Course Title: Poems and Paintings: In Search of Pleasure
Course Code: LIT 61
Instructor: Nicholas Jenkins
Meetings: 31 March-2 June 2022, 7:00-8:50 pm (PT) online

Joseph Severn, John Keats (1821-23), National Portrait Gallery
Do you love poetry, paintings, or perhaps both? Have you found that the more you attended to one of these forms, the more you understood about the other? This course begins with the assumption that the arts are in dialogue with each other. Our time in class will be rooted in group discussion and dialogue as well. Each week, we will look at several pairings of classic poems and enduring visual artworks. Sometimes these sets will include poems directly inspired by paintings or vice versa. Sometimes we will juxtapose paintings and poems that have no direct documentary connection but explore similar emotional and psychological terrains—love, grief, shame, joy, revelation, lostness, uncertainty, melodrama, secrets, the world of dreams.

Our goal is not to make firm conclusions but to enhance our ability to understand, enjoy, and react articulately to poems and paintings. The American poet Wallace Stevens wrote of poetry, "It must give pleasure." That will be our touchstone—that the more we enjoy the arts, the more we may aspire to understand them, and the more we understand the arts, the more pleasure we may find.

A tentative list of artists and poets whose creations we will study together include Rubens, Bishop, Dalí, Hopper, Cavafy, Hayden, Dickinson, Auden, Bruegel, Hiroshige, Graham, and van Gogh.

**Grade options and requirements:**
Students may take this course either on a “No Grade Requested” or on a “Credit/No Credit” basis. The requirements are simply to read, view or otherwise study the assigned material in advance and to be ready to participate in class discussions.

**Note about live attendance and recordings:**
Our class sessions will be recorded. However, it is important to participate live in order to get the full intellectual and imaginative benefit from the course. If that is impossible for you every time, I am fine with you watching a recording to catch up. Ultimately, as with most things in life the presence you give me and your fellow class-members will determine what you personally get back. I will not take a register and you can still earn credit if you miss one or two live sessions.

**Procedure:**
Each week, I’ll ask you to read in advance one tenth of the content in both the books I have assigned - that means you’ll have completed the volumes in their entirety by the end of the quarter. It’s not a huge number of pages to deal with, but you’ll be making a habit of reading poems and studying paintings in close proximity for 10 weeks straight. In class there will be an organizing theme for each meeting. I’ll present two poems and two paintings each time and give you my thoughts about them as well as introducing relevant background information. Quite often these pictures and lyrics won’t come from the books you’re reading,
though sometimes they will. In all cases, no prior knowledge is assumed. But the study and thinking you do by yourself each week is the foundation on which our class sessions will be built. After that, each session will be in seminar-style, progressing by means of questioning, individual contributions and dialogue. I’ll never call on anyone cold but I strongly encourage each class member to share their thoughts and reactions with the group.

**Assigned texts:**


**Tentative weekly outline:**
Week 1: 31 March  
Prologue - How to read paintings, how to see poems; and some thoughts about time

Week 2: 7 April  
Theme: Dreams

Week 3: 14 April  
Theme: Peace

Week 4: 21 April  
Theme: Drama

Week 5: 28 April  
Theme: Loss

Week 6: 5 May  
Theme: Everydayness

Week 7: 12 May  
Theme: Aloneness

Week 8: 19 May  
Theme: Joy
Week 9: 26 May  
Theme: My world

Week 10: 2 June  
Theme: Nature

Note: A final version of this syllabus will be available in the week classes begin.