

# BREATHE

AN IDIOT'S GUIDE TO LIFE



By Mike Potter

# HOW TO READ THIS

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I remember the stacks of books on my mother's coffee table, the numerous covers with smiling women, glowing sunrises, and vast, serene valleys. Each book's title ended with the word happiness, a promise of growing toward a fuller "you." I remember after the birth of my nephew the piles of pamphlets on rearing a newborn, each adorned with the slobbering face of multiple children, a rainbow of ethnicity. In America we are all obsessed with the bettering of ourselves; in 2008 alone, over 11 billions dollars were spent on self-help-books. The popularity of self-help-books has been on the rise since the fifties, a craze that's not diminishing if you believe the numerous aisles dedicated to the subject in bookstores. Titles like "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus" have concretely implanted themselves into popular culture. In the waiting room of any general physician you can find stacks of these artifacts.

Written in a similar manner as Stephen Potter's "Upmanship" books, immediately reminiscent of movies like "The Boy's and Girl's Guide to Getting Down," Michael Potter's first collection of prose deconstructs the form of a self-help book with the delicacy of a sledgehammer. This collection is a mockumentary in words; essays on riding tandem bikes and eating ethnic cuisine muster up the wry, lunatic-like humor of the late David Foster Wallace, the journalistic integrity of Jeremiah Sullivan. Each piece is aware of itself; the matter-of-fact tone of this collection immediately reminds this critic of any of the numerous "For Dummies" released throughout the nineties. Still, there's grace hidden away between the pages, an inkling of brevity.

Take as an example the multi-sectioned piece "How to Survive." Spread throughout this chapbook, these fresh and often poetic snippets tackle the gritty realities of the author's life. With its play on brief prose pieces routed in scene and its alternate titles, it acts as a counterpunch to the more upbeat and lighthearted pieces.

In "4th Alternate Title: Your mom pulls over on Christmas because the minivan is on fire and your dad calls to say the house burned down," this critic found images and word play strong

enough to impress in contemporary poet. With abrupt and honest statements like “It’s weird how ash and snow look the same until you touch them,” the reader is immediately brought to the scene of a burning vehicle. Michael Potter doesn’t wallow in this self-pity, though. He ends the piece with the young narrator making angels in the snow, an image that evokes a sense of awe and rebirth within the scene.

To fall back on an old cliché will this collection survive the test of time? Most definitely. “Breathe” is inclusive in its measures; it’s a collection that can give enjoyment to the old and the young, the comfortable and the depressed. Although seemingly at first a personal narrative, as a whole this collection evolves into something more, something that goes beyond the basic tethers of collection of prose. In Michael Potter’s first dive into truth, we’re presented with a writer with the patients and wisdom of a budding monk.

Brandon S. Butcher

# How to Survive

*(Alternate title) What to do when your grandfather's dying and you're seven hundred miles away, crying in men's room of an Applebees*

*(2nd Alternate title) The one thing to do when you're peering over the ledge of a 13th floor balcony after your spouse got drunk and fucked your best friend*

*(3rd Alternate title) Focus on this when your thirteen-year-old little sister says not to tell your parents that your childhood friend has been molesting her for three years*

*(4th Alternate title) If your mom pulls over on Christmas because the minivan is on fire and your dad calls to say the house burned down, do this*

*(5th Alternate) When you're stationed in Iraq and you find pictures of your fiancée kissing someone else on the front page of your Facebook remember to*

*(6th Alternate) If you've worked an 80 hour week and the kid won't go to sleep and it's three in the morning and the bills aren't getting paid you have to*

Breathe.

# Tandem Bikes: a How To(gether)

Tandem bikes are a cherished symbol of romance through-out the Western world. Nothing says “We are in love and also nostalgic” like a bike with two seats. However, riding a tandem bike isn’t as easy as it looks! Luckily for you, I rode a tandem bike once and am glad to guide you on your journey in cooperative pedaling!

## Should I rent or should I buy?

Tandem bikes cost like \$500. You don’t ride your bike by yourself except for that one week in April when you feel fat from the winter. You’ll ride the tandem even less, so let’s be honest with ourselves and get working on that rental.

