

## **Fifty Thousand**

### **1**

While the Emperor of China was hunting, he came across a lonely hut in the forest. Curious about who it might be that lived in this isolated spot, the Emperor dismounted and entered the hut. An artist was at work, surrounded with piles of drawings which were stacked from floor to ceiling. Astonished, the Emperor exclaimed, "There must be fifty thousand paintings here!" "No, your majesty," said the painter, "there is only one—the one I am working on."

### **2**

When the Emperor of China asked the painter why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the painter replied, "Your majesty, I am told that the secret of good fortune is to be in the right place at the right time. If one is in the right place often enough, then sooner or later, it will be the right time, too."

### **3**

The Emperor of China decided to hold an audience with some craftsmen and artists. Upon questioning, one artist said that he had made fifty thousand paintings. The Emperor laughed and said, "Fifty thousand! Surely that is too many!" The painter said to him, "Here, in this very city, there are fifty thousand people without food. That is too many. There are fifty thousand people without homes. That is too many. There are fifty thousand people in prison. That is too many. But fifty thousand paintings are not too many."

### **4**

When asked why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the painter replied, "When the Emperor built a Great Wall, he disturbed the great forces. I made these paintings in an attempt to restore the balance between Heaven and earth."

### **5**

The painter sat at his bench making one painting after another. The Emperor, who happened to be passing by, commanded his retinue to stop so that they could observe the painter. The Emperor's chief minister said, "Please, your majesty, why are we stopping to watch this?" The Emperor replied, "When we discuss the problems of state, you tell me our way is blocked, but this painter shows us that there are more ideas in Heaven and in Earth than we previously suspected."

## 6

A friend went to visit an artist who had made fifty thousand paintings. The friend picked up one painting and asked, "What is the meaning of this one?" The artist replied, "Yellow means the loneliness of desire, and blue represents the hope that loneliness will end." The friend picked up another painting and said, "What is the meaning of this one?" The artist replied, "The winter rains cover the earth but there is always one spot that remains dry." And so it went. As the friend picked up one painting after another, the artist explained its meaning. It took one hundred days to go through them all. When the artist had finished explaining the very last painting, he put it down and said to his friend, "Well, that's one way of looking at them, but not the only way."

## 7

The Emperor disguised himself and walked the streets of the Nine-Gated City in order to find out how his subjects lived and what they thought. In one house he saw a painter sitting among stacks of paintings. The Emperor leaned in the window and said, "How prolific you are!" "Yes," replied the painter, "I think I have made fifty thousand paintings." "Fifty thousand!" exclaimed the Emperor. "Why so many?" The painter replied, "There is misery, hunger, and war in the kingdom. Obviously, the Emperor is not doing his job. I can't do his job either, but at least I can make sure that I'm doing mine."

## 8

Three young men who admired the art of painting decided to travel to the Nine-Gated City to see a painter that they had heard about. As they entered the painter's dwelling, they saw him sitting cross-legged on the floor, making one painting after another with furious intensity and muttering to himself from time to time. "Obviously, he wants to keep starting fresh," said the first young man. "He loves new beginnings," said the second young man. "What is most important about painting is the very first brushstroke," said the third young man. Finally they drew close enough to be able to hear what the painter was muttering. As he tossed each painting onto the pile, he said, "Finished!" or "Over!" or "Done!"

## 9

The young man admired the old painter for his vigor and energy. The young man said, "Your youthfulness is astonishing! In one year alone, you have made fifty thousand paintings!" "Ah," said the painter, "this is not youthfulness. These fifty thousand paintings are like autumn leaves falling from an old tree."

## 10

The Emperor of China decided to hold a competition to determine which artist was the greatest in the kingdom. He finally narrowed the field of aspirants down to three painters. He commanded them to appear in court and answer one question: “Why do you paint?” The first painter showed them one painting and said, “I painted this in hopes of creating a masterpiece.” The second painter showed them four paintings and said, “I painted these in order to capture the feeling of every season of the year.” The third painter showed the Emperor boxes and boxes of paintings—fifty thousand in all. He said, “I painted these because I cannot stop.”

## 11

The Emperor summoned the court painter. “What is your wish, great majesty?” asked the painter. “I would like you to make a picture of the Nine-Gated City,” said the Emperor, “that I may see it through your eyes and come to know it better.” Some time later, the painter presented the Emperor with fifty thousand paintings.

