This piece is reprinted, with permission from the author, from the Northern Virginia Writing Project Newsletter.

One summer afternoon at a Writing Project workshop, Don Humbertson had us play with metaphor. After writing, "If ______ were a color, he/she would be ______," we wrote about that color, never referring directly to the person.

If Marian were a color, she would be blue. Blue sea—changing and shifting into shades of green, purple, black—then suddenly blue again. Waves gather momentum losing blue into churning brown topped with white lace—slowly steadily pulling strength from the blue vastness—the wave grows then crashes—leaving behind in the sand puddles and rivulets reflecting the blue sky—little ocean bits.

As soon as I narrowed the generalization "colors" to the specific image "sea," I wrote quickly.
After our spurt of exploratory writing, some shared their insights. Don began, "If Marian were a color, she could be blue." I smiled—and I had thought my idea was original! Metaphors, connections, making sense—it was a sensible connection. Marian Mohr was our unofficial leader. She is a writer, a serious teacher and student of writing, and her eyes are blue.

Later that day, I shared my writing with Marian. She said, "You saw my dark side," and I knew I had an honest connection. When she asked me for a copy, I said "sure," but I don't remember ever giving it to her. I was stalled by the thought of presenting a Finished Product to an Audience Whose Opinion Mattered. I'd forgotten about process, which I rediscovered by accident three years later.

My husband and I were moving from the area, and Marian called to say she'd stop by with a clipping from the "Writing Project plant." What could I give her? An hour before she arrived, I found that scrap of paper from three summers before.

When I reread it, I was dissatisfied with the form. Images describing a poet should be a poem. A poem in an hour? At least it could look like a poem. I fiddled around breaking it into chunks and worked briefly with word choice: "changing and shifting" became just "shifting" and "topped with" became "edged with." At noon, I presented my poem and my apologies to Marian. "Not really a Finished Produce...just a Draft...so little time...wanted to give you something..."

If Marian were a color,
   She would be blue
Sea blue—shifting into shades
   of green, purple, black—
   then suddenly blue again.
Waves gather momentum
   losing blue
   in churning brown
   edged with white lace
slowly, steadily pulling strength
   from the blue vastness
the wave grows
   then crashes—and leaves behind
in the sand
   puddles and rivulets
reflecting the blue sky
   ocean bits of blue.

I wrote the first lines and decided to try to discipline
   all my lines to five syllables each.

Marian

Sea blue shifts to shades
   of green, purple, black
and then again to blue
Waves draw their strength
   from that blue vastness
   until churning brown
   edged with beige lace
they crash—on the beach
   they leave puddles and
   rivulets of blue
   ocean bits.

I addressed an envelope and added a cover note.
However, before I actually sealed and stamped it, I re-read the revised poem. Suddenly, I found I was writing notes to Marian in the margin:

they crash—on the beach
   they leave puddles and
   rivulets of blue
   ocean bits

Sandpipers skitter
   on the beach
   in the puddles and
   rivulets glinting
   sky blue ocean bits.

Marian: Holistic Revision

Sea blue shifts to shades
   of green, purple, black
   and then again blue.
Waves from that blue grow
   until churning brown
   they reach the shore.
Sandpipers skitter
   there in puddles and
   rivulets—glinting
   sky blue ocean bits.

I almost mailed this to Marian, but let it sit awhile

(Continued on page 12)
What have I learned by observing myself as a writer?
1. I can be intimidated by the thought of presenting a Finished Product to an Audience.
2. My first reaction to this fear was avoidance. I didn’t "hand in" anything; it’s less threatening to be judged forgetful or unwilling than unable.
3. When faced with a deadline (Marian’s arrival with the plant), I revised superficially. I just rearranged prose to look like a poem.
4. I wanted to revise when I imagined my audience was an Interested Ally rather than a Discriminating Judge. Writing comments to my audience/ally worked like a conference for me.
5. Writing about my writing helped me identify what I wanted to say and where I had not succeeded yet. The process of discovery and problem-solving was fun, not threatening. I didn’t see my many drafts as failures, just working drafts.
6. Deadlines helped me overcome inertia, yet their pressure was not overwhelming since I had two chances.
7. It took a long time between spurts.
8. If someone had picked up my third or eighth draft of "Marian" and written "B-" across the top, I would have crumpled the paper in a wad and thrown it away. However, real Writers finally publish their work in a "cold, cruel world." If teachers see students as real Writers, then we allow them the time and choices they need to write like real Writers. Then, finally, there is a deadline and a red pen or blue pencil followed by publication, for all writers write to be read....

Well, Marian, what’d you think?

Catherine Garea is a Fellow of the Northern Virginia Writing Project.