## Okay... well how should I go about renting?

Renting is incredibly easy. First you have to find a quaint town, the kind that has a festival to look at its leaves when they change in autumn. There will be one antique shop for every four residents, but snuggled in between them will be your rental venue.



### **Pro-tip: check your calendar!**

While leaf watching festivals are adorable, and autumn leaves are gorgeous, they don’t mix well with tandem bikes! You need to watch where you’re going, not stare at leaves! Especially if half the population of the state inexplicably comes to a town of 18,000 to look at trees!

Unfortunately, this kind of town is populated by people whose appreciation for money does not outweigh their love of sleep. Be prepared to wait a half-hour past opening time for the store to actually open. When the attendant does arrive, she will perform her duties with the mental and verbal agility of a hibernating turtle in a frozen lake. You will pay \$40 for 2 hours, but SURPRISE you will also be charged a \$200 deposit that will return to you

account with a predictable lack of speed when you are finished. So for about a week, these two hours will cost one quarter of your rent.

## **Awesome, so what do I do with my bike?**

First, behold your mighty steed! You may notice that your bike appears to have been made in 1963. Don't be alarmed! Despite what Amazon may tell you, no one has actually seen a tandem bike made after Ronald Reagan took office. To be fair, you are not renting a tandem bike to embrace modern technology, that's what Segway tours are for! Both the paint job and the cooperative nature of the activity harken to an older, gentler time.



### **Pro-tip: don't skip the dumbbells!**

Like every other vehicle made in the 60s, your tandem bike is made of steel! Most bikes you deal with today have aluminum frames, but not your tandem! While this makes it sturdy, it also makes it absurdly heavy. And while normally you dismiss gender roles because you are a feminist, they tend to reassert themselves whenever heavy things need moved! Be prepared!

The torpid attendant will suggest you give the bike a spin in the parking lot before tackling the mean-streets of Leafville. While your irritation with her lethargy and your unearned sense of mechanical competency will chafe at the suggestion, it's a good idea! It turns out it isn't as easy as it looks.

## **How do you ride a tandem bike?**

Just like a normal bike, but with much more fear! Your years of riding solo bicycles has trained your body to tune into its own shifts in weight and balance. When you mount your bike, these senses will settle back in and you'll smile at the familiarity. Then your riding partner will shift and your body will move to correct for it at the same time hers does. You will fall.

You will have to learn to trust your partner. Far more than a joint bank account, wobbling down a crowded sidewalk on a tandem bike requires faith. You will be in front because it is agreed that you are more alert, and also if one of you is going to crash head-first into a parked car it's going to be you. You will both notice the uncertainty with which you steer, but neither of you will comment. Survival is more important than form.



**Ya goofed: why are you bringing that camera?**

I understand your instinctive need to take pictures of everything as a safeguard against your abysmal memory. However, you wouldn't ride a bike solo with a thirty pound backpack with dangling tripod, so why the hell do you think it's a good idea on a tandem?

**Why the hell would I ride a tandem bike? This sounds awful!**

It does, I know! But bear with it. Weave through the crowd, braking often for overweight elderly folks on hover-rounds or pulling oxygen-tank carts. Placate your flaring temper by being thankful that you are at least a few decades from being "that old." Get lost, several times. You have become addicted to your cellphone and its GPS, but in the spirit of immersion you tucked it away in that damned back-pack. Accept this with grim determination, take random turns. You'll start to feel the liberation of the safely lost. The per-capita GDP of Leafville is almost \$70 thousand. There is no bad part of town.

You'll end up by the river, looking at the leaves on the far shore. You will grudgingly admit that they are gorgeous, deserving of celebration. You will stop, rubbing your sore butts (because tandem bikes do not absorb ANY of the bumps). Look at the leaves, at the water, at your beautiful partner. Be thankful for the view, for the companionship, and for the knowledge you don't need a tandem bike to find romance. Return your bike an hour early, the wasted \$20 are irrelevant.