## 12

One morning, the Emperor was having tea with his seven daughters in the Jade Pavilion. The first daughter said, “I met a painter who made fifty thousand paintings.” The second daughter one said, “What folly! He has completely ruined the value of his paintings by making so many!” “That is true,” said the Emperor. “One or two gems are rare and precious, but when there are fifty thousand in the marketplace, the price is low.” “Ah,” said the third daughter, “but fifty thousand gems shine far more brightly than one or two.”

## 13

A drunk and disreputable old man stopped to watch a painter working in front of his dwelling. “You are always painting!” said the old man. “How many paintings have you painted?” “I am proud to say that I have made fifty thousand,” replied the painter. “Fifty thousand! That’s nothing! Do you know how many stars there are? Or grains of sand? Or how many fish eggs in the river? More than fifty thousand! A lot more! Fifty thousand is nothing!” In disgust the painter threw down his brush and paper and invited the old man in for a drink.

## 14

The Emperor was wandering in his garden on a warm summer day. As he walked, one delightful sight after another presented itself to his gaze. A white lotus rising from a pond on its spindly stem, a fluttering hummingbird, the shape of a cloud, the scattered brightness of sunlight glancing through foliage. “Ah,” he said to himself. “One picture after another.” As he walked through the garden, he came across an artist sitting on a bench, making quick rapid sketches. As soon as the artist was finished with a sketch, he tossed it into the pile and started a new one. “Ah,” said the Emperor to himself. “One picture after another.”

**15**

The artist was so absorbed in his work that he lit a candle during an eclipse so that he could continue painting.

**16**

The Emperor of China heard of a great artist who lived in the Nine-Gated City. He commanded the artist be brought before him. "I would like to see your work," said the Emperor. The painter bowed and left. He returned the next day and showed a painting to the Emperor. The Emperor nodded and said, "I like it." The painter bowed and turned to leave, but a court attendant blocked his way. The artist turned around and saw that the Emperor's face was flushed with rage. The Emperor said to the artist: "We expressed our interest in this painting, but you did not give it to us!" The painter bowed and said, "Permit me to offer you this painting, your majesty." Later on, a malicious court attendant said to the Emperor, "O Son of Heaven, know that the artist who was so rude to you this morning has made fifty thousand paintings." Hearing this, the Emperor became furious and summoned the artist into his imperial presence once more. The Emperor said, "You have made fifty thousand paintings, yet you gave us only one!" The painter bowed and said, "Permit me to offer you another one, your majesty."

**17**

When the Emperor of China heard that a painter had made fifty thousand paintings, he said, "Some inherit a kingdom, some destroy one, some create one."

**18**

A travelling merchant who dealt in precious works of art came to the Nine-Gated City. There, he met a painter and asked him to make some works of art that could be sold for profit in some distant parts of the kingdom. The painter was hesitant, but the merchant pressed him relentlessly. Finally, the painter gave in and agreed. Content, the merchant left the painter to his work. Some days later he returned to the painter and said, "Well? Do you have something for me?" The painter scratched his head and said, "I will begin soon." Then the merchant left the Nine-Gated City. Some months later he returned, and found the painter busy at work, surrounded by vast piles of paintings—fifty thousand, to be exact. The merchant was delighted. "You've done so much work!" he exclaimed. "Oh, no!" said the painter. "These are just sketches. But don't worry. I will begin soon."

**19**

A painter was showing some paintings in the court of the Emperor. Everyone admired his work. The Emperor asked, "But tell us, how many paintings have you made?" The painter answered, "Fifty thousand." The Emperor smiled and said, "But tell me, how good could your paintings be if you have made fifty thousand of them?" The painter replied, "Your majesty, I beg you to pretend that I have only made ten of them."

**20**

The Emperor was introduced to an artist who had made fifty thousand paintings. “A great accomplishment!” said the Emperor. “Yes, your majesty,” said the painter. “You have a right to be proud of yourself for making fifty thousand paintings.” “I’m proud of making ten good paintings,” said the painter. “I know there must be at least that many among these fifty thousand.”

## 21

The painter made a vow to make fifty thousand paintings. He worked very fast. As soon as he completed one painting, he immediately began the next one. He might never see some of these paintings again. So much passes by us, so many people.

