



**U.S. Department of Justice**

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Information Management Division

Winchester, VA 22602-4843

April 21, 2023

Stephen M. Friend  
stephenfriend1@gmail.com

Re: PPR 23-213: Manuscript "True Blue: My  
Journey from Beat Cop to Suspended FBI  
Whistleblower"

Dear Mr. Friend:

This letter is in response to your request on January 30, 2023, for review of the above-referenced product for publication pursuant to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Prepublication Review Policy (PRP) and Prepublication Review Policy Guide (1065PG).

Your manuscript was reviewed pursuant to the terms of the PRP and we concluded some of the information presented falls within a restricted area of disclosure. Prepublication approval is contingent upon removal of the redacted information as shown in the attached version. There is no objection to the remainder of your work, as presented.

Our findings are based on Bureau prepublication policy and extend only to the release of information contained in your submission. This approval does not include any photograph, picture, exhibit, caption, or other supplemental material not specifically approved by this office, nor does this approval imply FBI endorsement or factual accuracy of the material. Please incorporate a disclaimer advising readers of the following:

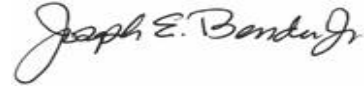
"In accordance with my obligation as an FBI employee pursuant to my FBI employment agreement, this book has undergone a prepublication review for the purpose of identifying prohibited disclosures, but has not been reviewed for editorial content or accuracy. The FBI does not endorse or validate any information that I have described in this book. The opinions expressed in this book are mine and not those of the FBI or any other government agency."

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Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Prepublication Review Office (PRO) via e-mail at [fbiprepub@fbi.gov](mailto:fbiprepub@fbi.gov). You may also refer to the Prepublication Review Policy Guide (1065PG) located on the FBI Vault at [vault.fbi.gov](http://vault.fbi.gov). Thank you for your participation in the FBI's prepublication review process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph E. Bender, Jr." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "J" and "B".

Joseph E. Bender, Jr.  
Acting Section Chief  
Record/Information  
Dissemination Section  
Information Management Division

offices around the country. We trained hard for three weeks. It was undoubtedly some of the best training I ever received. That being said, we joked that the two most memorable things to transpire were unquestionably witnessing the Chicago Cubs win the World Series and a television game show host become president of the United States.

The Omaha SWAT team was stacked with some amazing operators. We had snipers, medics, breachers, and a bomb technician. Our team leader was a former member of the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team, and other operators possessed decades of SWAT experience. The team was fairly active too. We trained four days per month, deployed for high-risk operations in Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois, and helped to protect the FBI director and United States attorney general when they traveled to our area.

An FBI field office SWAT team operates within its own area of responsibility. But SWAT teams also provide assistance to each other for large-scale operations. In October 2020, I took part in one such operation. My experience had a lasting impact on my view of the FBI.

A warning order was disseminated to the SWAT team to travel from our respective offices to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[illegible][illegible]

[REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I fully comprehended the strength of our foe and the gravity of the situation. I was in the habit of calling Anastasiya after every SWAT briefing. I told her my responsibility for the upcoming operation and the nature of the threat the SWAT team expected to encounter. Anastasiya always worried for my safety, and she wanted to gauge my personal risk factor for each operation. God love my wife. Even if I was assigned to handle a ballistic shield at the front door to a structure, she always ordered me to stand behind the other operators or hide in the backyard of the property.

This time would be an exception. Risk is inherent for every SWAT operation. That is why the SWAT team is a valuable law enforcement resource. SWAT operators undergo extensive training and typically possess superior manpower, tools, and firepower. We rely on speed, surprise, and violence of action to mitigate risks. Nonetheless, for the first time in my SWAT tenure, I was convinced that I was going to be involved in an imminent gunfight. I decided to spare my bride the worry and "forgot" to call her.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. Though my participation was admittedly minor, it compels me to ask the question, "Were we the bad guys?"



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The other JTTF member explained that we were going to document everything that he told us and submit it to Washington, DC. We did not know if he was going to be charged with a crime.

I discussed the interview with my JTTF counterpart during the return trip from Jacksonville to Daytona Beach. He was the case agent for Sam's case, and the Jacksonville Field Office was the Office of Origin. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Yet, the decision to present the case for prosecution was out of this special agent's hands. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Moreover, in the aftermath of January 6th, Sam lost his job. He was paying an attorney to represent him in the matter. Whether or not the United States Attorney's Office charged Sam with crimes for his actions at the Capitol building, there was no doubt he was suffering punishment.

I asked myself again, "Why are we doing this?" It suddenly dawned on me. The process WAS the punishment. And just like the Governor Whitmer kidnapping case, the FBI was potentially using its personnel as instruments of retribution.

The JTTF awaited word from Washington, DC, for several months. As summer arrived, we discussed the cases among ourselves and all expressed hope the passage of time meant a greater likelihood that the cases were going to be declined and ultimately closed. I followed the news and saw the high volume of convictions. Following the one-year anniversary, the Department of Justice issued a statement detailing its successes. At the time, I noted that in addition to assaulting police officers and trespassing on restricted federal property, many defendants were charged with "corruptly obstructing, influencing, or impeding an official proceeding, or attempting to do so."<sup>5</sup>

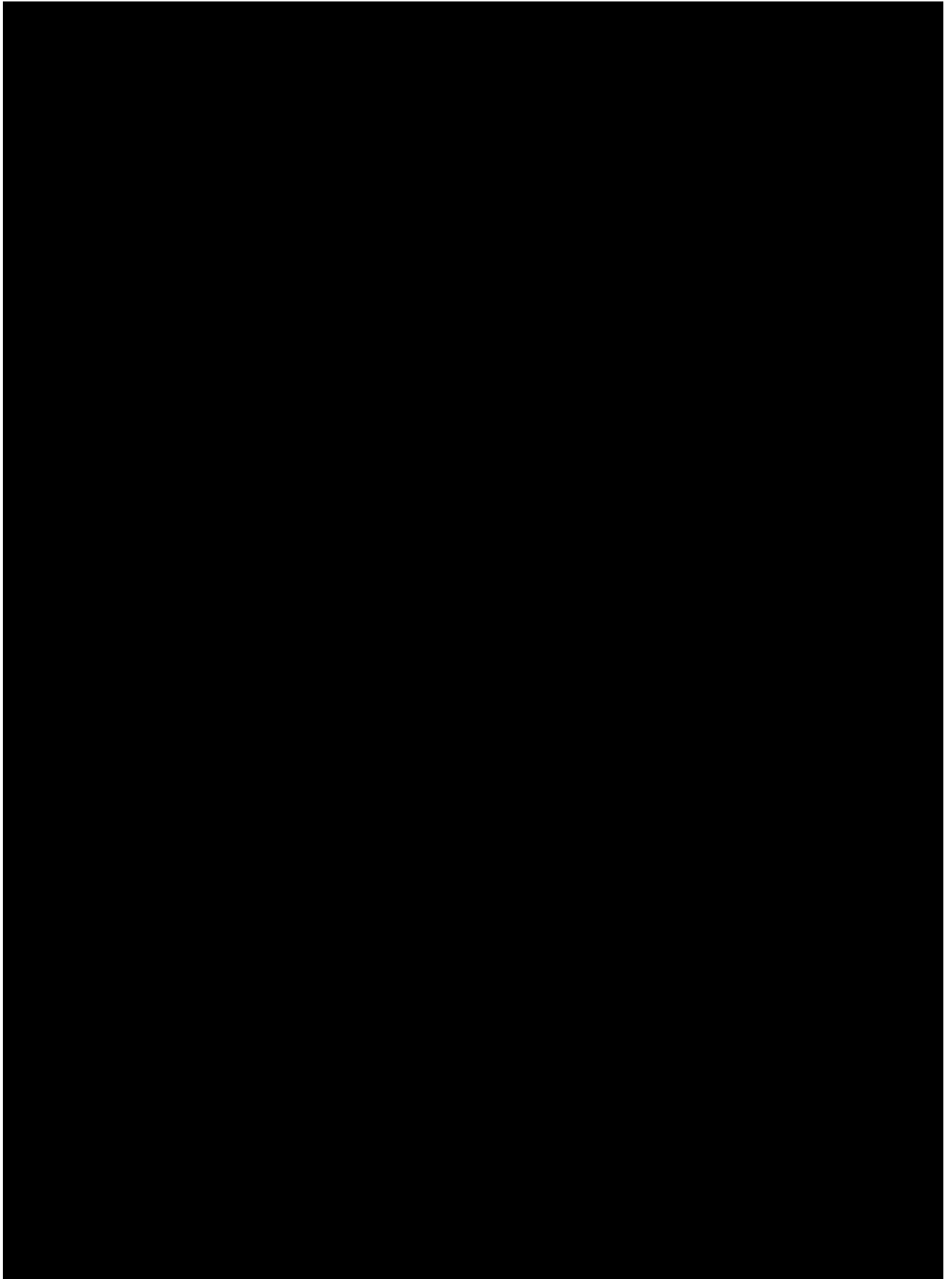
I enjoy reading nonfiction books. True crime is among my favorite genres. I particularly enjoy reading about famous FBI cases. On the recommendation of another FBI special agent, I read Kurt Eichenwald's *Conspiracy of Fools: A True Story*. The book detailed the 2002 Enron investigation. I was also interested in the case because it led to the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. I was in college at the time, and the law became a major focus within Notre Dame's accountancy curriculum. During the Enron case, auditors from Arthur Andersen LLP shredded audit documents to conceal them from the United States Securities