# Your grandfather's dying and you're seven hundred miles away crying in men's room of an Applebees

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# How to eat Sichuan Food



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Sit down in a restaurant that strives to be very foreign. Embrace its foreignness, do not second guess the over-done decorations or strip-mall location. The music will have vocals that are not in English. Imagine they are very profound; the voice of a nation's soul. Do not worry about whether the music is just the Chinese equivalent of trashy American pop. Your inability to understand is a blessing: this music can be about anything, why not assume it is good? Most of the decorations will have words that are not translated into English, so treat them like the song. Instead of thinking they are sarcastic jokes like the walls of a Jimmy Johns, imagine you are reading something analogous to Shakespeare or Keats.

9

Make a note of, but do not outwardly acknowledge, the foreignness of your server. He is authentic because he is Asian. Do not wonder if he is actually "Chinese". A) that is ignorant, because there are a dozen different ethnic groups within China. B) Unless you have actually studied Asian ethnography you will just make an

ass of yourself. Accept that he is foreign (the alternative, a speech impediment, is less interesting), trust that he is of the appropriate ethnicity. When ordering, smile apologetically when you read the names of the food, or just swallow your pride and order the English equivalents in italics below. You are here for an authentic Sichuan eating experience, give him the dignity of an authentic American serving experience.

8

Order food you cannot assume you will enjoy. This is an important part of the meal. The easy way would be to order fried things you have had before, and rice, because even a province with a per-capita income of three thousand dollars a year cannot fuck up rice. You must instead order the things you can't assume you'll like because that is the challenge. Tomorrow, your foodie friend is going to ask you how it was, and if you say you had the fried chicken he will be disappointed. He might even refrain from inviting you to the delicious new ethnic restaurant he's heard about. Besides, your entire life you have eaten safe food that could generously be called "filling" and accurately called "bland." You are an adult now, and you will eat.

7

Do not go alone. Perhaps this should have come earlier, but now is when it matters. The larger your party, the better. Bring your foodie friends, and your absolutely-not-a-foodie friends. Talk about the food, about the restaurant or don't. Talk about work, sports, or music. Talk about anything. It will relieve some of the tension, because you are tense – your just ordered pig stomach stew, how could you not be tense? Listen to the conversation flowing like a brook. People listen to streams babble, why not people? Feel free to babble yourself, be the brook, the human sound machine you play to soothe and calm. Give yourself these minutes when your mouth and mind are free to wander, because the food is coming soon.

6

The food will arrive on bland white plates that will sit next to unadorned white teacups. Your soda will fizz in the same plastic cups you find in rest stop diners. This will leave all of your attention focused on the food itself. Look at what you ordered. Give yourself two to three minutes of regret. Do not force yourself to be excited, though you if you really are, good for you. You are about to eat something that your culture has – perhaps rightly, you don't know yet – refused to call food. It smells ominous, denying that fact invites indigestion by way of suppressed anxiety (Freud said the things we hold down will find their way up). The squid may be dead, but you are allowed to be afraid of its corpse for a while.

5

Now is no time to be hero. You were brave when you ordered, but this is the time to know your limits. Push your boundaries, but do not make yourself sick. Take half a spear of squid, cut to look like pale, tumescent sprigs of lavender. If you are feeling brave, take two ladles of pig intestine. Allow yourself a fried chicken dumpling, because while you did not order the comfort food by God you will not turn it down. And rice, the rice will save you. You can leave it alone, pristine white grains melding with the plate, or you can pile the food on. It will bring something you know into this mess of things you do not.

4

Eat with your eyes open. You cannot hide from the squid or the intestine; this is dinner not peak-a-boo. Look at the way the squid bends like rubber before your fork chops off an ivory bud. See the dumpling flake as you pinion a chunk. Now put it in your mouth. Don't close your eyes now either. Keep them open as you feel the intestine slip around your gums and coat your teeth in an earthy meatiness on the far-side-of steak. This is umami, the fifth flavor, the secret of soy sauce and chicken soup. Swallow.

3

Do not think about what you are eating. This is cowardice, but it is also necessary. You have intestines, and thinking about this will make that digestive jump-rope play double-dutch beneath your skin. The fact is, the thought of eating intestines is gross. The thought of a live squid, tentacles writhing as its alien eyes search for your face, is gross. But the reality of squid, of intestines as food, is not. It is not slimier than a meatball; it's no spicier than Taco Bell's pseudo-beef. This food not bad, and the horizon of your pallet will begin to brighten with appreciation.

