

## David Kirby

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### *Ten Thousand Hours with You*

Nobody in our adorable little one-horse town  
knows whether *Turandot* is pronounced with  
a long or short “o” or if the “t” is voiced or silent,  
so I write opera critic Anthony  
Tommasini at the *New York Times*, and he says that the vast

majority of people in the opera world  
pronounce the character’s name as “TuranDOT;”  
like “spot,” and I think, now there’s a good fellow,  
courteous, well-informed, not so full of himself  
that he can’t write to a country mouse like me,

and so I post his reply as a Facebook status update,  
and you’d think that’d settle it, that the opera lovers  
of Tallahassee would let go of their plow handles  
and wipe their sweaty brows with their bandanas  
and say, “Well, looky here, Ma, this newspaper

feller says he knows how to pronounce it, and he  
ought to know, him being Eye-talian and all,”  
but no, my update hasn’t been on-line for more  
than fifteen seconds before someone writes  
that Puccini scholar Patrick Vincent Casali

has written an article in which he says that  
“the current practice of sounding the final ‘t’  
of *Turandot*’s name is incorrect,” and the next  
thing you know, people are weighing in as though  
Anthony Tommasini and I hadn’t settled the whole

thing just minutes before, but that’s  
human nature for you, isn’t it? In study after study,  
researchers have established something they call  
the Ten Thousand Hours Rule, which says that’s

how long it takes to get really good at something—

cello playing, archery, poetry, safecracking, chess,  
you name it—and therefore you should expect to put in  
about twenty hours a week over a period of ten years  
before you're an expert, but then most of us have  
spent more time than that in cars, yet we still drive

the wrong way on freeways, cross into the other guy's  
lane while texting, careen off cliffs, and, if we are  
James Dean or Jane Mansfield, get hit head-on  
by 23-year-old Cal Poly student Donald Turnupseed  
or plow into the rear of a semi that had slowed

because of a truck spraying mosquito fog, prompting  
the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration  
to require an "underride guard" on all tractor-trailers  
to minimize the damage of future mishaps. When you  
come right down to it, we do our best or think we do,

which amounts to the same thing: historian Doug  
Blackmon tells me that half of Thomas Jefferson  
and Sally Hemings' kids looked like her and stayed on  
at Monticello as slaves, whereas the ones who looked  
like TJ "ran away and became white people," so that

today there are hundreds of thousands of white folks  
out there who are (a) black and (b) Thomas Jefferson's  
descendants, though they don't know it, and now they're  
doing yoga and drinking designer coffee  
and going to Wes Anderson movies, and they don't really like any

of this, but they have to do it because they're white.  
To me, New York is the place where people know  
how to pronounce every word correctly, seeing  
as how every language group is represented there,  
although not even New Yorkers can manage "Houston

Street." Or a New Yorker might want to say

“I’m right,” for example, and have it come out “I’m white,”  
which isn’t the same thing. Or what if I called you “belle”  
and you thought I called you “bel” (the Indian thorn tree)  
or “Bel” (the Babylonian god)? I’d like to say everything

to you and say it right. Imagine yourself sitting next to me  
on the subway, either in New York or just in your mind.

I might be the great-great-grand-something  
of a U.S. president, you know. I’ll lean over  
and say “beauty” to you, and you’ll look at me and say “beast.”