant to finish that last thought, although I can't remember what I was just thinking then. I hate that when it happens.

It's kind of awkward. Maybe I should say something. But I don't know what to say. He has really long legs. I have to take a lot more steps then him and he is fast too. Got to keep up with him but I can't run.

I think we are here. Breathe Marco, don't trip over your own feet, or the ground. Remember the things that padre told me: No asking questions unless being told to; be confident and speak truthfully. Okay, I'm ready.



During each Unit, two or three times, each student writes an individual essay. Over the course of the 7th Grade Renaissance Unit, the students write essays about such things as, The Plague in Italy and the challenges Copernicus faced in his work, the inventions of da Vinci.. In the samples follow, students were free to choose their focus and the perspective from which they would experience the Plague; as you will see, they took that opportunity and flew!



Abigail

I rowed slowly down the canal, breathing heavily in my mask. The waters were practically abandoned, and I hardly saw any people who were happy anymore. I remember when many people rowed down the peaceful canals in their sandolos and gondolas; those were happy times indeed. The festivals and the marriage of Venezia to the sea all seemed to have happened so long ago.

I sighed and kept rowing the barge through the deathly silent rio. The plague was so unexpected, and the doctors and the priests hardly did anything. They came to houses and the doctors would say there was nothing they could do; and the priests prayed … But what did they do? Absolutely nothing! The sounds of the church bells rung all the time, and my partner and I constantly picked up more bodies for funerals or to be hauled off to far off islands.

I kept rowing. I looked at my partner rowing in front of me, dressed in the same layers of black clothing as me. There were so many layers of warm cloth that I constantly felt like I was over heating. But I knew it was for the best: to keep us from getting this mysterious, awful sickness that was sweeping over the city. We also wore masks with long beaks for extra protection.

In between me and my partner was the pile of bodies covered with a white cloth. The stench was wretched, but after a few days I got used to it. It was the smell of death, and it was everywhere. The disgusting scent floated through the air on the canals and everywhere else imaginable in Venezia.

My partner and I kept rowing to the next house where we were supposed to pick up bodies ; a servant's family who had all been struck with the sickness and no one had survived except for him. We arrived at the house and knocked on the door to see if the servant was there. No answer. I slowly opened the door and entered the house; my partner followed behind me. The house was dark and silent. We turned a corner into the servants' quarters and saw two bodies on their

small beds: one of the bodies had been covered with a sheet while the other had not been. He must have been the servant who had come requesting that the bodies to be picked up a couple of days ago. We left that part of the house and made our way upstairs. The first door we came to was for the child's room. I wanted to cry when I saw a little human figure under a cloth, lifeless and not moving.

"She must have been at least been five years old," I stammered under my breath. My partner just looked at me and said, "Remember we have a job to do here." I snapped out of the small amount of grief I had for the child and focused on my job. I had seen many dead children before and it should not affect me.

We went into the next bedroom and found the mother and father lying side by side in their bed, dead. I pulled back the cloth covering them and saw black swellings all over their bodies. No wonder some people referred to this plague as the "black death."

We lifted the bodies one by one off of their beds, out the door, and onto the pile of corpses on the barge. After we had loaded all of the bodies onto the barge I went back to the door and closed it. Then we covered the dead with the white cloth. Finally we boarded the barge and headed off to collect more rotting corpses.

This process felt endless. Every day I would row down the canals on the barge with my partner, collecting bodies from houses. We would pass houses abandoned by people who had fled to the countryside to escape the sickness. The bells were constantly ringing and the cries and wailing of people who had lost a loved one were common. After a few weeks the bells stopped, and the smell of death was stronger than ever.

I was almost constantly working now with many, many deaths occurring. It takes a certain kind of person to do the job that I do; they must lack in sympathy and not be disturbed by the dead. An ordinary person might break down in tears or faint from the sight of a limp human being covered in a deadly sickness. I do not know how much longer this sickness will stay here, but until it leaves I must keep rowing bodies down the canals of what now feels like a ghost town.

