

RHONEL ROBERTS

Gileesa's World, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

WESLEY BROWN

In the Land of Oop-Pop-a-Da

It was a cool spring afternoon when Anna and her father took the bus to Randall's Island. The huge crowds, pouring into the stadium, blended together in their felt hats and lightweight jackets. People quickly filled the folding chairs on the grass and packed into the stands above. Jacob Danova had brought a camera with him to take pictures of musicians who were regular customers where he worked, at Walgreens Drugstore at 44th Street and Broadway, only a few blocks from the Danovas' apartment building.

Anna hadn't wanted to go with her father at all. She'd never paid much attention to the music he raved so much about on the radio. But he was so persistent in his efforts to get her to go to the concert that she finally agreed, just so he would leave her alone. She was fifteen. And it wasn't as though she had so many other things she could be doing on a Sunday afternoon. A thick-bodied girl with strong hands inherited from her mother, Anna didn't have a best friend and didn't date. When she thought about it, there was nothing in her life that mattered enough for her to look forward to it. So why not go with her father to this stupid concert?

Jacob led Anna to a row of seats to the left of the stage. He didn't sit down, telling her he wanted to move closer to the musicians with his camera. Anna couldn't remember, exactly, when her father's interest in taking pictures started. But he always seemed fascinated by anything he knew very little about. Jacob often told Anna and her two older sisters that, when he arrived in America from Russia with his parents at the beginning of the century, they were determined to become "American" as quickly as possible. They changed their name from "Danovich" to "Danova," and that began what her father called his "great love affair with the English language." He saw America as a magical place, and wanted to make his way in this exciting country by doing things just well enough to keep himself in suspense about what he still hadn't figured out.

Unlike Jacob, Anna's mother, Lila, did one thing very well. Her hands could take a piece of fabric and sew it into something that made the girl or woman wearing it feel like she was in the company of a close friend every time a sweater, skirt, or blouse touched her skin. Lila wasn't the talker Jacob was, and Anna often wondered whether that was because of the difficulty her mother had speaking