2

Your fellow diners are now combating their own meals, and you should watch them. Look at their faces, brows furrowed, skin flushed. Their eyes will be focused on their food, a battle of wills. Their mouths will vary according to their adventurousness – some demure, others pinched, and one or two squirming against nausea. Look at yourself in the mirrors on the walls, and there will be mirrors to create the illusion of space. See your eyes, perhaps a bit watery from the surprising spiciness, but otherwise clear. You should feel free to smile at yourself. Acknowledge that you have survived, not just unharmed, but enlightened. Feel relief. Feel pride.

1

Now eat your food. If you like, you may close your eyes. Hell, if you want to, do a headstand. It doesn't matter what else you do, but do eat. Now that you have proven the food can't kill you, enjoy it. Savor the flavors you've never tasted before, relish in the unique texture. This is eating as an experience, and you can take it with you. Let your eyes get wide when the peppercorns turn your tongue numb. Maybe your foodie friend ordered something even more bizarre – like cold beef kidney or whole sea-bass. Share proud grins with your fellow diners, those who were adventurous as yourself. You are Livingstone, or perhaps more appropriately, Marco Polo. Tip your authentic waiter generously, because the bill will not be nearly so big as the experience. Leave happy.

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(Optional) Spend all night on the toilet, culinary Magellan, nursing a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

# You're peering over the ledge of a 13th floor balcony after your spouse got drunk and fucked your best friend

Everyone is watching you through the window. They heard your breath quickening as you listened to the voicemails, the distant alert to wrong doing. Heard your fist pound the ratty carpet of the apartment floor. And now they're just watching, and for once your drama is earned.

You don't yet know how it went down. How his girlfriend walked in on your wife riding him furiously in the foyer. How they were both so drunk that your wife called him by your name, before his girlfriend pulled her off. You don't know yet, but you will, and when you do you'll remember this moment. You'll remember the stubborn reluctance of the cigarette to light, and how peaceful the ash looks as it drifts in little flakes down to the parking lot below.

## Why you don't drink

The worst possible time for it to come up is during a business meeting. The other person will order a beer with their meal and raise an eyebrow when I ask for a soda. They'll taste their delicious, locally brewed beverage full of hoppy hints of god-knows-what, and then offer me a taste. And I'll decline, and they'll look hurt and then I have to explain: "I don't drink."

It's a lie; I do drink. I drink tons of things, just not alcohol. But ethanol is such an integral part of human interaction, the social lubricant that makes civilization possible, that it might as well be the only drink. So when you don't drink it, people are really curious about your reason.

You can't sight morality or health as your reasons, because this will make the other person defensive. Your abstinence is the anomaly, you have to do the explaining. Basically, this has to come in the form of a confession. Which is, again, extremely awkward in a business context. How do you tell someone, in a professional manner, "I was *almost* an alcoholic?"

The almost is the real problem here. If you were an alcoholic, and now you're sober, you're awesome. You have overcome adversity, even if it was of your own making. You're an inspiration. But I wasn't an alcoholic, I was just going down that road. To everyone else it's like finding a strange lump in your left testicle, finding out it's benign, and saying "I was almost a cancer survivor."

Regardless of how stupid "*almost* an alcoholic" sounds, the other person will inevitably apologize for drinking in front of me. This puts the onus on me to explain both that I did have a drinking problem but that it's totally fine for them to drink in front of me. When you tell the story of your *almost* alcoholism, you have to use humor. This is deeply uncomfortable stuff. You have to explain your own weakness without endangering the other person's secure knowledge that they have their own drinking under control. Yes, they are the kind of person who drinks during a business meeting, but that just means they are even more sensitive to this kind of thing.



