

# Riddles and Kennings



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## **MATCH & PAIR : WARM-UP EXERCISE**

Cut up the kennings and their referents into single strips. Divide them into sets according to number of participants. Each group matches up their set. Discuss the results. For example, which kennings are particularly effective and why. More kennings can be found on the Skaldic Editing Project database (<http://abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?table=kennings&view=>).

***ulfvín* — ‘wolf-wine’**

***hljóðgreipar* — ‘sound-grabbers’**

***jökla akrmurur*, — ‘the silverweeds of the field of ice-floes’**

***hattarstallr* — ‘hat-stool’**

***hel kastar* — ‘the death of the wood pile’**

***malmregn* — ‘metal-rain’**

***grár nagr hræva* — ‘the grey bird of corpses’**

***tún reikar* — ‘homefields of the hair-parting’**

***þjóð mána stiettar* — ‘the people of the moon’s path’**



***mævǫrum sævar*; — ‘the slender arrows of the sea;’**

***salr sólborgar* — ‘the hall of the sun’s stronghold’**

***harmsfullr hallr hugstrandar* ~ ‘sorrowful stone of the thought-shore’**

***in mjóva mengrund* — ‘the slender necklace-ground**

***himintungl heila* — ‘heavenly bodies of the brain’**

***fjǫrrǫnn* — ‘life-halls’**

***aldið, ótamt vigg Varðrúnar*, — ‘the old, untamed steed of Varðrún <troll-woman>’**

***birkihind brums* — ‘the bark-stripping hind of the bud’**

***eykr jǫtuns*, — ‘the draught-animal of the giant,’**

***hetskum fjanda heims* — ‘the malignant enemy of the world’**

***sú sía smiðju galdra* — ‘molten substance of the smithy of spells,’**

***fellir lífdvalar* — ‘a slayer of life’s duration’**

***hæst hugborð* — ‘the highest mind-board’**

***þessi hagkennandi hróðrs* — ‘this skilled conveyor of praise’**

***Gætir grefs* — ‘the minder of the hoe’**

***Atrennir agngalga* — ‘the caster of the bait-gallows’**

***timbrfastr nökkvi toptar* — ‘the timber-fast boat of the building plot,’**

***vegr jǫtna* — ‘to the path of the giants’**

***hjarta lagar* — ‘the heart of the water’**

***þorp þrætu* — ‘hamlet of quarrelling’**

***tól bragar* — ‘tools of poetry’**

***ilvegr* — ‘sole-path’**

**BLOOD**

**EARS**

**FOOT**

**HEART**

**FIRE**

**HEAD**

**EYES**

**MOUTH**

**ORGANS OF SPEECH**

**HERRINGS**

**BATTLE**

**FISH**

**EAGLE**

**ANGELS**

**EARTH**

**WOMAN**

**BREASTS**

**WOLF**

**GOAT**

**BULL**

**DEVIL**

**INSULTS**

**DEATH**

**COURAGE**

**FARMER**

**POET**

**FISHERMAN**

**HOUSE**

**ICE**

**MOUNTAINS**

**EVIL**

**HEAD**

## Riddles & Kennings

Riddles have been around for a very long time in all cultures:

*The Book of Proverbs ... for perceiving the meaning of proverbs and obscure sayings, the sayings of the sages and their riddles... (Proverbs 1:6-7)*

*Oedipus found that the king of the city (Laius) had been recently killed and that the city was at the mercy of the Sphinx. Oedipus answered the monster's riddle correctly, defeating it and winning the throne of the dead king and the hand in marriage of the king's widow, Jocasta.*

*The Queen of Sheba asked: 'What are the seven that issue and nine that enter, the two that offer drink, and the one that drinks?' Solomon answered: 'The seven that issue are the seven days of menstrual impurity. The nine that enter are the nine months of pregnancy. The two that offer drink are the beasts, and the child is the one who drinks.'*

**Who wrote this poem? And *what* is the thing with feathers?**

Clue: it's abstract

..... is the thing with feathers

..... is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—  
And sore must be the storm—  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chilliest land—  
And on the strangest Sea—  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb—of Me.