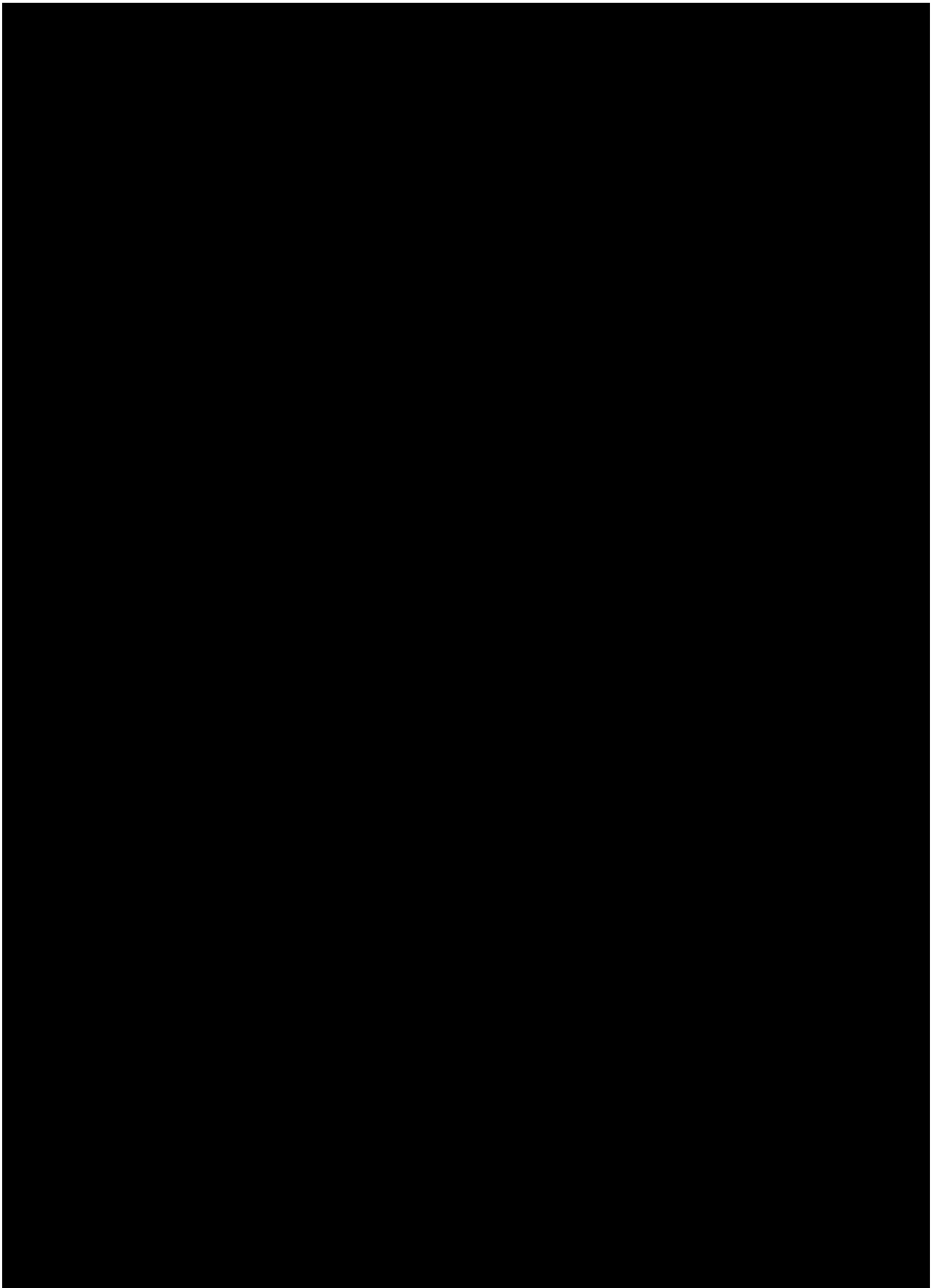
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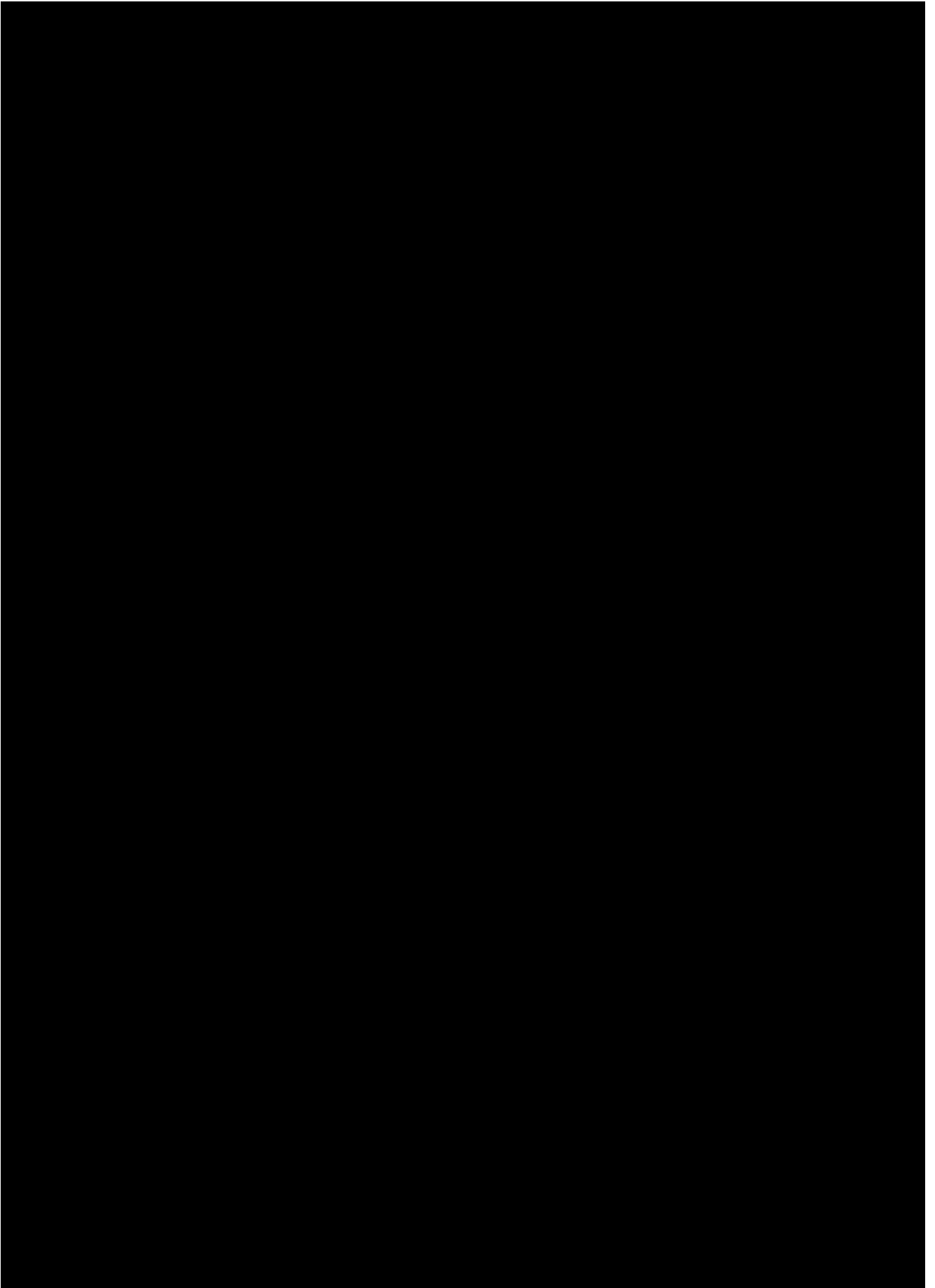
<sup>5</sup> "One Year Since the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol," US Attorney's Office, District of Columbia, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/one-year-jan-6-attack-capitol>.

