



## Tattoos and Scars

**Steven Leake II**

Softcover

*I was on fire, and no one will dare tell me different.* —from “A Chain Unbending”

*Tattoos and Scars* is a dichotomy on the theme of self-destruction, alternately rejecting and embracing it. Steven Leake II knows much about substance dependency and a bit about mental illness, but he seems to be approaching a life transition to a more reflective existence.

*I look at your cosmopolitan cliché*

*From my timeshare penthouse on the Styx,*

*And sigh with all the starlight diamonds I've lost.*

The poet shares personal experience, but he's freshest looking out through the eyes of someone quite different from himself, as in “Jose the Janitor.” While a number of poems are about a feeling of disconnection and lack a setting, the easier pieces to receive are routines rooted in specific locations. “nocturne” sets the scene well:

*A smoke filled Irish pub.*

*Dim, the darkness floods from outside,*

*Velvet Underground lullabies*

*Filter.*

*in through starlight*

Some of the most mature work includes effective combinations of setup and payoff, as here in “Po' boys”:

*the dance of hammers hitting strings  
on a piano playing scales*

*then plunging seven stories to the sidewalk.*

Literary associations are Milan Kundera, Hunter S. Thompson, James Joyce and repeatedly, Lewis Carroll. Identifiable musical references are the Velvet Underground, Smashing Pumpkins, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd, Nirvana and Layne Staley of Alice in Chains, who overdosed on the anniversary of Kurt Cobain's suicide. The topic of sexual identity is touched on but not fully investigated. A strung-out resignation often dominates. Within that mode clusters of gripping lines can jump out, even while the overall poem trails off into vagueness, hits and clunks juxtaposed. In general, efforts at simple illumination succeed more reliably than more elaborate comparison:

*The low life, so pure in its humble grace  
Asks for nothing.*

Steven Leake II grew up in York, South Carolina. He was a distance runner and a wrestler; he now fronts a grunge/blues band known as the Underground Kings. This is his first volume of poetry. *Tattoos and Scars* is a milepost for a bright young poet climbing out of his own experience, in the process of gaining awareness of other perspectives. With sustained determination and a commitment to constant improvement common to all serious writers, he will make it to the next level.

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