## TWO POEMS BY IAN CROCKATT

(from *SKALD Viking Poems*; Koo Press, 2009, 2011)

Consider the assonance, alliteration and atmosphere of these poems.  
Now try to find a suitable word (sound *and* meaning) to fill in the gaps.

### Drowning

I love you, ..... . I'd give  
    my two breasts to hold you.  
Sky-rider, when your dream  
    lets you down, drown with me  
in the vague haar of my hair  
    on this blue ..... beneath  
you. .... , do you doubt me?  
    Here's my tear- ..... shadow.

### The Unprotected

Now that a thin sleet-smirr  
    sogs the ..... 's coat, force-  
feeds itself through door-slats  
    and loose-thatched straw- ..... roofs,  
we're anyone's; wolves, skalds, elves,  
    crossed monks, weirds, berserks, .....  
gods □ bastards all □ enthrall  
    us. Child, welcome to .....

## SO WHAT IS A KENNING?

### Structure

1. referent – the object being referred to but not mentioned
2. base word – this represents/describes the ‘secret’ referent
3. determinant – this is the environment of referent
4. solution/meaning

Example: Category: object

1. sausage
2. snake
3. pot (or ‘of the pot’)
4. solution: pot-snake = sausage

Add a bit of ‘colour’: tasty pot-snake

Think: *alliteration* & *assonance*: eye-poppingly tasty pot-snake

### Now your turn

moon	hunger	giraffe	igloo
grass	memory	mother	wineglass
snow	hope	poet	spoon

## **MAKING A KENNING STEP BY STEP**

### **HARE**

1. Consider how you or a child or the hare itself might think of HARE

What's its most striking feature: What does it do?

eats (*everything*)                      proliferates (24/7)

How does it move?

lopes    leaps    bounds    fast    flashes

What does it look like?

long-eared    bright-eyed    bob-tailed (try fresher images)

What is its mythology?

trickster    bad omen    transformer    hunted    witch    love charm

2. Hare (referent)

find a word(s) to replace 'hare' (base word)

add word(s) to describe how it moves (determinant)

and another to show what it looks like (colour)

think about alliteration & assonance

Here are my kennings:

*soft-eyed mower of the homeland    loping long-eared grass-mower    lop-eared grass-cropper of the garden*

*nose-twitching garden grass-stripper    bob-tailed breeder in the fields*

*curse of the farmer's food purse    pest of the gardener's lettuce patch    bob-tailed breeding-machine*

*cunning trickster of the starry-eyed heart-hunter    white-tailed shape-shifter on the moon's horizon*

*fleet-foot charmer of the harmless child*

3. Now try your own

(For fantastic 'hare' poems, see David Harsent's sequence 'Lepus' in *Marriage* (Faber and Faber, 2002))



### **TAKING YOUR KENNING FOR A WALK**

1. Hold up image of HARE. Discuss its attributes (Step by Step). Take your HARE kenning for a walk in a specific location. Flow-write: think about atmosphere, mood & tone of your writing. Is the voice yours, a child's or the HARE's? (5-10mins)

Malene Thyssen



2. Hold up image of GNOME. Follow the **Step by Step** to make a GNOME kenning. Now introduce him into your writing. How does he interact with HARE? How does HARE respond to GNOME? Allow yourself to play and go off on tangents... (5-10mins)

Nutmeg designs



3. Hold up MOON and repeat the procedure to make a MOON kenning and incorporate into your writing. Let your imagination run free!