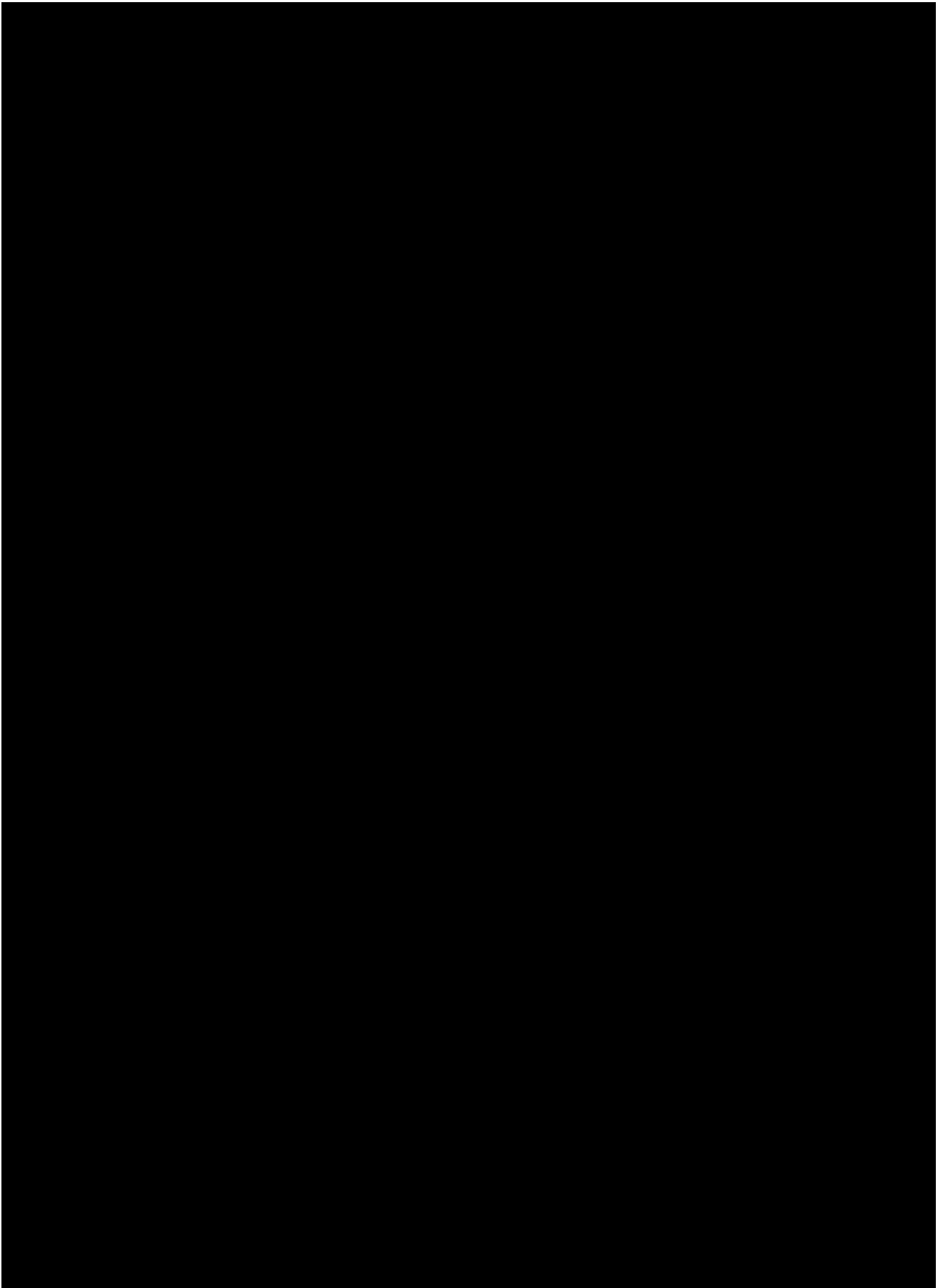


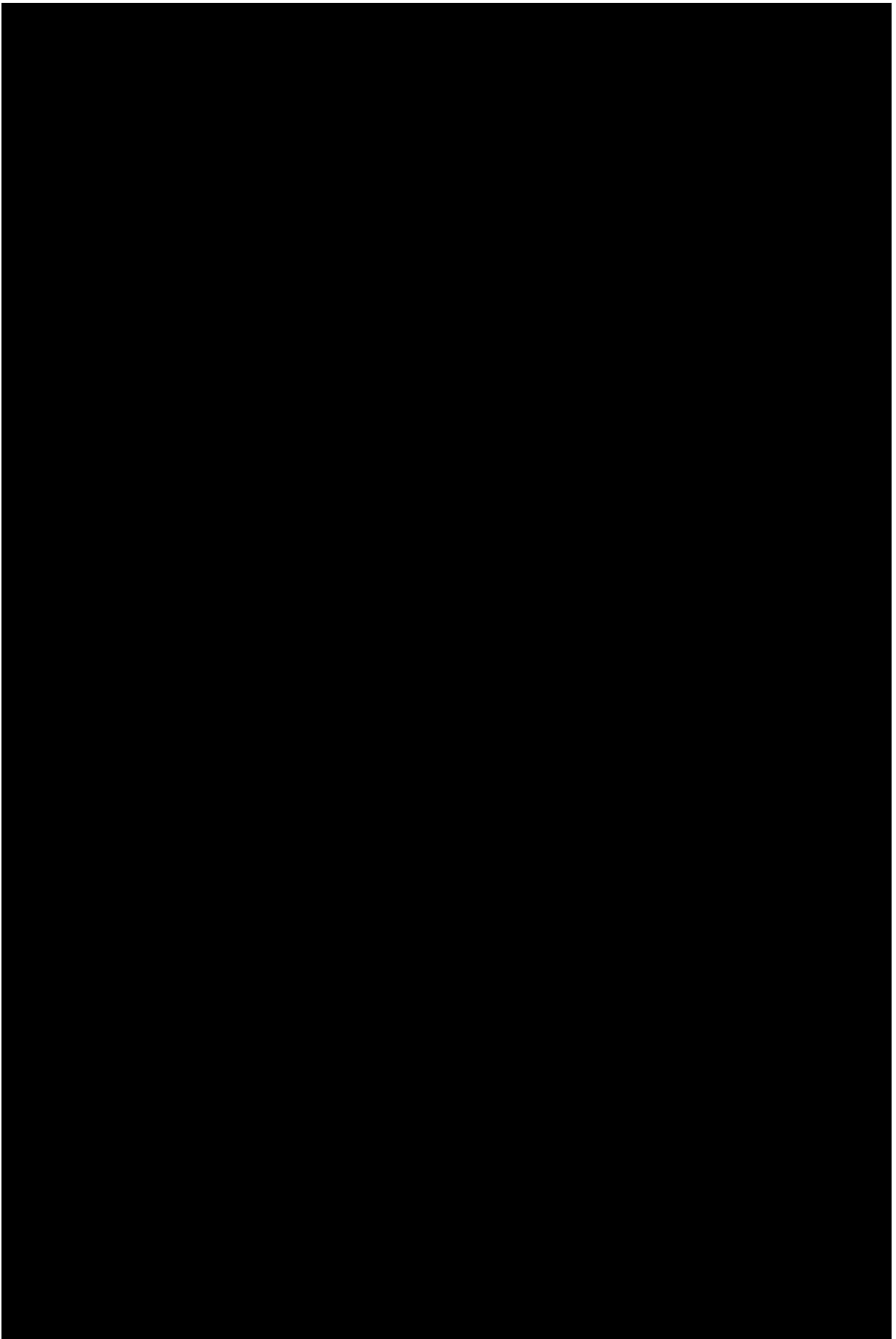


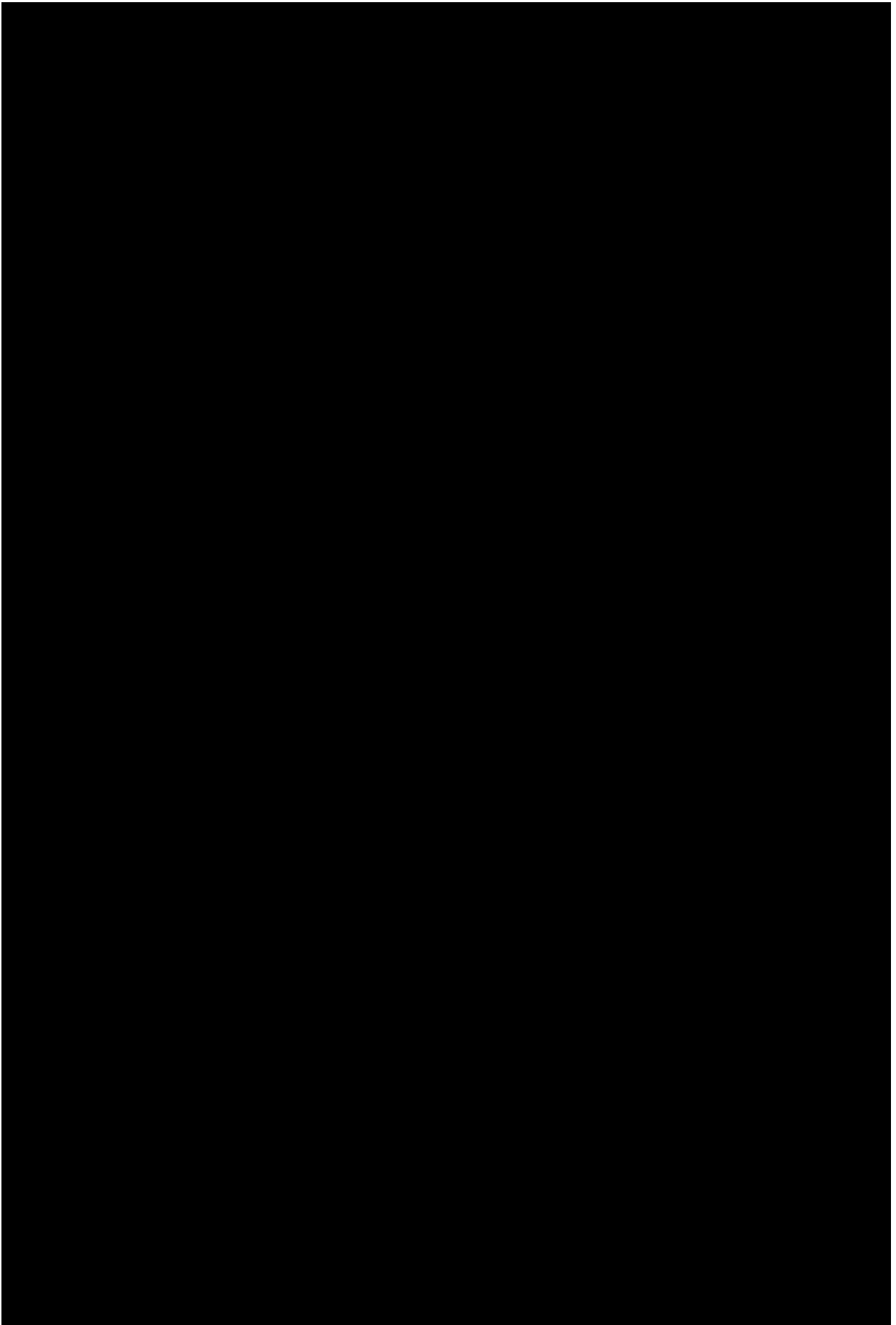