I often open up with the amount I would regularly drink. This is somewhere around a liter a night when partying, and a little less when I was just “relaxing” at home. I will punctuate this with the story of how I once drank almost a gallon of rum and coke. I was a legend among my friends, which of course made me drink harder. (NOTE: when the running joke is “alcohol can’t kill him,” you’re dramatically more likely to die from alcohol poisoning. )

# Your thirteen-year-old little sister says not to tell your parents that your childhood friend has been molesting her for three years

The key here is to remember that this is your fault. You are going to remind yourself, every minute of the next decade, that you made this happen. You're why he came to the house. It was your bedroom he crept from while you slept, to come to her room and rob her of her childhood. It was your anger he threatened her with when the tears streaked her cheeks still fat with youth.

Carry with you, for the remainder of your life, the time you came downstairs to find them both beneath a blanket in the family room. Remember always how you should have known what was happening. Never forget the fear in his eyes when you brought it up.

Tell her you're sorry.

# Suicide by National Park



Killing yourself is a difficult proposition. I should know, I've tried it at least 20 times, with an obvious lack of success. I have tried a number of the most popular methods, but the same ineptitude that drove me to the attempts also saved me from them. My first attempt, at nine, fell flat because hanging yourself by pulling yourself up with the rope is the kind of suicide attempt only a nine year old would come up with. Various others, be they by overdose or razor blade or smothering were all miserable failures that didn't even result in a hospitalization.

To be clear, I am glad that I failed so often. Were it not for the last four attempts, I don't know that I would feel that way. They are the most spectacular failures of my life. With that in mind, I suggest that anyone who wants to kill themselves but doesn't want to want to should do what I did: drive 8,000 miles from national park to national park trying to get yourself killed<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For Christ's sake don't ACTUALLY try to kill yourself, go get professional help. But if you're suffering from massive depression, you could do worse than a cross country road trip.

## 1) Drive into a snowstorm at the top of a 12,000-foot-tall mountain.

The Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park snakes up the Trail Ridge, starting at a yawn-inducing 8,500 feet. At that elevation, a quarter of the oxygen your body is used to at sea level is gone. The mountains peak over the crowns of Ponderosa pines and Quaking Aspen along the road, where it splits off of Deer Ridge Junction. It's not hard to find, as the highest continuous paved road in the continental United States is one of the park's selling points.

What would be snow was just a thin grey mist of rain when we started our<sup>2</sup> ascent. The trees drooped with the weight of water that stained their trunks almost black. The incline is impossibly steep, winding through asphalt switchbacks as it claws its way up the bare granite of the ridge. We crained our necks frequently, watching the approaching point where the mountain and road both disappeared into the clouds.

Driving in a cloud is just like driving in a thick fog, except that you are at a cloud-level elevation. We hit it just before the treeline, the 11,000 foot mark where the trees stop growing shorter and simply disappear altogether. There will be no shapes looming out of the murk, no shadows to delineate an outside world. Only the dim ghost of tail lights ahead, and three feet of road to each side. This is where the world ends, where the black road slips off into the unknown.

There was construction when I road the mountain, so we were driving under twenty miles an hour. You should hope for the same, because there are no guardrails; there is nothing to hold you back from the almost one mile trip through the thin air back to the floor of the valley. Slowly the world will shrink further, until the tail lights ahead are nothing but a fading hint of pink, and the hood of the car starts to melt into the fog. You tell that you're on the road more by the rumble of the tires than by sight.

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<sup>2</sup> My road trip was with my best friend who had recently returned from a tour in Iraq. Among his various duties was counting the bodies of children who had been killed in terrorist attacks. He was in a similar state of mind through out.

Then, if you're fortunate, everything stops.

We found the bumper of the car ahead of us inches before we collided. The car rocked gently in the wind











# Your mom pulls over on Christmas because the minivan is on fire and your dad calls to say the house burned down

It's weird how ash and snow look the same until you touch them. They mingle on the median where you and your brother shiver while mom cries into the phone. The van is still smoldering, smoke the same color as the roadside slush, when the fire trucks arrive.

After you're ushered away by the curb to make room for the hose, you lay down in the snow and wave your arms and legs. Your brother just shivers as he watches you paint crecents in the snow with your limbs. But the ash keeps falling, filling your angel back in. So you lay there, frantically flapping, for twenty minutes until your mom pulls you up and calls a cab.



