Dash

I wake to the sound of bells. I am Matteo and am trapped in this confusion of death, despair and suffering. As I rise from my bed I notice a small bird crouching on the window ledge.

I am struck by the colorful feathers rustling in the wind. A small point of happiness in this dead city. As I gaze at this wonderful and colorful creature I remember the old days. The days we spent having celebrations and feasts. Now everybody avoids each other. They fear that if they get too close they will get the disease as well. I put my head in my hands. What have we done to deserve this…….. this plague!

Hearing a flutter of wings, I look up and see the colorful bird has flown. I race to the window and look out. The bird is circling upward far into the clouds. How I wish I could fly away like the bird could. Away from all of the death. But I must stay and help Madre and Bianca survive. It is my duty. "

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Leaving the gruesome spectacle below, I climb closer to the sun. Then, when I can go no further, I soar down again. I land on a tower – the same tower that houses the bells. The bells that ring for the dead. They have been ringing constantly now. I am used to it. Everybody is. Finally, when I can take it no longer, I fly away.

My wings take me to the port. It is a busy place. People are throwing the dead into the sea like garbage. I fly onto the deck of a ship where the captain is standing right in front of me. I wonder what he is going to do. Suddenly the captain pulls out some bread and tosses it to me. I eat it quickly. Then with my little belly full, I gracefully fly upwards. As I do, I hear him say, "What a beautiful bird."

My back is starting to ache from bending over. I have been praying for more than an hour. I am now sore, hungry and tired. I must keep praying for Madre to get well, I tell myself. Most likely you will feel worse if you continue, my better sense tells me. I give up and rise. I wish my father were here. He would know exactly what to do. But he is gone. I will always remember him, no matter where he is. That is my promise.

Ibra

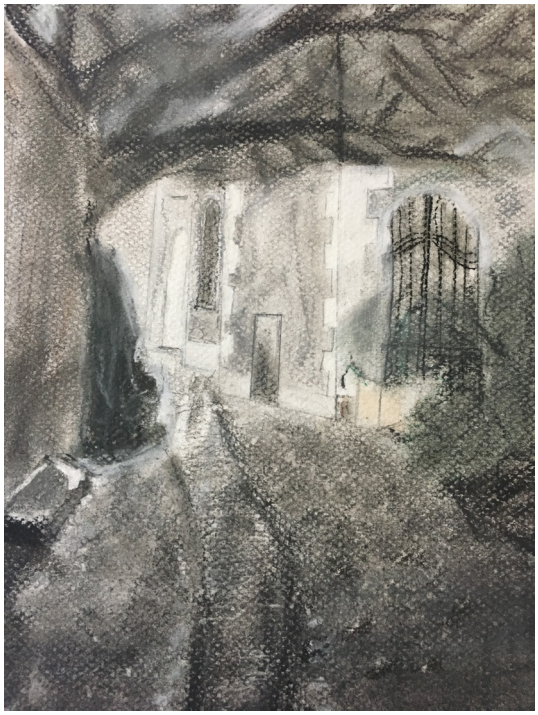
Ugh, the smell; the last few months I've been waking to the aroma of rotting corpses, which does not have me rushing down to breakfast every morning. It gets worse; every day after breakfast I walk down to my boat and row up and down the canals looking for dead people. Then I have to ferry them to the bay where they get thrown overboard. Sounds nice, right? Well, it isn't. Just touching them gives me the shivers; imagine having to lift them up and throw them over the side of the boat again and again.

Three bad things about my job: first, the bodies are very heavy; second, they stink; and third, blugh, rowing home after a day of backbreaking labor smelling like rotting flesh is just wonderful.

That's how my days usually go but today is different. I spoke to a boy today which does not usually happen since most of them are dead by now. I was surprised to find that he did not appear to be sick in any way. He actually looked healthy, though he did say that his mother and sister were sick and dying. So it probably won't be long before he's gone as well. As I arrive back at my small house, I look at my garden which has decayed because I don't have time to take care of it with all the bodies coming in. It reminds me of better times: of the Festa de la Sensa and the busy canals of this once-great city. It is sad what it has become of it. It has become a graveyard.