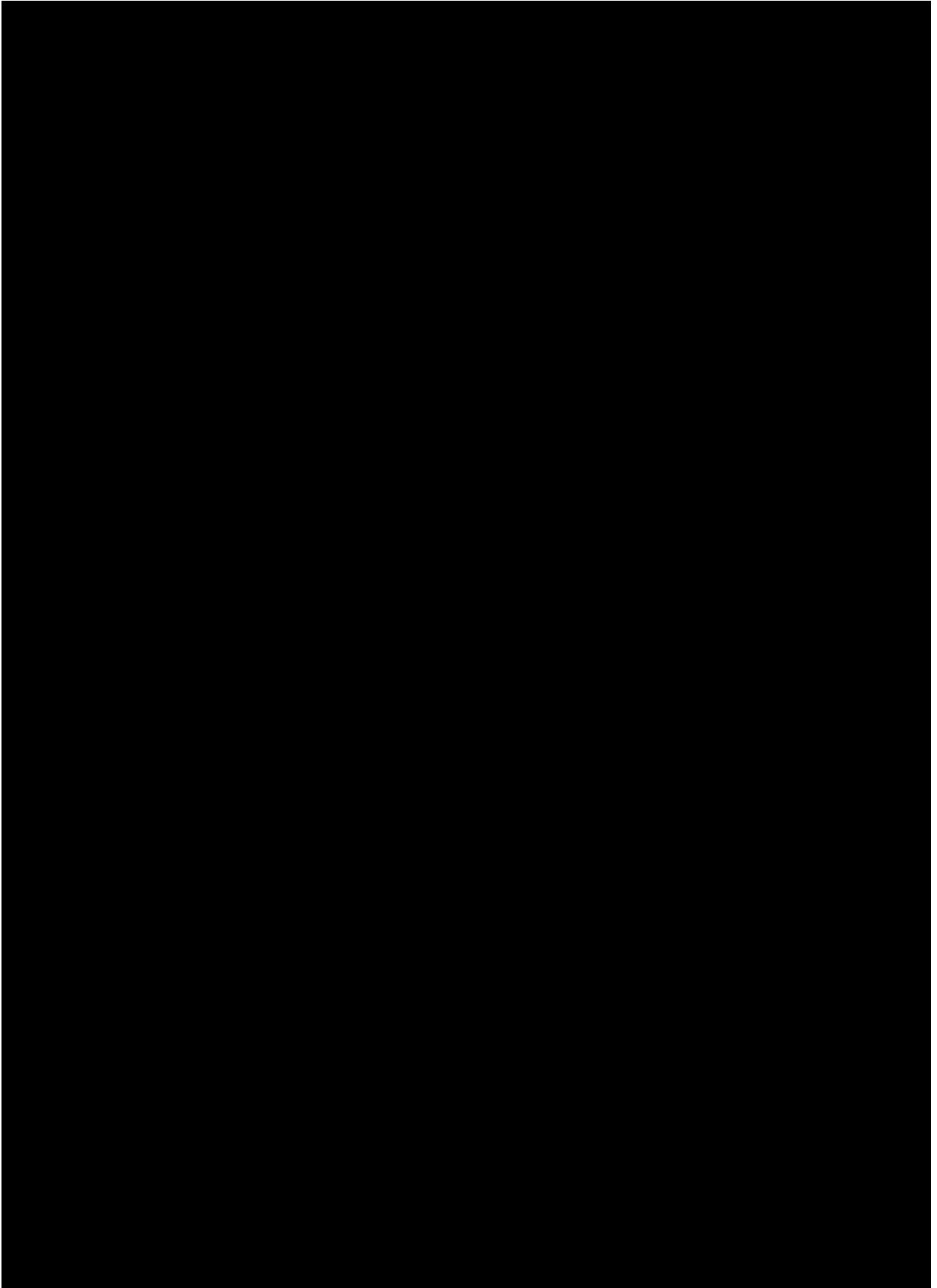


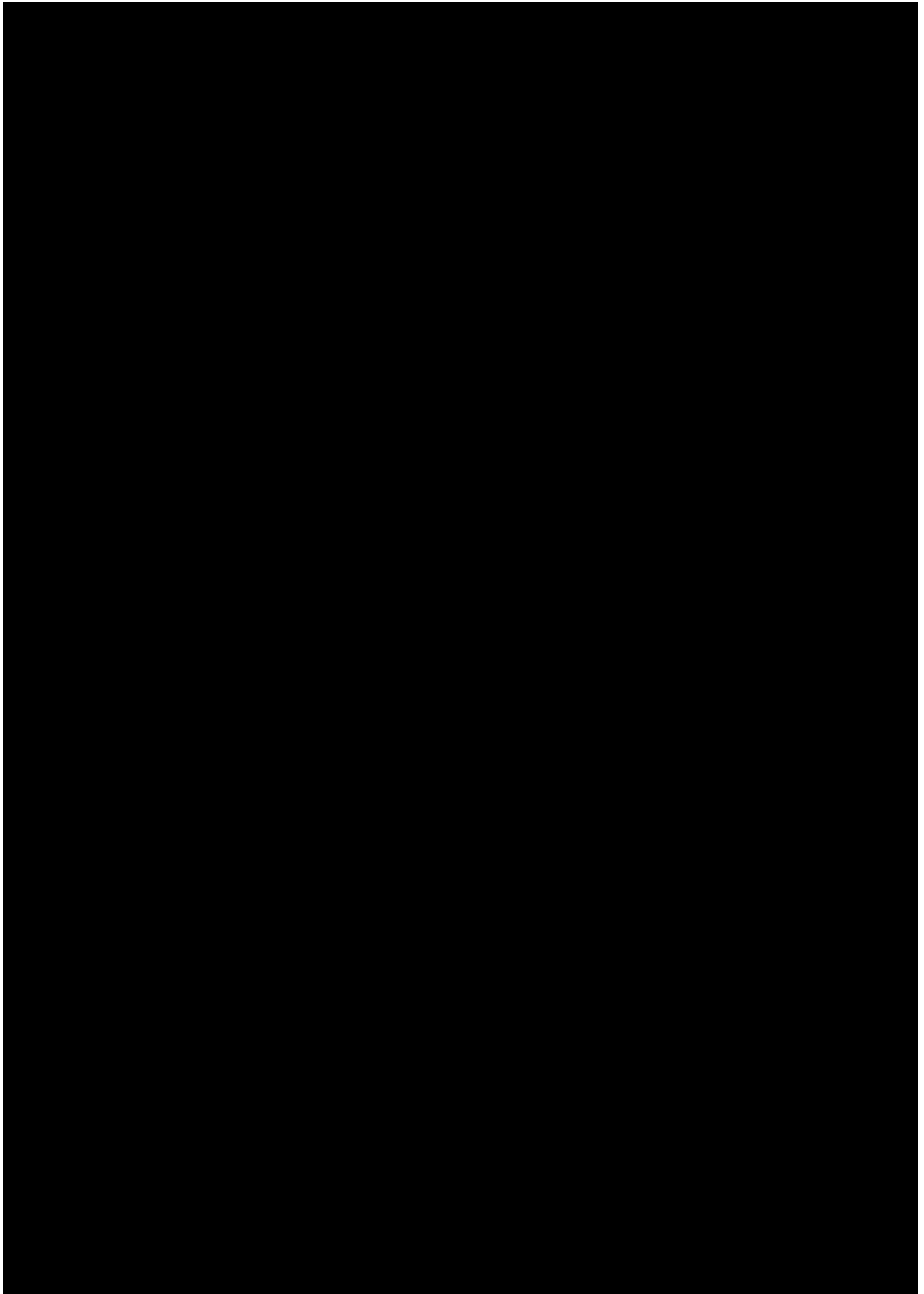




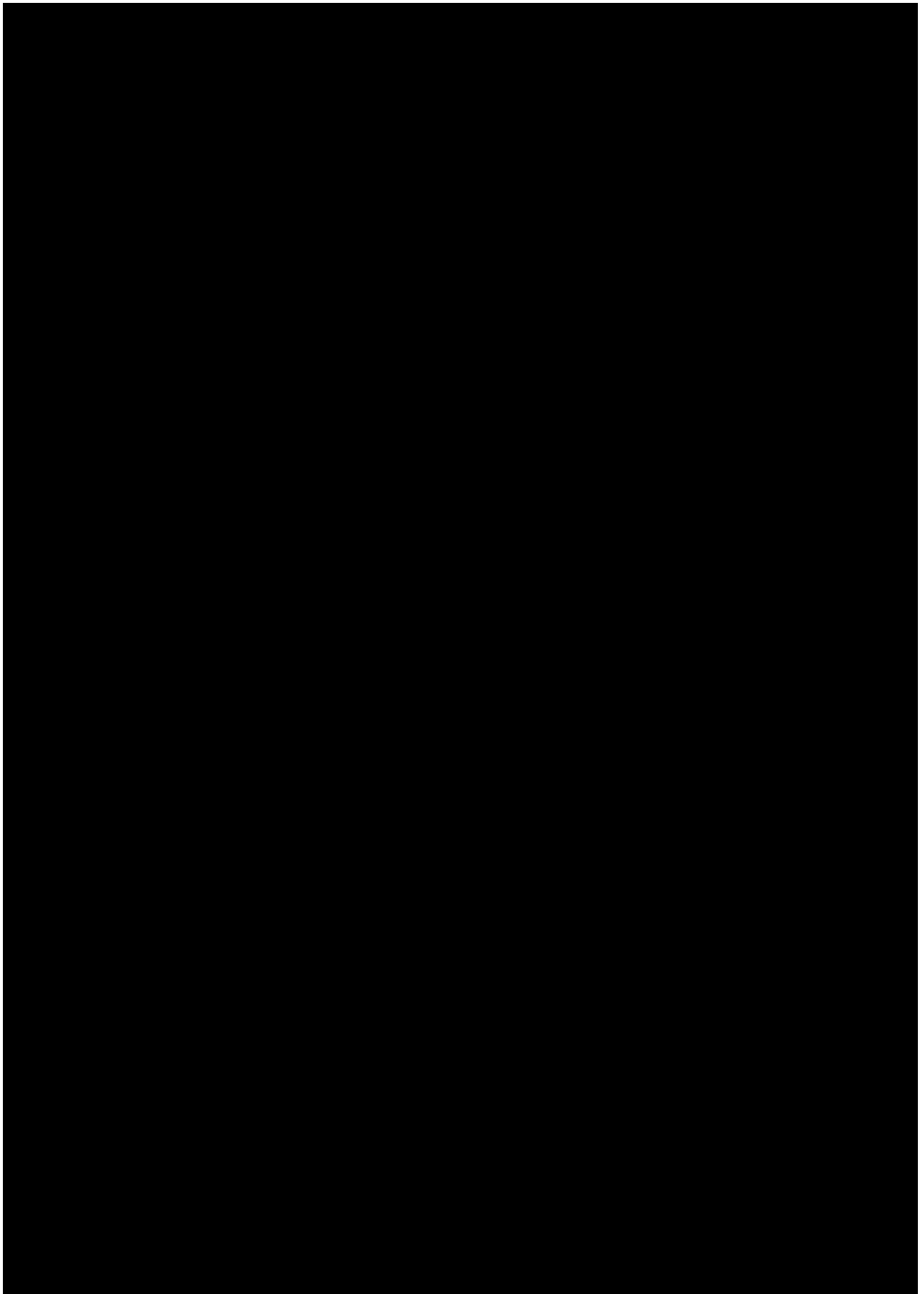