Tom Bayly

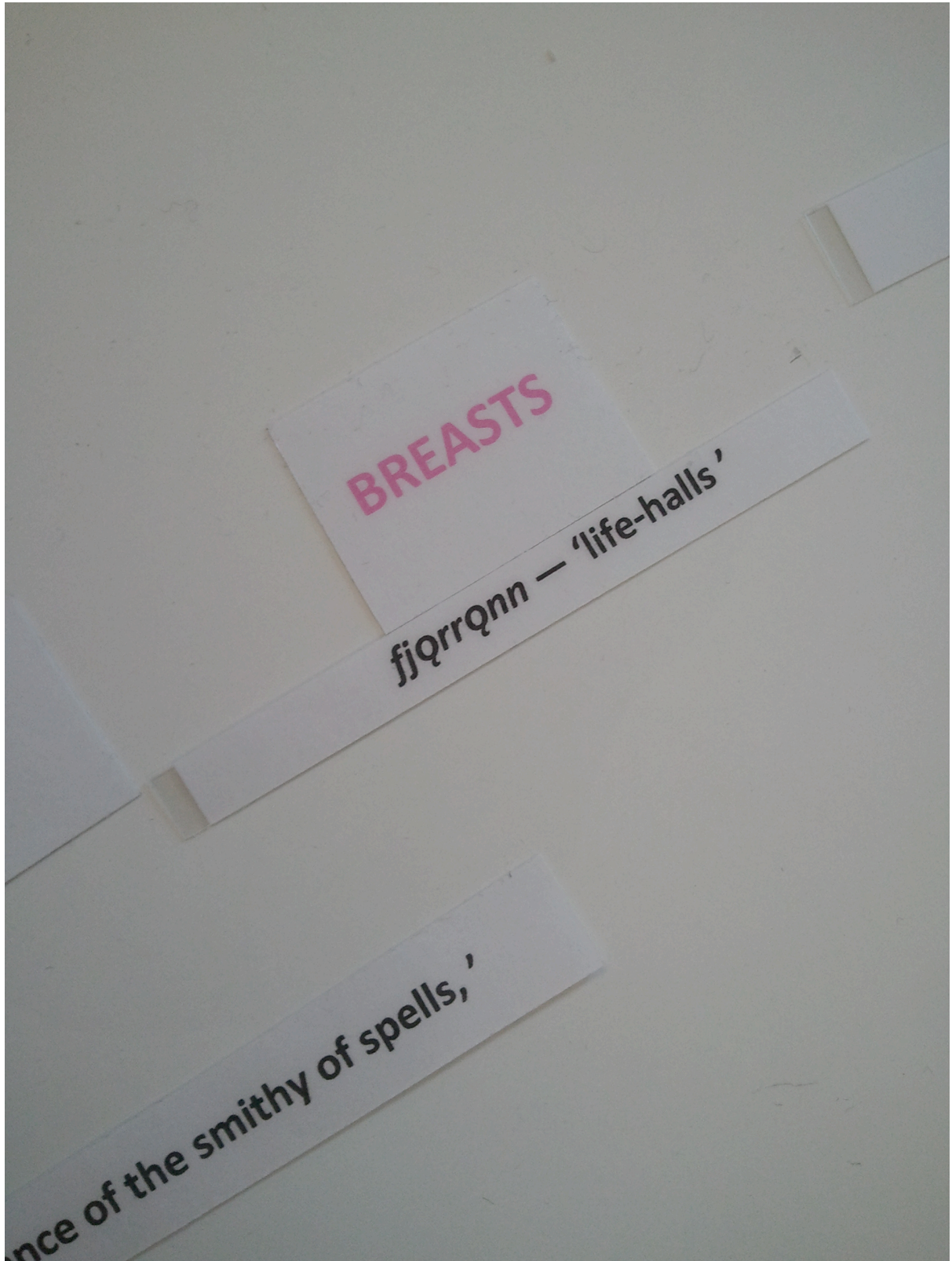


4. Hold up WITCH and repeat the procedure. (5-10mins). Read round and discuss participants' writing. This (exaggerated) exercise demonstrates how unexpected juxtapositions can lead the writer into new/unusual/surreal landscapes and moods.

Immanuel Giel











## COMMENTS ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

Valérie Fabre: *The workshop on Saturday was a great source of new inspiration. I hope we will have a chance to work together again.*

Linda Canalelli: *It was stimulating to be part of the group, despite having no former knowledge of Kennings. Lucy and Debbie put us at ease with the subject but at the same time gave us the stimuli to work with and gain confidence.*

Michael Bardouleau: *Listening to other people's work and seeing how they'd integrated kennings in subtle and overt ways into their writing was fascinating. There were no dry and dull discussions! I was exhausted when I got home afterwards! Highly recommended.*

Kathryn Crowcroft: *The workshop was just fantastic, thank you. I got so much out of it, and learned a great deal. Such a lovely group of people too.*