

## VICTOR CONTOSKI (1936 - )

**M**y first college teacher of poetry was Victor Contoski, a professor at the University of Kansas. He encouraged his students unconditionally; he insisted we purchase copies of literary magazines and imagine ourselves in their pages; and he encouraged us to learn how to write reviews. Contoski also taught his students to read Midwestern writers closely, especially William Stafford, Robert Bly, and Ted Kooser. He was greatly influenced by his Polish wife's experiences during the war and his own experiences teaching in Poland during the Cold War as a Fulbright scholar. A gallows humor underlies the outlook of survivors, and this humor seeps through Contoski's works.



**C**ontoski writes haunting, vivid and unsettling poems about rain, stars, frontier history, and myths. "Sunset" occurs during a somber time of day. Its setting, the Western frontier, is a backdrop for Spanish horsemen, nursery rhymes, and western cowboy heroes who die. Finally, the European folklore figure Jack enters into the grasslands landscape, reincarnated as a Wild Man figure, and now as comfortable with a cottonwood tree as a beanstalk. And the final victor is nature itself, the constantly moving sun.

### SUNSET

Since long before the white man  
rode out onto the prairies  
the sun has been going down.

A towering cottonwood sways in the breeze  
rocking rocking the cradle in its branches.

The hero's eyes turn glassy.  
His hand waves vaguely  
toward something in his breast  
as his knees buckle.

The giant coming down the beanstalk  
feels it start to sway beneath him.

He looks down and sees Jack  
with a silly grin and a hatchet  
looming suddenly larger and larger

as the sun over Kansas  
goes down and down and out.

**Education:** Victor Contoski received a BA in Ancient Greek and MA in English (University of Minneapolis); and a PhD in American literature (University of Wisconsin 1969). 1961-1964 he lived in Poland, as a Fulbright professor. As a professor at KU from 1969 to 2009 he won the HOPE award.

**Career:** Contoski's books are *Astronomers, Madonnas, and Prophecies* (Northeast/Juniper Books, 1972); *Broken Treaties* (New Rivers 1973); *Names* (New Rivers Press 1979); *A Kansas Sequence* (Tellus/Cottonwood Review Press 1983); *Midwestern Buildings* (Cottonwood Press 1997) and *Homecoming* (New Rivers Press 2000).