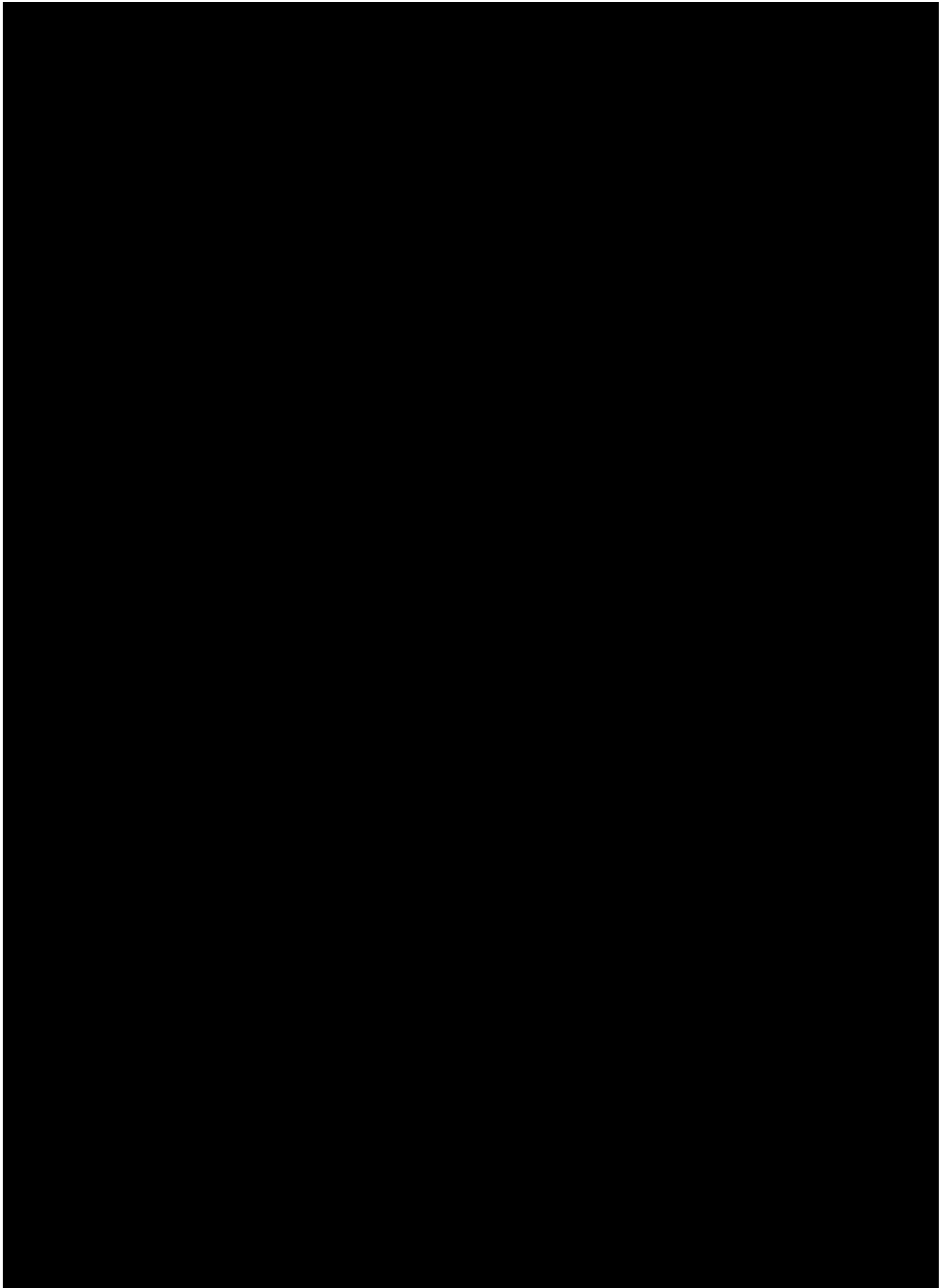


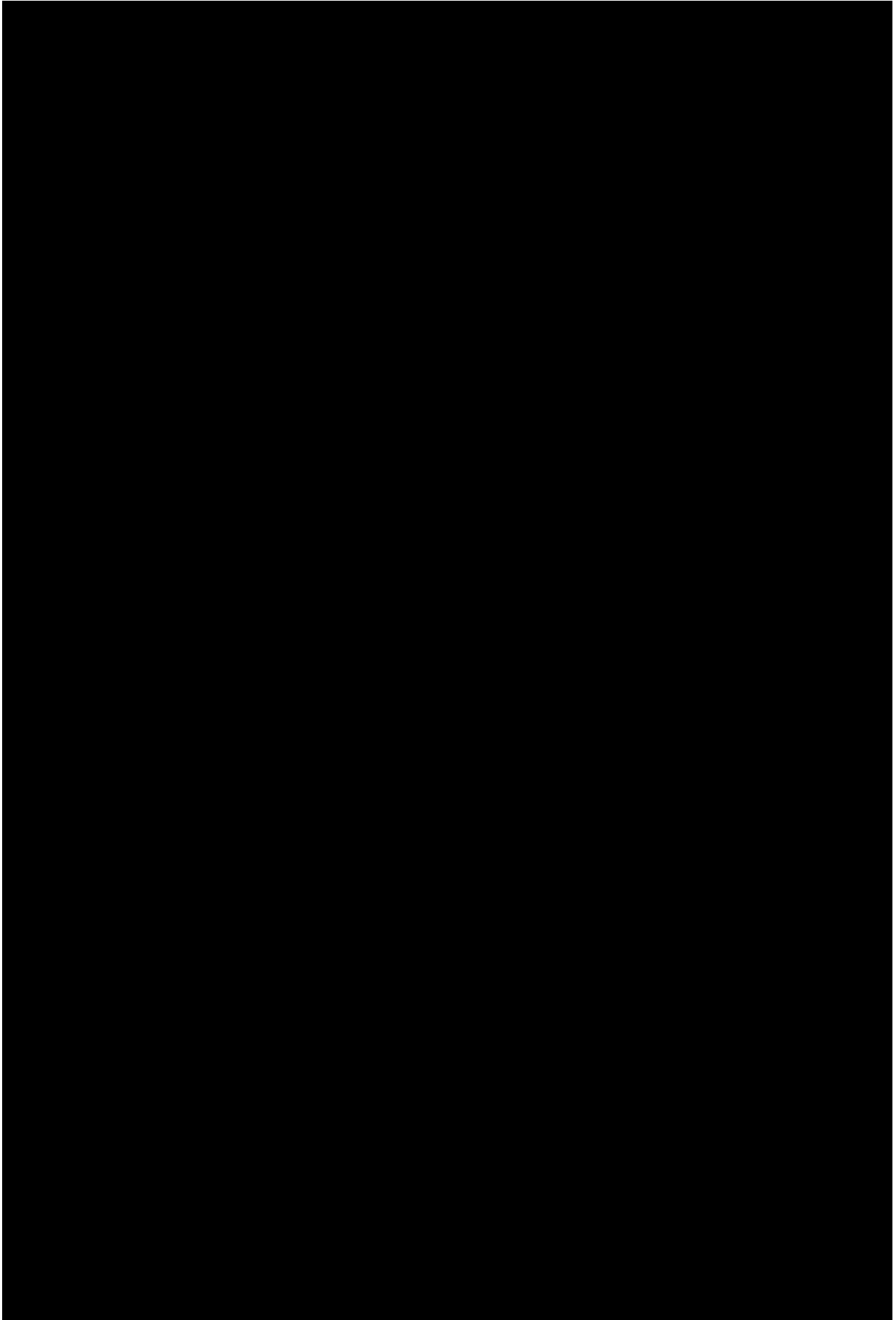


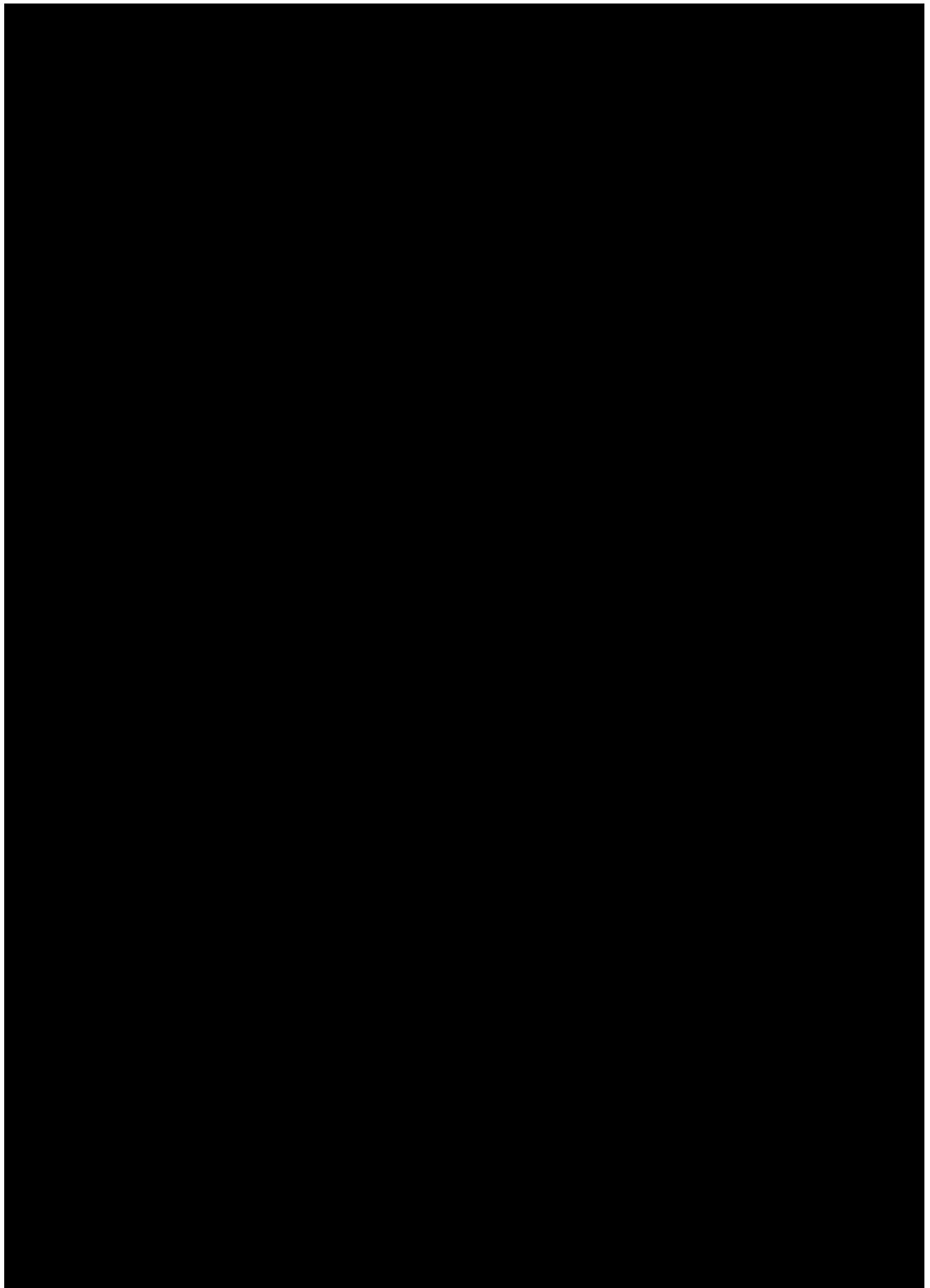


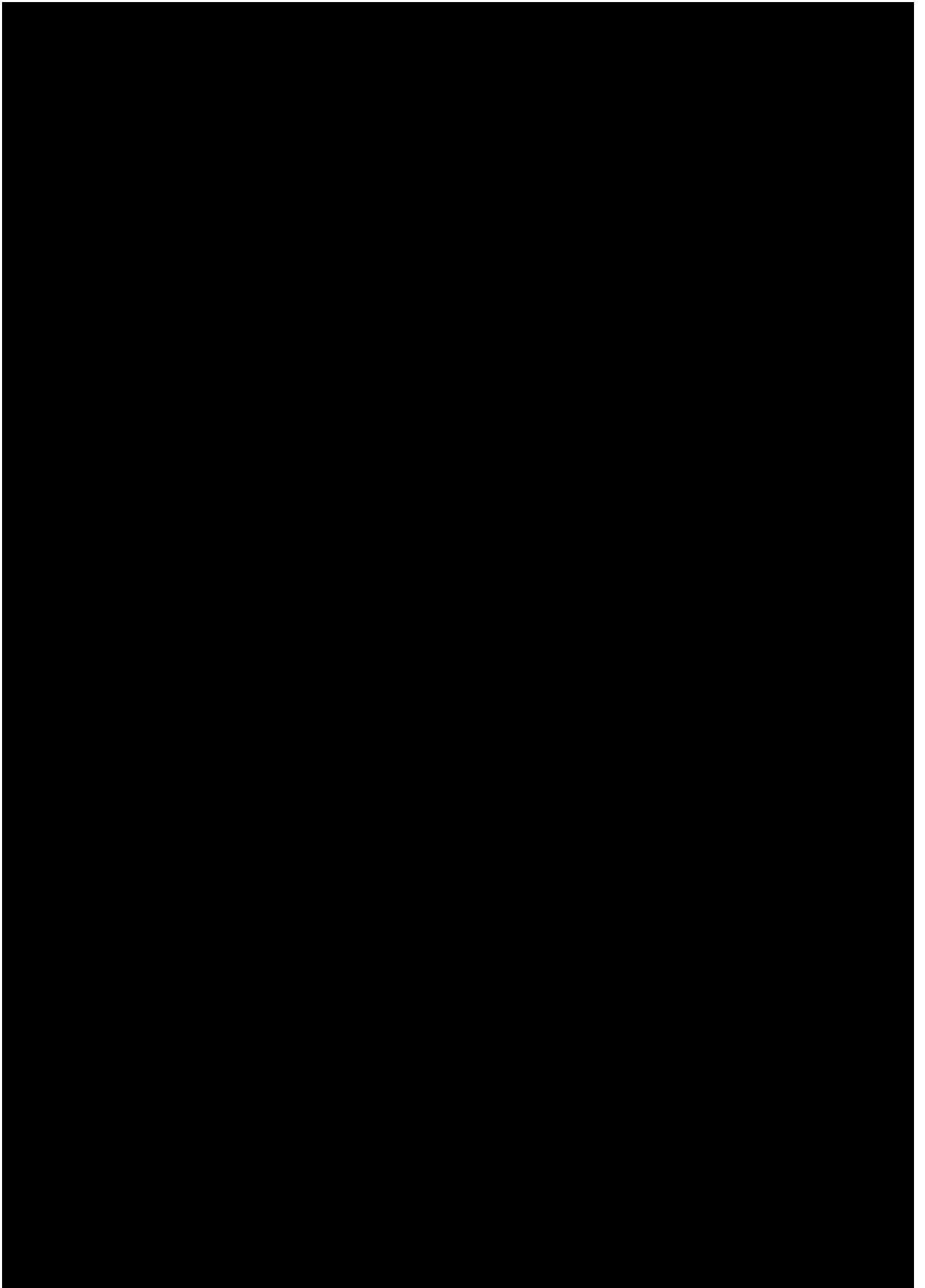