Rebecca

The dark is oppressive, surrounding me, suffocating me in a midnight blanket so heavy I can't even remember what light looked like. The only relief I enjoy is small scraps of sound that cut into my miserable world with much needed reassurance of my sanity. Something hits the side of my cage with a loud clank, jolting my tortured mind to a painful halt. I turn my face towards the sound and blink my eyes open. Even though I know there is nothing I can do to push back the darkness, the simple gesture helps clear my brain. As I wait for something to happen with bated breath, another sound floats into my mind. It's deep, and rich, with a strange lilt, that gives me the idea that it's a voice. I try desperately hard to put the sounds together, but can only find something that I think means dislike. A moment later something hits my foot, and stretching out a hand, I find a hard piece of bread. Then a drop of liquid hits my middle finger, and I realize that the small groove in the bottom of my cage is also filled with water. I bend to take a mouthful; it's bitter and hardly satisfies my thirst, but there is nothing else to drink. I sit back, grasping the food in one hand. The bars instantly dig into my spine, and send a jolting pain, like lighting, up my spine, but at this point, I'm already deep in my mind, lost with the nightmares and memories.



Tonight, the bells ring, again the sweet sound shattering the horrid nightmares into a million pieces. As I sit in complete darkness, crouched like an animal, in a cage as big as my bath house used to be, I feel as though for one perfect moment I am free. Then the moment fades, along with the notes, leaving me in a quiet so deep that, for a moment, I wonder if I'm alone. The thought sends shivers running like icy fingers up my back. If I am alone, there will be no one to save me from the twisted horrors that are encased in my own head.

No familiar sound has graced my prison for days. I am exhausted by the endless darkness that relentlessly surrounds my little world. For now, there are no bits of music, or tinkles of laughter, to give me scant relief. All is quiet, and still. The only input I get from the outside world is a smell. Harsh and bitter, it has stung the inside of my nose and mouth for so long, all my other senses seem dim and bland, in comparison. Sometimes, the call of an unknown bird pierces the silence, echoes for a moment, then dies, muffled like a cricket in a storm. The only reassurance of the survival of my species is the infrequent scream, carried on the wind from tormented lips. But that does almost nothing to reassure me that there is hope for my survival, as my throat is now as dry as a puddle, under high noon's sun.

My head is now heavy as lead, too heavy for my shaking neck to lift. My mouth is so dry, I can hardly remember what it felt like to drink my fill. Even the birds have left now, and the screams are nothing more than echoes, remembered by the wind. There is a pain in my head, that pulsates with each beat of my falling heart.

As I sit here, I slowly begin to realize that this is it; this is how I end. I am a husk, nothing more than pain, thirst and monsters, but just as that thought crosses my mind, I remember something. : a

saying that, for all these weeks, has been hidden from me. It is in my language, something my mother murmured every morning, in thanks to the Lord. I pause for a moment, then taking one deep breath, I began to chant. My voice is weak, and so quiet, I can hardly hear it. But I keep going, scrambling though my jumbled thoughts, for the next word, the next line, the next breath. My lips are so dry that at every letter, they crack a little more, sending small rivers of salty, crimson, blood, into my mouth.

But I don't stop.

The next time I breathe in, my lungs spasm with a horrible pain, that makes me believe for a moment, they are collapsing in on themselves.

But I don't stop.

My voice cracks at almost every sentence, and is still no more than a whisper.

But I don't stop, until I have recited every word, and then it's only to take a deep, rattling, breath, before starting again.

Thusly I die, but I choose to die as a person, not a prisoner in my own head, not an outcast shunned by my people. But a person, a person who died, in the name of her God.

In 2016, students did extensive writing, drawing and craft projects about key figures of the Renaissance, however these were written as scene plays for their (overly extensive) video projects. Those can be seen via the link on this page.

Models include a tank and a catapult built according to Leonardo da Vinci's plans.