

## Just what does Tacoma's poet laureate do? It's about finding the essence of the community



LUI KIT WONG/The News Tribune

Tacoma's poet laureate, William J. Kupinse, left, used poetry to curse leaf blowers. But University of Puget Sound groundskeeper John Conley has a poetic response.

# Poetic license

### A CURSE UPON LEAF BLOWERS AND THE MEN WHO LOVE THEM

In all their zeal for smoke and rattle,  
the Futurists never envisioned your leaf blowers  
pounding the geometry of row houses.  
Yesterday, I cast a spell to charm  
the throatwhistlers' roar  
to silence if not wonder,  
but once more this morning I hear  
their tintinnabulation.

If not a charm, a curse then:  
To all who handle leaf blowers,  
may dust enter your eyes  
in ounces not in motes.  
May you blast away wanted objects,  
family photos, bills of medium denomination,  
W-9 forms, eyeglass prescriptions,  
cards addressed to grandmothers and elderly aunts.

May the allied evil of lawn trimmers  
flay your calves like the self-scourges  
of an ascetic monk. May humus turn to ashes,  
your golf shorts to sackcloth. May the starter  
cord wrap around your neck in dreams.  
May your dinner reek of gasoline.  
May you some day learn  
the meaning of rake.

William J. Kupinse

BY WILLIAM J. KUPINSE

**T**he most common question that friends have asked since I was selected as Tacoma's poet laureate is "Do you get a special hat?" They're right, in one sense: The word laureate literally means "crowned with laurel as a symbol of distinction." They're wrong, however, in that I received a very nice certificate, but no hat.

The word "laureate" seems an odd fit for a city such as Tacoma, which is a down-to-earth, unpretentious place, the kind of city that finds joy in the process of work rather than in, well, resting on its laurels.

I too tend to prefer a quieter, less visible role. I'm happiest observing life around me, jotting down notes, writing poems and revising them. Frankly, reading in front of people makes me nervous, though I've gotten over that a bit in recent years.

As grateful, not to mention surprised, as I am to have received the award, if I had my druthers I would change the title from poet laureate to "poetry facilitator" or "poetry engineer," or maybe just "city poet." Such a name change would reflect the fact that while it's a nice honor to receive the award, there's also a job involved, which is to promote poetry's public role within the community.

But perhaps it's worth asking why there should be a position created to promote poetry in the first place.

Fostering poetry in the city may seem a less obviously pressing need than building parks or supporting firefighters, but I do think that art in general and poetry in particular are crucial components of community life.

"It is difficult / to get the news from poems

/ yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there," wrote William Carlos Williams, suggesting that in poetry's absence, values necessary to human life remain unvoiced.

This sense that poetry speaks to both civic and spiritual needs led the City of Tacoma — whose support of the arts rivals that of many larger cities — and the progressive, ecumenical Urban Grace Church to form a partnership to sponsor the poet laureate position.

Indeed, poetry does address both these needs: It affords the possibility of reconciliation without resolution, and it provides space for individual reflection.

Moreover, poetry offers a forum for conversation that any one can join. One of my poems that appears at left, "A Curse upon Leaf Blowers and the Men Who Love Them," was inspired by the overenthusiastic yard care of Midwesterners in a town where I once taught.

In fact, it grew out of an exercise I assigned

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### STIHL YOU TURN ME ON

With my Master's ears plugged  
with foam, and his eyes a shield  
of goggle, I am become the whirl  
and wail upon tumescent eardrums.  
I AM LEAF BLOWER.

I don't want to stir up any  
particulate matter but ...  
at 65 decibels does your cochlea  
really clang, do your anvil and  
hammer truly bang?

I will not see my Master's crippled  
carpus frozen to the rake-handle  
of society's green-leaf child.

I was a benevolent force once,  
working behind a filmmaker's  
camera that found American beauty  
in a floating plastic bag.  
They couldn't have done it without me!

You said I was Big then.  
Well I'm still big, it's the EPA decibel  
levels that got smaller.

I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. Kupinse.

John Conley

# POET

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

to my creative writing students, which was to write two poems – one a blessing, the other a curse. (I always do the in-class writing exercises I assign; it seems only fair).

While it's not the best poem I've written, for some reason "Leaf Blowers" seems to strike a chord with people; I read it often at public events. Imagine my delight when early one morning I found that John Conley, a University of Puget Sound groundskeeper, had slipped under the door a poem he'd written in response to mine.