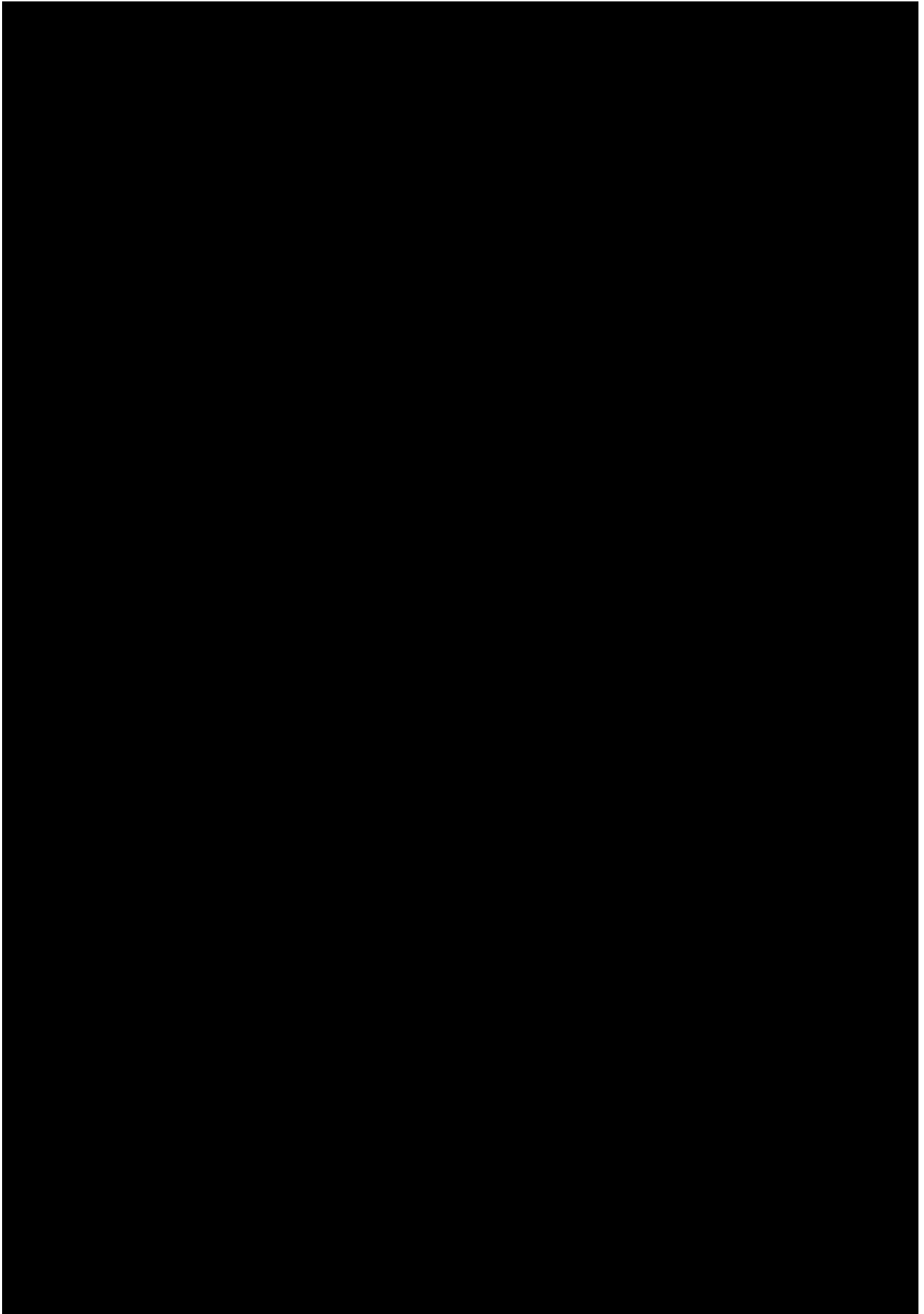


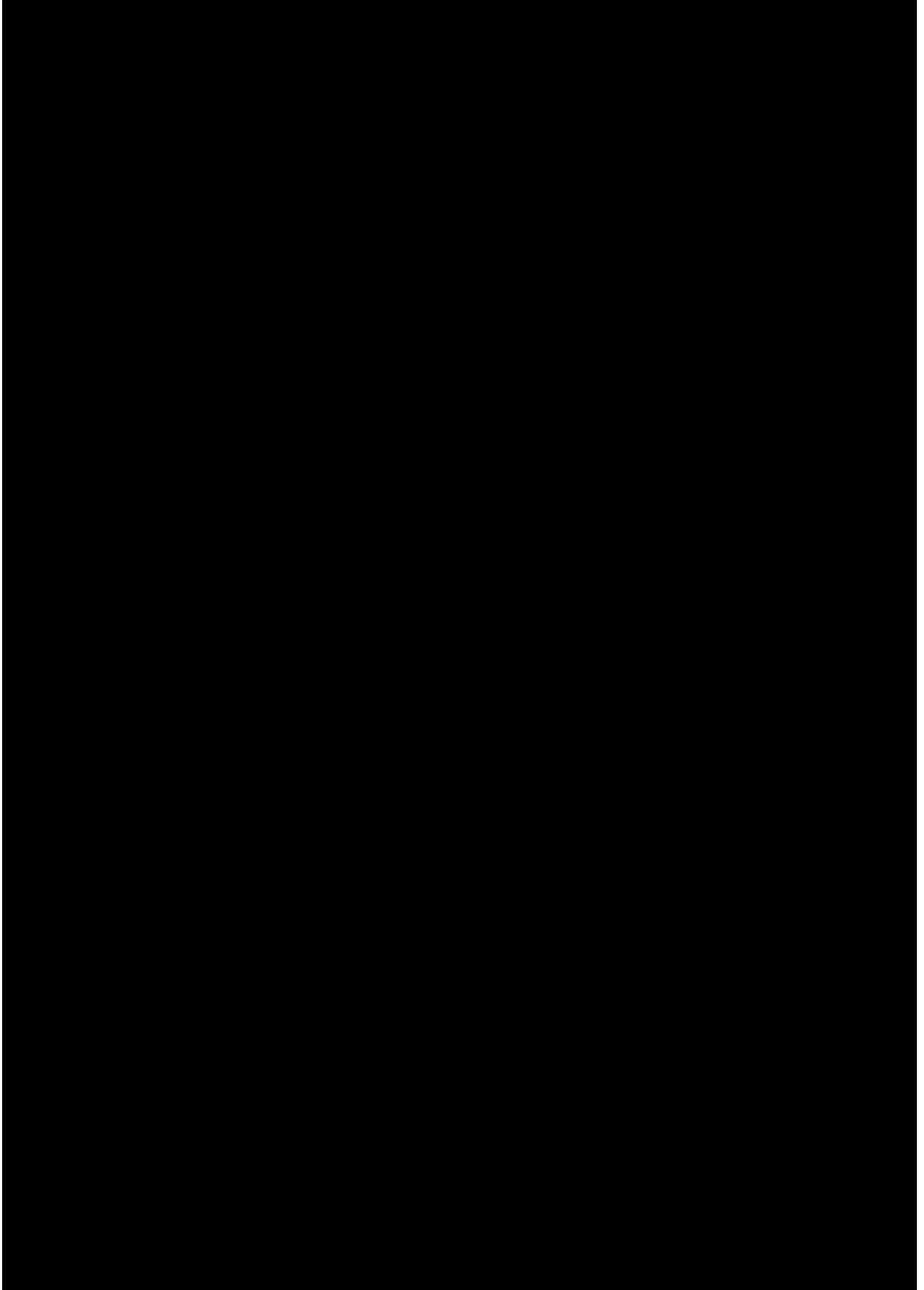


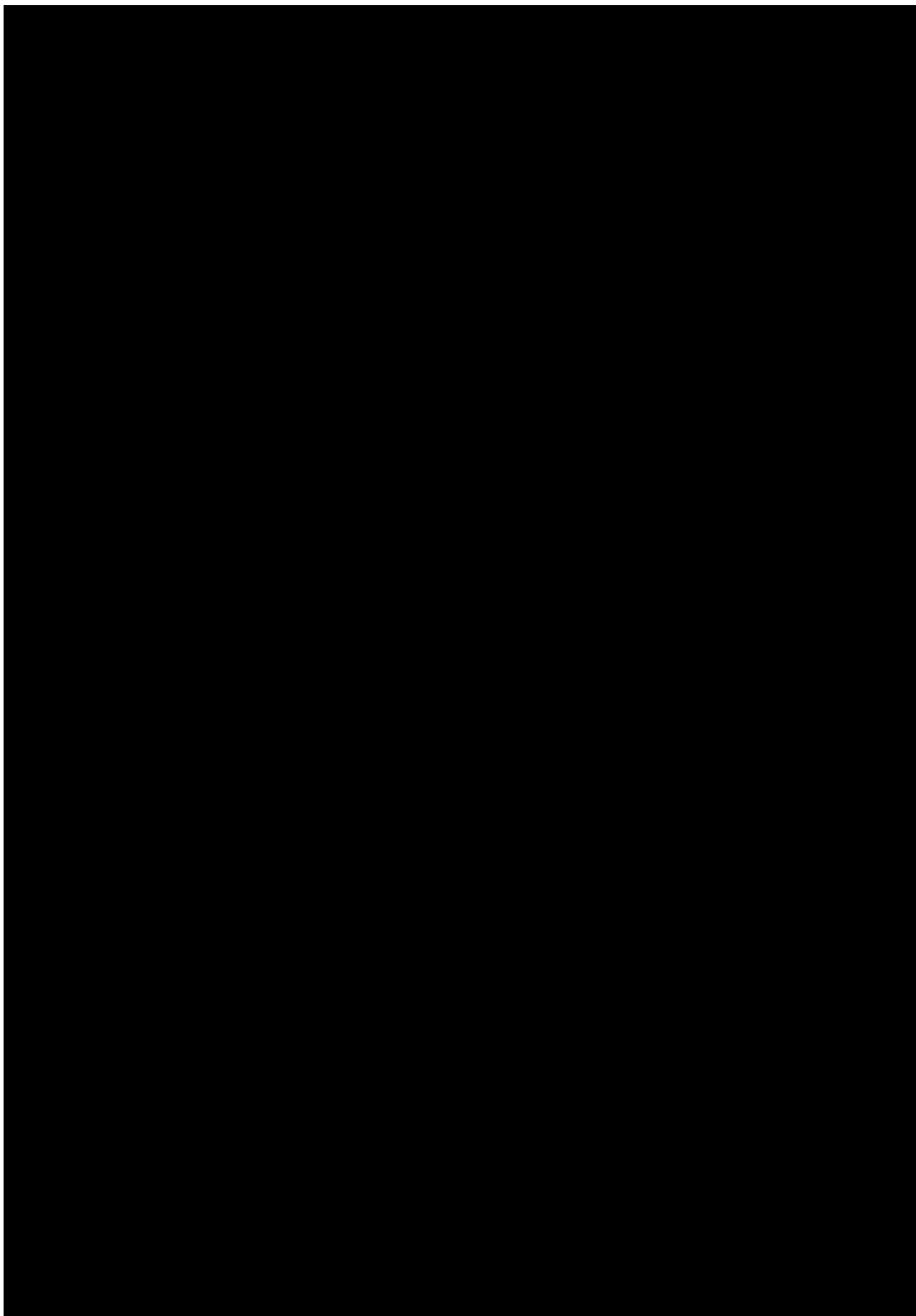




