All That Divides Us

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First we dine on carp, sweet and sour. 
After the prized fish, the old chairman 
slurps his soup. Hunched like a holy man, 
he never looks up from his bowl. But the Canadian 
exchange professor stares at me between 
spoonfuls and rubs his new beard. Over 
green cabbage and leeks he tells me 
his students of English beg him 
for lectures on Adam and Eve, 
Jesus and the fishes. He says these stories 
filled his childhood in Saskatchewan 
by the parsonage stove. Now they 
haunt his cold narrow room. And what 
does he tell them? Parables 
in whatever words he can find. Then 
the students ask if his people really 
believe. They write out dozens of questions 
on Bible-thin paper. Across the teacups 
choked with leaves, the professor hands me 
pages like white money, trembling. 
During the passing of pears I study 
the students’ small writing. Who is God? 
Why did he make the world? What does it mean 
to be saved? I think these are the same 
questions asked by strangers who sweat 
in cold rooms. Before I can 
find out what answers 
he gave them, it’s time to rise 
from a table littered with fish bones 
and bow to a chairman sleepy with meat. 
I shake the professor’s hand and say
the only thing I can think of
to join us together: *Good luck fishing!* His eyes look
hungry for more.