

ASKING THE TREE

For His Honour Steven Point and Chief Tony Hunt - March 2010

Blessing the food, he says, "All my relations," and now he's asking the tree for permission to cut its ancient flesh. It is the same all over the world. Things are not always what they seem. *When an elder dies, a library burns.* When a tree falls, it could become a book or the boat that will carry him to his home across the river.

Some Ghanaians choose to travel in fishing boat coffins. Viking's are sent back to sea, where souls are free to come and go, in burning vessels. The *Sto:lo* people light fires in their canoes, inviting river relations to join them.

Its first carver began this half-completed fishing canoe in the first Millennium, then set it free to be found by the chief, who will finish it in time to return to the river and be born again. The chief is calling the cedar canoe *Shxwtitostel*, "a safe place to cross the water." It's taken so many lifetimes to find a safe place to launch a tree cut down before the White-comers came.

Will the first carver, his work interrupted by smallpox or war, accompany the elder on his spirit journey to the other side? Will the hand that guides his knife teach him how to paddle in unison? *Slahkum* arrives at the mouth of the river and shakes off the saltwater clinging to his bark. Already the chief can see the end of one world and the beginning of another.