

# Wakarimasen



*The Search for Meaning in an Unknown Language*  
by Brooks Jensen

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Wakarimasen.

Ik begrijp niet.

Je ne comprends pas.

Ich verstehe nicht.

δεν καταλαβαίνω.

Non capisco.

Eu não compreendo.

Я не понимаю.

No entiendo.

*I do not understand ...*

# わかりません

Life is a search for understanding. From the moment we are born, we look, we reach, we touch, we absorb. We accumulate, organize, listen, think, speak, learn. From the noise of the world at large, we build our world in specific.

Noise  
Data  
Information  
Knowledge  
Understanding

We think we know.  
We think we understand.  
But, do we really?

With scratches on a surface, we write and know what we have written — such sublime ideas and complicated understanding — the miracle of written language. We have communicated. Our words bring understanding.

But, do we know how fragile our understanding is?  
What happens to our understanding when *language* fails us?

What if we forget what the marks mean? What if we don't know the symbols? What if we *never* knew? What if someone — if *the world* — is trying to tell us all it knows, but we cannot read the meaning of the messages, written in an unknown, perhaps even *non-human* language? What if the message with the deep wisdom we seek is right in front of us and we do not understand? What if our only response is ... *wakarimasen*?



































# A f t e r w o r d

This project is the result of an accident — the almost universal way in which creative ideas infect us. Like so many photographers do on a regular basis, I was out in the world, wandering around, looking for something to photograph. A friend and I were exploring the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State and stumbled upon Fort Worden — an old, World War I artillery battery in the town of Port Townsend.

Fort Worden was, in its day, one of the important defense facilities protecting the entrance to Puget Sound. Large cannons pointed toward the water, ready to blast any incoming enemy ships. Decommissioned decades ago, it is now a State Park recreation facility. Its miles of cement walls are the perfect target for the graffiti-prone and their profanities, a reality the Parks Service does its best to protect us from. Industrious — no, *creative* — Park Service employees periodically paint over the profanities with broad brushstrokes and whatever colors of paint are handiest. There is no attempt to beautify, only cover.

Nonetheless, the result — at least to my eye — is a dance of the most wonderful shapes and colors, the perfect raw material for a pho-

tographer predisposed to enjoy abstract photographs. I am such a photographer.

We spent a week photographing there. In every single room of the complicated, winding structure I found these fantastic, calligraphic brushstrokes. Having studied Chinese and Japanese calligraphy very briefly in my youth, to this day I still enjoy the dance of the brush. I cannot read Chinese nor Japanese, so I am free to see the calligraphy of the Orient without the interference of language. The master calligrapher may write lofty poetry about birds or griffins, love or the glory and gore of battle, but to my illiterate eye they are all the same. It is the shape and the stroke that fascinates me, not the sentiment behind the written word.

Photographing in Fort Worden, I was struck by the parallels between these non-sensical strokes of paint on the cement walls and the lyrical shapes of the calligraphic brush of the oriental masters. I could see the hand of Sengai or Hui-tsung. And, just as I cannot see words in the calligraphy of the Japanese master, nor could I see words in the shapes at Fort Worden. There is only the non-verbal, rhythmic dance of the brush.

Still, when I look at calligraphy I know there is meaning in the strokes, language in the shapes, and I know that my illiteracy denies me a measure of enjoyment that is beyond the mere shapes. At Fort Worden, I wondered if these brushstrokes, too, held a hidden meaning, an unknown language that might be trying to tell me something if only I could read it. Probably not, but how would I know? When we are communicated to in a language we don't understand, how do we even know it's a language? To my cat, my words are just noise. How can I be certain that I am not equally ignorant when presented with such "writing" as I found on the walls at Fort Worden? How can I be sure that there is nothing being said in those brushstrokes just as in the brushstrokes of the master calligrapher? Perhaps this is precisely why the first and most important words we learn in the study of any foreign language are ... *I don't understand*. Perhaps this is more than a statement about language. Perhaps it is a metaphor for life.





## Publishers & Editors

Brooks Jensen  
Maureen Gallagher

## Design & Layout

Holly Chadwick

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LensWork Publishing  
909 Third Street  
Anacortes, WA 98221-1502 U.S.A.

USA TOLL FREE 1-800-659-2130

Voice 360-588-1343 FAX 503-905-6111

Email [editor@lenswork.com](mailto:editor@lenswork.com)

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