## 22

While Emperor of China was hunting, he came across a lonely hut in the forest. Curious about who lived in this isolated spot, the Emperor dismounted and entered the hut. Inside an artist was at work, surrounded by piles of drawings stacked from floor to ceiling. The Emperor asked the painter, “How many paintings have you made?” The artist said, “Fifty thousand, your majesty.” The Emperor said, “Fifty thousand! That is too many!” said the Emperor, laughing. The artist said, “Your majesty, you are right.” He picked up one painting and thrust it into the fire. “*Now* there is exactly the right number of paintings,” he said.

## 23

The Emperor was taking tea with his seven daughters one morning in the Teak Pavilion. The first daughter said, “Have you heard there is an artist who made fifty thousand paintings?” The second daughter said, “Fifty thousand? He is a fool.” The Emperor said, “Indeed, I would value ten paintings more than fifty thousand.” The Emperor’s third daughter said, “Suppose you could choose between ten days to live and fifty thousand days to live.” “I would choose fifty thousand, of course,” said the Emperor, “but I would still value each of those ten days more.”

## 24

When the Emperor asked the artist why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the artist replied, “I could not show that desire has no limits. I could only imply it.”

## 25

The Emperor commanded that he be carried in his litter through the streets of the Nine-Gated City. He saw merchants selling, artisans working, women going to market, and children playing. “Really,” said the Emperor, “The life of the common people is very boring and trivial.” They moved further until they came to the dwelling of an artist. “This looks interesting,” said the Emperor. “We will stop here.” The Emperor entered the artist's dwelling. “I am honored by this visit from the Son of Heaven,” said the artist, bowing low. His dwelling was filled with paintings—fifty thousand in all. The Emperor looked around and said, “You have made so many paintings that the very sight of them makes me yawn. A few paintings are rare and precious, but so many paintings can only be called common and ordinary.” The artist replied, “Great majesty, we pass our lives dealing with the common and ordinary. Therefore common and ordinary things have a profound importance.”

## 26

The Emperor entered the dwelling of an old painter and found him working. Everywhere there were piles and piles of paintings—thousands of them. The Emperor picked up a painting at random from one of the piles and looked at it for a moment. Then he said, “Pardon me. I have forgotten which pile this painting came from.” The painter said, “You majesty, in your kingdom you employ many scribes and clerks. They keep track of everything. Here, in my kingdom, we keep track of nothing. You may put the painting anywhere you wish.”

## 27

The painter made a vow to make fifty thousand paintings. He worked very fast. As soon as he completed one painting, he immediately began the next one. In this way, he trained himself to let go of the past.

## 28

One day the Emperor commanded a painter to make a series of paintings to be displayed in the Palace. After some weeks, the Emperor went to see how the painter was progressing. He had made one hundred paintings. The Emperor asked, “Are you finished?” “No, your majesty,” replied the painter. The next time the Emperor stopped by, the painter had completed five thousand paintings. The Emperor asked, “Are you finished?” “No, your majesty,” said the painter. The third time the Emperor stopped by, the painter had completed twenty-five thousand. “Are you finished?” asked the Emperor. “No, your majesty,” said the painter. “Well, then,” said the Emperor impatiently, “when will you be finished painting?” “When you are finished ruling the Empire,” replied the painter.

## 29

After making fifty thousand paintings, the artist was sad. A friend asked him why. The artist replied, “There are ten good paintings among these fifty thousand, but I'll never know which ones they are.”

### 30

The Emperor was taking tea with his seven daughters one morning in the Onyx Pavilion. The first daughter said, "I believe the goldsmith is the most important artisan in the palace, because gold is so beautiful." The second daughter said, "The jeweler is more important than the goldsmith, because jewels are more beautiful than gold." The third daughter said, "The painter is more important than the goldsmith or the jeweler, because he can transform ordinary paper into something as beautiful as gold or jewels."

### 31

The painter made a vow to make fifty thousand paintings. He worked very fast. As soon as he completed one painting, he immediately began the next one. In this way, he trained himself to paint without fear, without hesitation, without control.

### 32

When the Emperor, whose dynasty was Han, heard that an artist had made fifty thousand paintings, he laughed out loud with delight. Everybody in the court was startled by this outburst. Seeing their puzzlement, the Emperor said, "In future generations, nobody will ever imagine that one single artist made all these paintings. They will be called 'paintings of the Han dynasty.'"