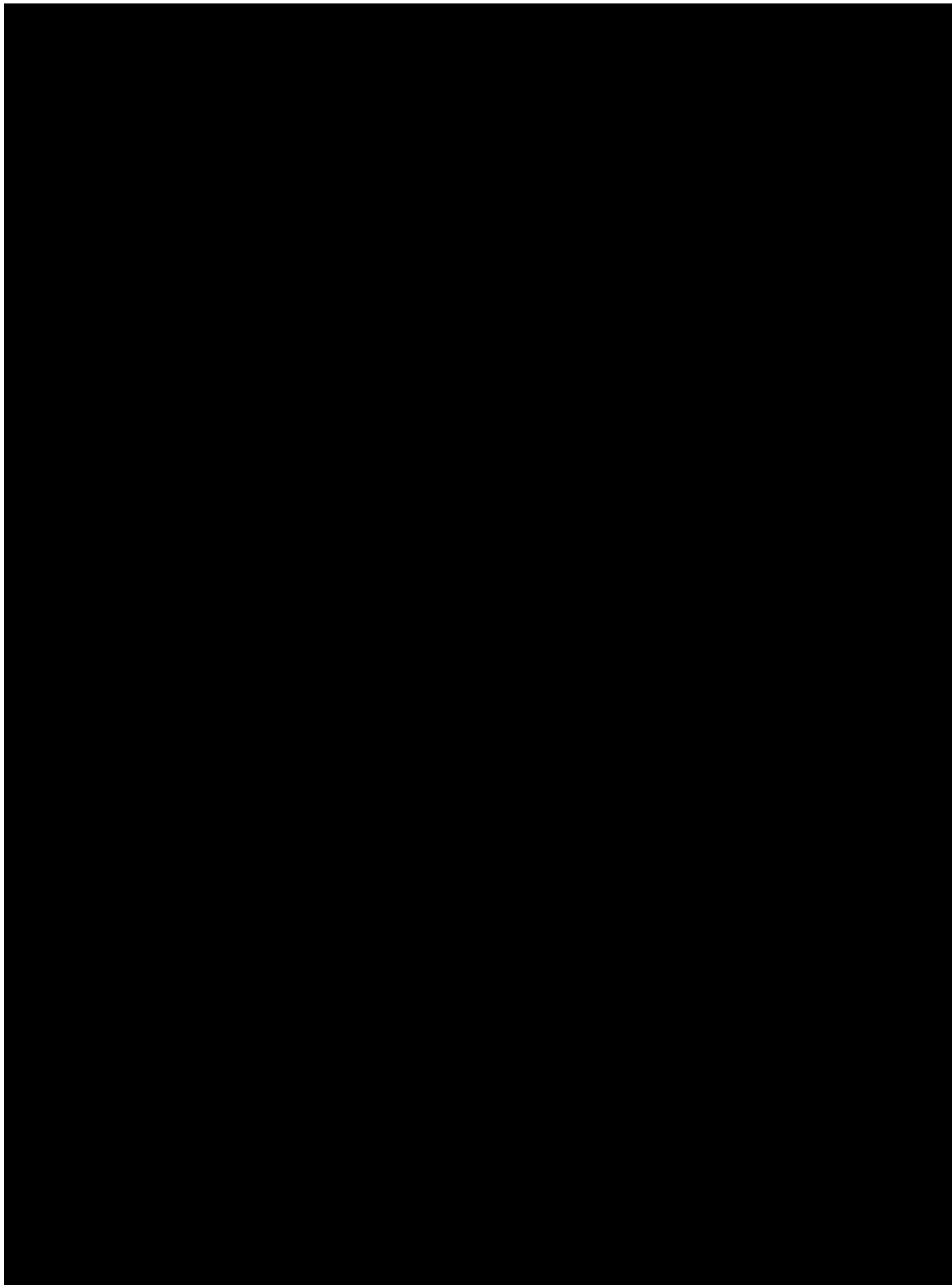


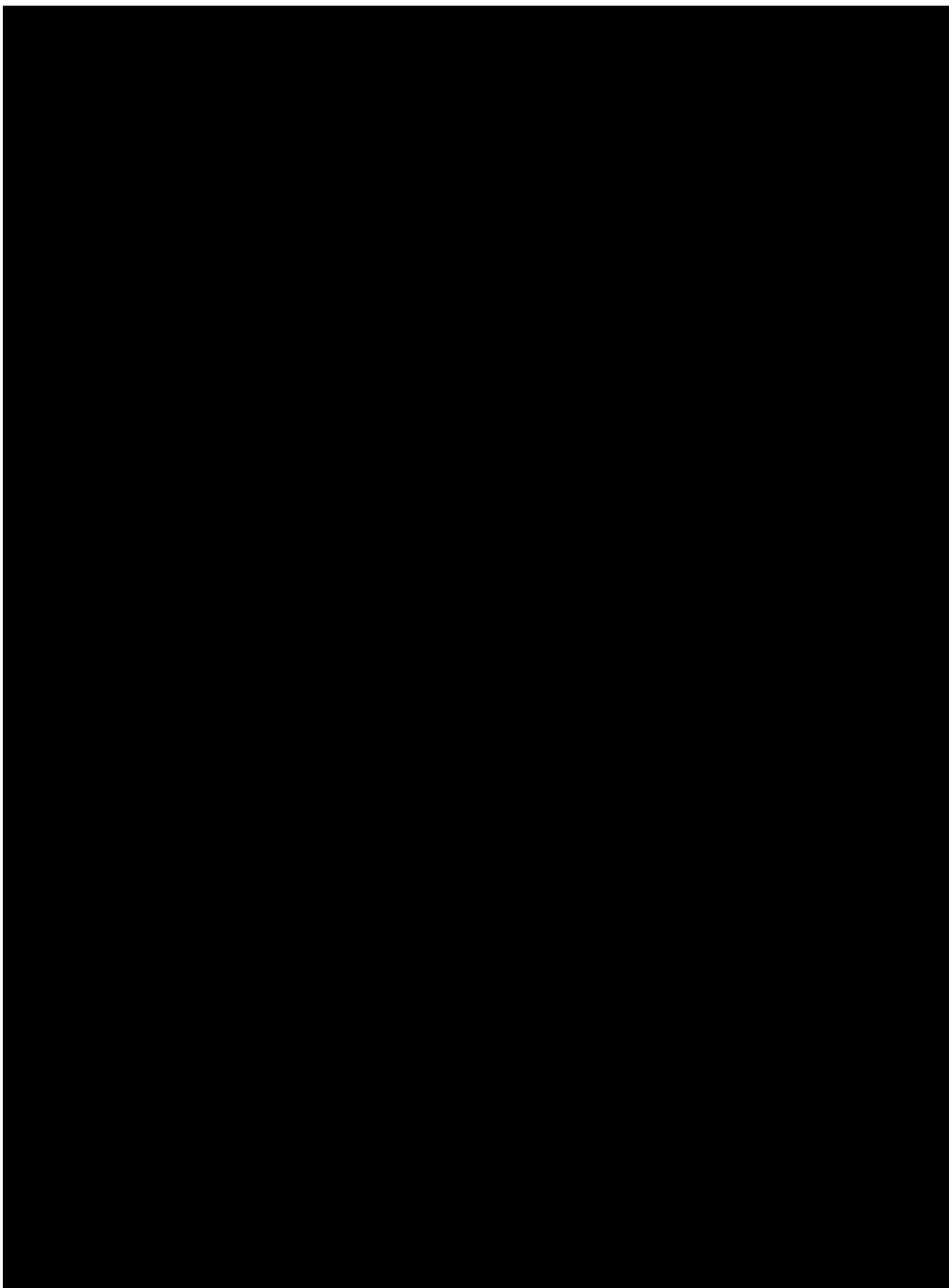


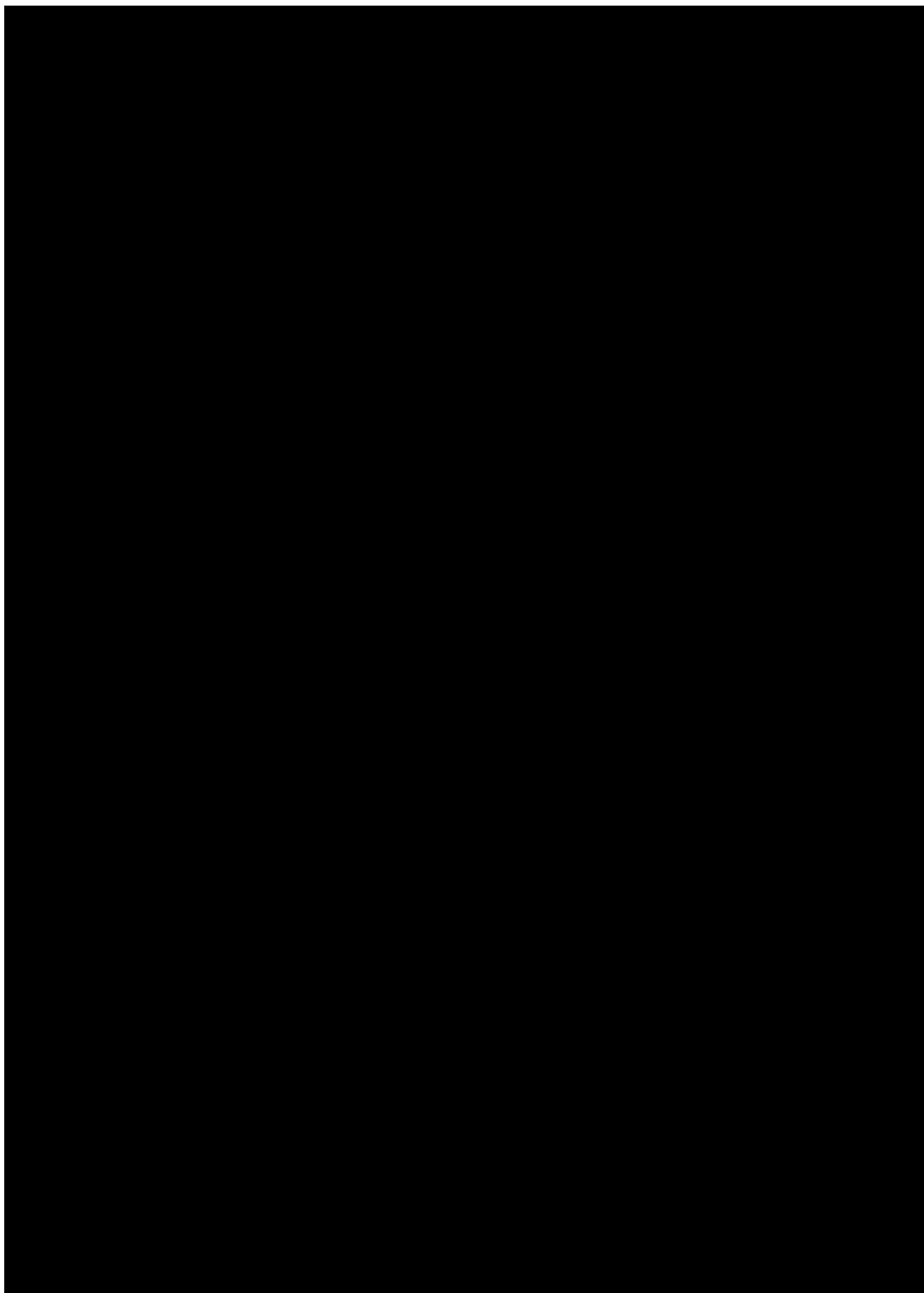


