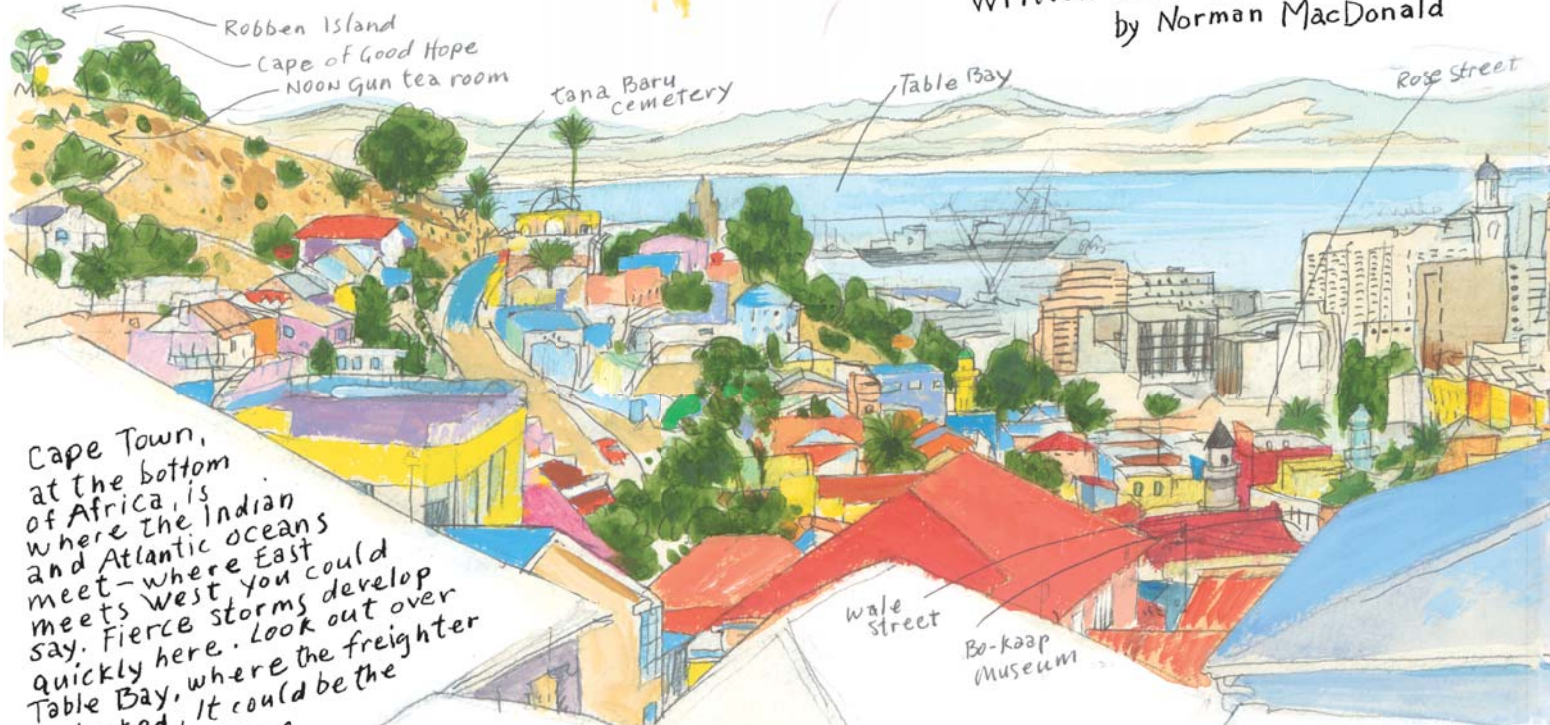


BLESSED by

Written and Illustrated
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Cape Town, at the bottom of Africa, is where the Indian and Atlantic oceans meet—where East meets West you could say. Fierce storms develop quickly here. Look out over Table Bay, where the freighter is docked. It could be the very spot where the Haerlem, a Dutch ship, foundered in a storm in 1647. The European history of South Africa begins right about then.

When you gaze out over Cape Town from Signal Hill, you see the colorful houses of the Bo-kaap district in the foreground. In the distance is Table Bay. The majestic Table Mountain isn't visible in this drawing, but it's over the top of the mountain that gives the impression of a tablecloth. Are there songs written about this city—like Chicago, New York, even Birmingham? None of those places have a mountain of brilliantly colored houses or a bay. From here, Cape Town seems to deserve an Opera.

One morning I was sketching a pink house close to a grey-green mosque. A man came by and looked over my shoulder. "You know," he said, "we are blessed." He mentioned the beautiful harbor, the Bo-kaap where we were standing, Table Mountain and "Doctor Wind," which at times can blow at hurricane speeds, but, he said, "it purifies our air." During my weeks there, the word "blessed" came up several times, even in the book I was reading: *Summertime*, by J.M. Coetzee, about his early years as a writer in Cape Town. "I felt blessed" is near the middle of it.

The hill to the left, a Muslim burial ground, looks like what the rest of the harbor would have been if you think away the ~~the~~ buildings. The glowing tales of the bay that the rescued sailors of the Haerlem told convinced the governors of the Dutch East India Company that, in spite of storms, this was an ideal half-way stop on the route to Batavia (Indonesia).

So Jan van Riebeeck arrived on April 6, 1652 with three ships (two were to follow) carrying 80 men and eight women, including his wife. They were, essentially, survivors; on the 5 ships, 130 sailors had died en route from Amsterdam. It's a comment on how important the new settlement was to become.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the company sent slaves, convicts, political exiles and occasional intellectuals and even princes to the Cape. They came from India, Southeast Asia and especially Indonesia. Most were Muslims, and they were sent to build the town, though some were imprisoned on Robben Island out in Table Bay.

Recuperating Dutch sailors and bored soldiers gave Cape Town the reputation in maritime circles as "the tavern of the two oceans." However, the Muslim workers arriving from the East were different. Drinking was against their beliefs. They were also law-abiding, skilled and smart. Some eventually started moving to the slopes of Signal Hill.

TWO OCEANS



In Afrikaans it was called "Boven die Kaap." Now everyone just calls it Bo-kaap. Over the next 350 years, this area became home, at one time or another, to almost every clan and religion, including the Dutch. But it was always most closely associated with the Muslim community, as it was built largely by the descendants of the Malay slaves in the last half of the 17th century. Under the infamous apartheid Group Areas Act of 1950, the area was declared an exclusive residential area for Cape Muslims. Since the end of Apartheid in 1990, and especially today, the Bo-kaap is hot real estate. People from everywhere are buying these red, green and yellow houses with a view over the bay where it all began.

In the 17th century, before Cape Town existed, sailors who spied these rocks at The Cape of Good Hope looked to the sky and whispered a prayer that good weather would see them safely past.