### 33

When the Emperor of China asked the artist why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the artist replied, "I used to labor long over every single painting. If it turned out well, I was happy, but if it turned out badly, I was overcome with melancholy and despair. Now I have painted so much that I am no longer attached to any painting, but only to the art of painting itself."

### 34

When the Emperor saw the painter working so quickly, he said, "But how can you make a painting without planning it first?" The painter replied, "My whole life has been dedicated to planning the shape of my art. I do not have to make a separate plan for every single painting."

### 35

When the court painter complained that there was too poverty in the land, the Emperor rebuked him, saying, "If you are so concerned about the people, you should stop painting and devote yourself to improving the nation!" "Your majesty," replied the painter, "you confiscate the people's money and use it to build prisons and wage wars. I think the nation would be better off if you stopped ruling and devoted yourself to painting instead."

**36**

These fifty thousand paintings are one book made up of fifty thousand characters. The meaning of each character is always changing, the order of the characters is always changing, and the thoughts of the reader are always changing. Thus, this book is like every other book, only more so.

**37**

Fifty thousand paintings can be one single work of art, and one single painting can contain fifty thousand possibilities.

**38**

There were two painters who worked in the same room, but not together. Each one had his own art. One day, by coincidence, they both began painting at the same moment. By the end of the week, the first painter had made one thousand small paintings. The other painter had covered an enormous canvas with shades of yellow. By the end of the second week, the first painter a thousand more paintings. The other painter had covered his yellow canvas with gray; all that remained of the previous week's work was one tiny spot of yellow showing through. At the end of the third week, the first painter had completed another thousand paintings. The other painter had decided to cover the yellow spot.

**39**

When the Emperor asked the artist why he had made so many paintings, the artist replied by making another painting and giving it to the Emperor.

**40**

The Emperor asked the court artist for a painting. The artist sat down and painted one on the spot. The Emperor said, "No, I want a painting that you spent some time on." The artist replied, "Every painting I make has taken my entire lifetime to produce. It is impossible to spend any more time than that."

**41**

An artist exhibited fifty thousand paintings. Unfortunately, a fire burned all the paintings. The next day the artist exhibited the ashes of his paintings. Unfortunately, a strong wind blew all the ashes away. The next day the artist exhibited himself, sighing deeply.

**42**

The Emperor was taking tea with his seven daughters one morning in the Ruby Pavilion. He said, "I heard that there is an artist who has made fifty thousand paintings." The first daughter said, "He is protesting against death." The second daughter said, "He is playing a game of chance." The third daughter said, "He has made a secret pact with the infinite."

**43**

When the Emperor heard that an artist had made fifty thousand paintings, he ordered that the artist be executed and his paintings burned. The Emperor said, “Those who wage war against me are my enemies; those who wage peace against me are also my enemies.”

**44**

An artist went to India and there painted fifty thousand pictures. He then returned to China. Presenting himself at court, he told the Emperor that the paintings had been painted by Indian monkeys who had been trained to use brushes and paper. Astonished, the Emperor exclaimed, “Some of these monkeys are very talented indeed!” The artist then humbly asked the Emperor and his court attendants to choose the best one hundred paintings, so that the animal trainers of India would know which monkeys showed the most artistic promise. Later, the artist went back to India with these one hundred paintings and showed them to a Maharajah. The artist told the Maharajah that the paintings had been selected by Chinese monkeys who had been specially trained to appreciate art. The Maharajah exclaimed, “Some of these monkeys are very discerning indeed!”

**45**

During the plague, a painter made fifty thousand paintings to distract himself from the constant sound of weeping.

**46**

The painter made a vow to make fifty thousand paintings. He worked very fast. As soon as he completed one painting, he tossed it on the pile and immediately began the next one. The painter is like you or me; each painting is like a day of life.

**47**

When the Emperor of China asked the artist why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the artist said, “My brushes are neither long nor short.”

**48**

When the Emperor of China asked the artist why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the artist replied, “Obviously, it is much easier to discuss fifty thousand paintings than it is to discuss one single painting.”

**49**

When the Emperor of China asked the artist why he had made fifty thousand paintings, the artist replied, “The essence of life is multiplicity, variety, profusion.”

**50**

When the Emperor of China asked the artist why he had made fifty thousand paintings ...