Among its many insights, John's ode to leaf blowers observes that the famous floating plastic bag scene in the film "American Beauty" employed an offscreen artificial wind source. In other words, art sometime requires leaf blowers.

I don't think that I could ask for a more attentive reader, and I, in turn, read John's poem with real interest. Such is the kind of conversation poetry can foster.

I'd like the world to have more poems about leaf blowers written by people who use them in their jobs. I'd like us to have poems about trees written by tree surgeons – and by loggers and environmental activists and fourth-graders alike.

I'd like us to have poems written about Tacoma by dockworkers and City Council members and retirees and people whose occupations can't be bluntly categorized. I'd like to have people write poems on subjects they know intimately and would care enough about to choose their words deliberately.

This brings me to my final point, which is to say what I hope specifically to accomplish during my term as city poet, aka poet laureate.

First, I'd like to share some poems with Tacomans and others that perhaps they will find illuminating or thought-provoking – or at least enjoy. In addition to the poems of my own that appear along with this essay, in the future I want to share the poetry of other writers,

## CHESTNUT

Sea urchin's convergent cousin, landed  
by wind or the inevitable cleave of stem,  
nettles the mossy earth to command  
its claim: Here, the credo of each spine.  
How did its inside, once removed  
and caramelized in Christmas hearths or hawked  
from city carts, come to stand for truth  
uncapitalized, wisdom to be pocketed  
and worried in odd moments? What aphorism  
binds these happenstance discoveries  
to our large needs, then sees them through the prism  
of the too-familiar? Simplicity  
could never be the answer, every child knows.  
Burnished without fire the chestnut glows.

## SEEN TWICE

And just look at how tender this roast is,  
the host draws out the words, his angular  
Manchester consonants as finely honed  
as the knife that cuts the marbled flesh.  
Meat juice flowing like steeped tea,  
the infomercial audience gives a standing O.

Is there a world where infomercial chefs  
cook in plastic gizmo domes roasts  
that don't melt in the mouth? Not likely.

whether established or not.

To that end, I plan to arrange several poetry readings over the next year that will feature local writers, and to publish an anthology of Tacoma poets. I also welcome invitations to speak to schools or other community groups; it will be a pleasure to volunteer my time for this endeavor.

Second, I want to encourage everyone who feels the inclination to write poetry to do so. I will conduct two poetry workshops over the next year to help.

The first, on the theme of "Illumination," will take as its subject the Tacoma Art Museum's visiting exhibit, opening July 12, of the St. John's Bible. The first handwritten

Bible commissioned in more than 500 years, this illuminated manuscript includes, among other things, a genealogy of biblical women, illustrations of DNA and connections with Islamic, Jewish and Native American spiritual traditions.

The second workshop, in March, will focus on the idea of sustainability.

While my goal is for these poetry workshops and readings to give local writers a chance to hone their craft and find an audience, the most important thing that I've learned in the short time I've been poet laureate is just how many talented and accomplished writers there are in Tacoma already.

Should we despair the spectators' delight  
in what's predictable because seen twice?

Recall that ancient audiences sitting  
on the Theatre of Dionysis's stone benches,  
rump-sore, cursing pillows left at home,  
knew Oedipus would always end up blind,  
knew Aeschylus would never fail to best  
Euripides in Hades' poetry slam.

So too when I in early morning rain  
forsake the television and the couch,  
plant my rump on a bicycle saddle  
and pedal through the empty April streets.

I've traced this city's gritty lineaments  
a hundred times before on bike or foot,  
from Wright Park's Greek revival maidens,  
to Ruston Way's driftwood and seawrack.

Though I know where each street and alley leads,  
my interest's in the how more than the what:  
the practiced gait of sanitation workers,  
the devotion of a gardener at dawn,  
beaming bus stop faces in the fog.

This morning I am seeing the city twice,  
which is to say I'd missed it all before.

Indeed, my greatest personal satisfaction so far has been to have my eyes opened to the fact that there are people all around me wearing invisible laurels of their own, whatever hats they wear in their daily lives.

**William Kupinse is the Urban Grace Poet Laureate of Tacoma for 2008-09 and associate professor of English at the University of Puget Sound. His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Cimarron Review, The Fourth River and Sea Stories. He is also the author of a poetry chapbook, "Raw Materials."**