

From kenning to kenning poem

For the most part, Viking and Anglo-Saxon poets created kennings for a very limited number of objects, people and aspects of nature. But why limit ourselves? It is possible to come up with kennings for any number of things relevant to our modern-day experience of the world, so here's a little exercise to get you into the kenning frame of mind:

1. Think of an object or element of the natural world you'd like to work with. This could be anything – moon, house, clock, car, tree, shoe, mobile phone, rain, mouth etc. Now make a list of things which could represent or act as metaphors for your object in some way. These will be the 'base words' of your kennings.

Think about the way your object looks, feels, moves, smells, sounds and tastes when considering what you might compare it to. I've come up with the following lists of things to represent fork and snow:

FORK	SNOW
spear	blossom
spade	dust
comb	foam
pen	tears
tree	pearls
pen	petals
snake	lace

2. Make another list which includes things that describe your chosen object, and other objects which are associated with your object in some way. This list will be the 'determinants' of your kennings, the clues which help your audience find the solutions to your kenning puzzles. Here are my lists for fork and snow:

FORK	SNOW
knife	icy
plate	sky
food	clouds
breakfast	winter
silver	cold
plastic	white
sharp	arctic
pronged	penguin

3. Now for the exciting part: you are ready to start constructing your kennings. You can do this by selecting words from your second list (the determinants) to pair up with words from your first list (the base words). You may choose to connect the words with a hyphen as in *whale-road*. Alternatively, you could use 'of' or 's' to connect them in a phrase, such as *road of the whale* or *whale's road*. Play around with them and make a decision in each individual case in terms of the way it sounds. Here are some of my examples:

FORK
sprout-spear
carrot-comb
fanged snake of the plate
the knife's husband
the silver supper-pen

SNOW
winter-dust
cloud-blossom
icy lace
pearls of the sky
arctic foam

You may find that words from your list of determinants encourage you to use new base words you hadn't thought of before. For example, in my list of fork kennings, *the knife's husband* is inspired by the conventional pairing of knife and fork – like husband and wife. You could also draw on other human relationships: the fork could be *the sister of the spoon* or *the rival of the chopstick* and so on.

Another way you can enrich the imagery and sound is by adding extra adjectives. For example, I have attached *fanged* to *snake of the plate*, developing a comparison between the teeth of a snake and the prongs of a fork.

4. Now you should have a nice set of kennings to use as a starting point for a poem. The poem could take the form of a list of kennings or the kennings could be part of a larger poem as in the following example:

Moon-Pearls

The curdled milk of the sky
deposits its cold blanket
over the soil's silver follicles

gaunt shrubs glut
on the snow-plough's harvest

clouds wilt their winter-blossom
churning the air with the slap
of boreal breakers

the eskimo's pale vowels
sound above still attics
painting their polar frieze
on dark windows

I pack my palm
with precious moon-pearls
and name them snow

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This exercise is from a workshop written for the Poetry Society's Young Poets Network, December 2012 (<http://www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk/>)