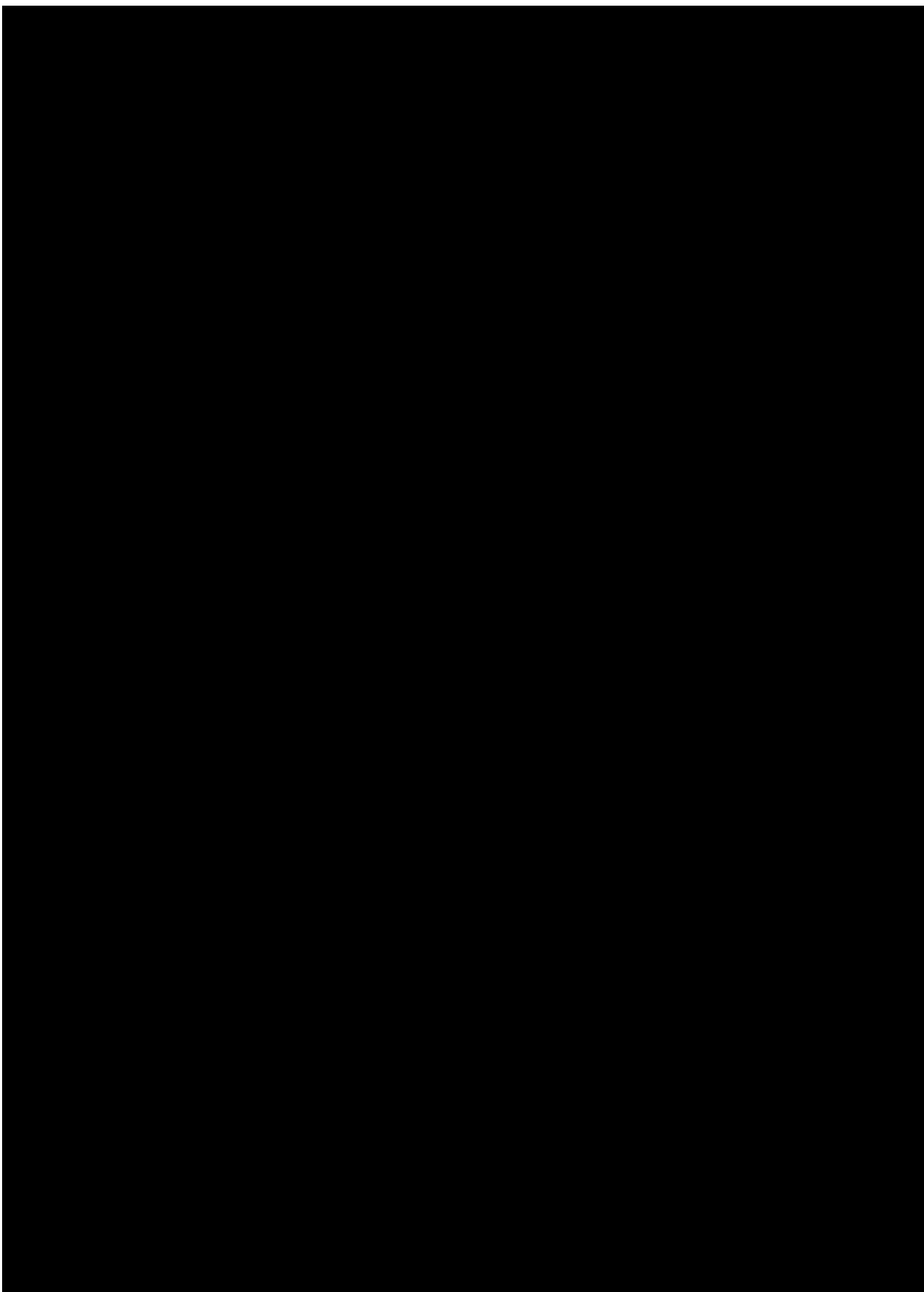


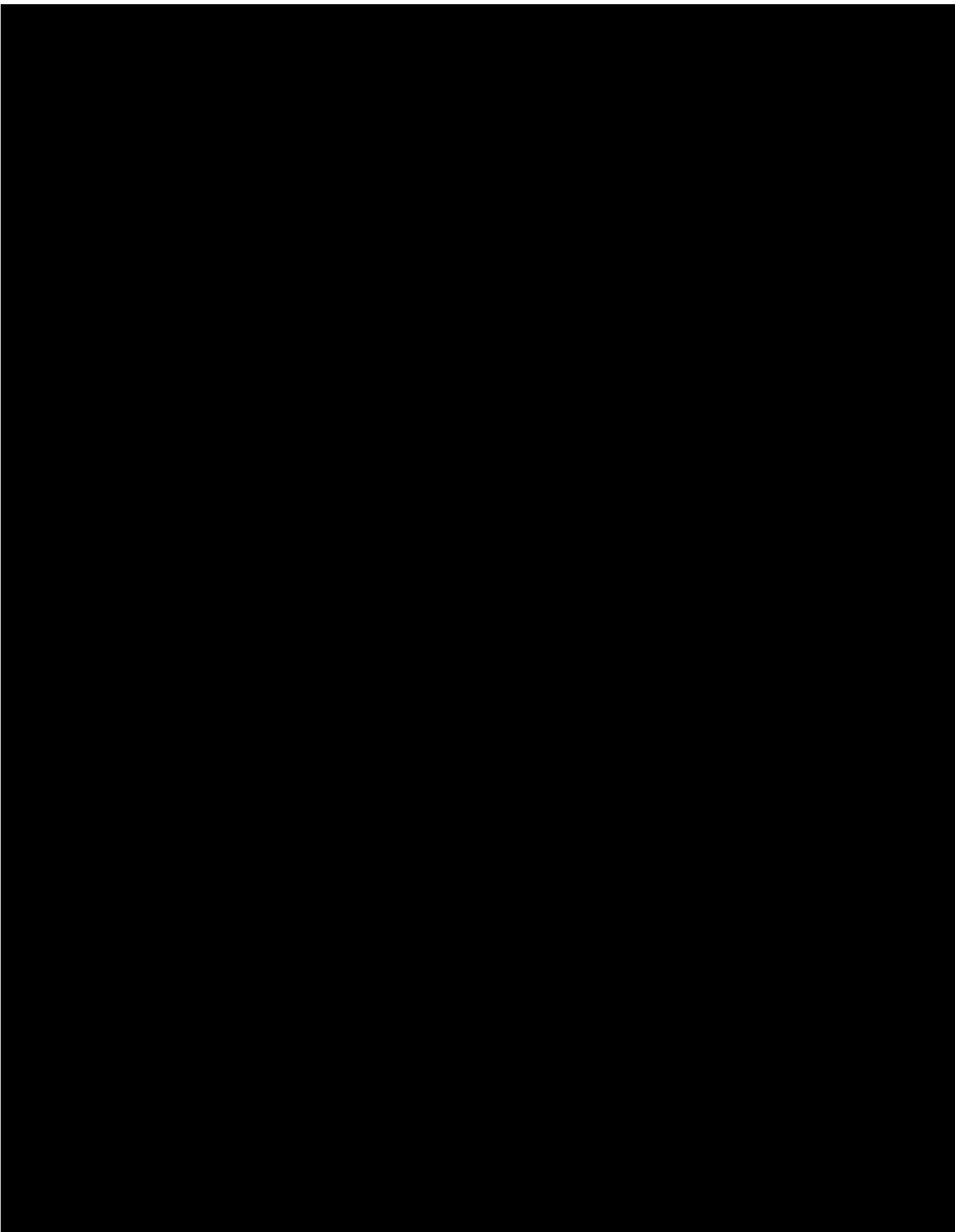


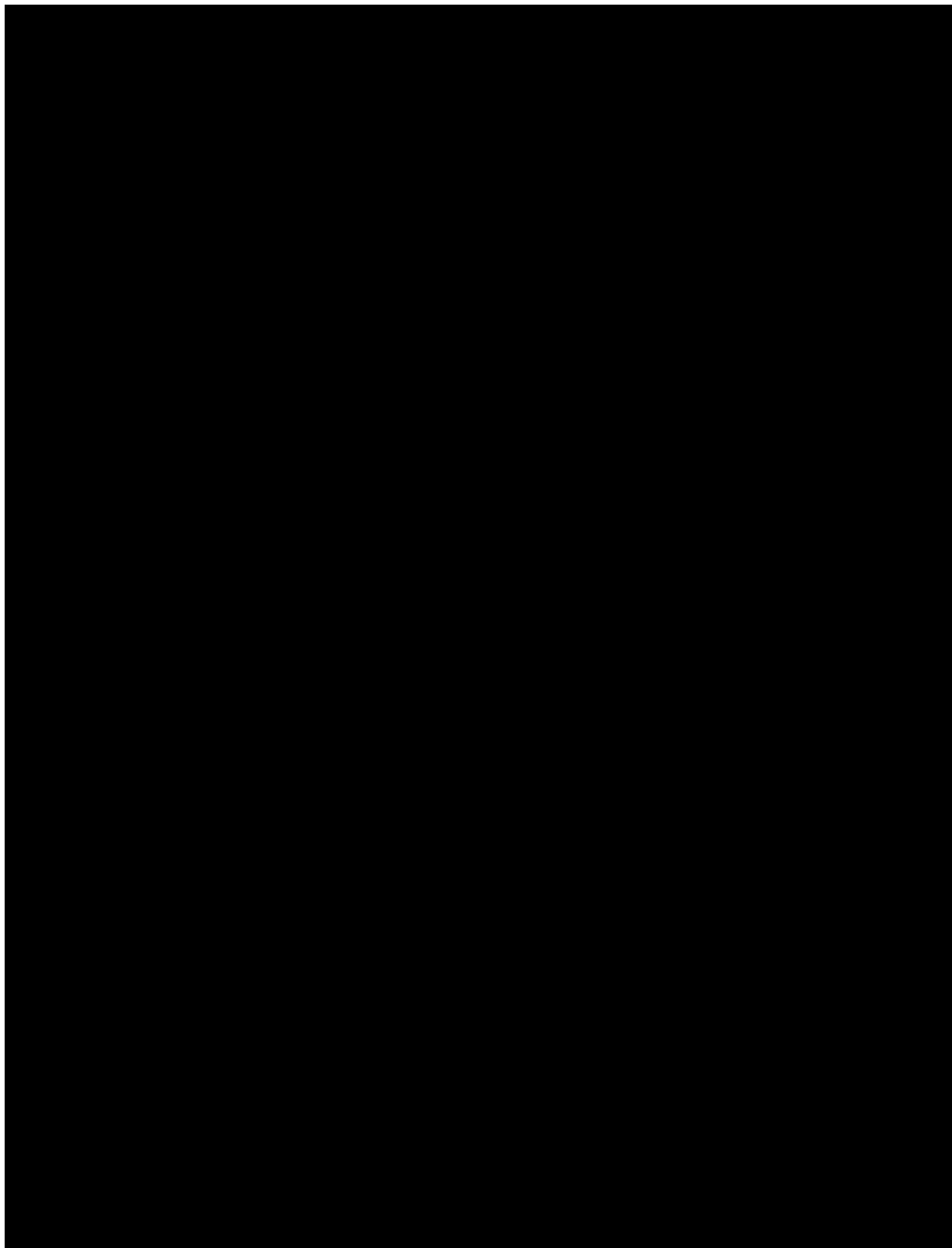


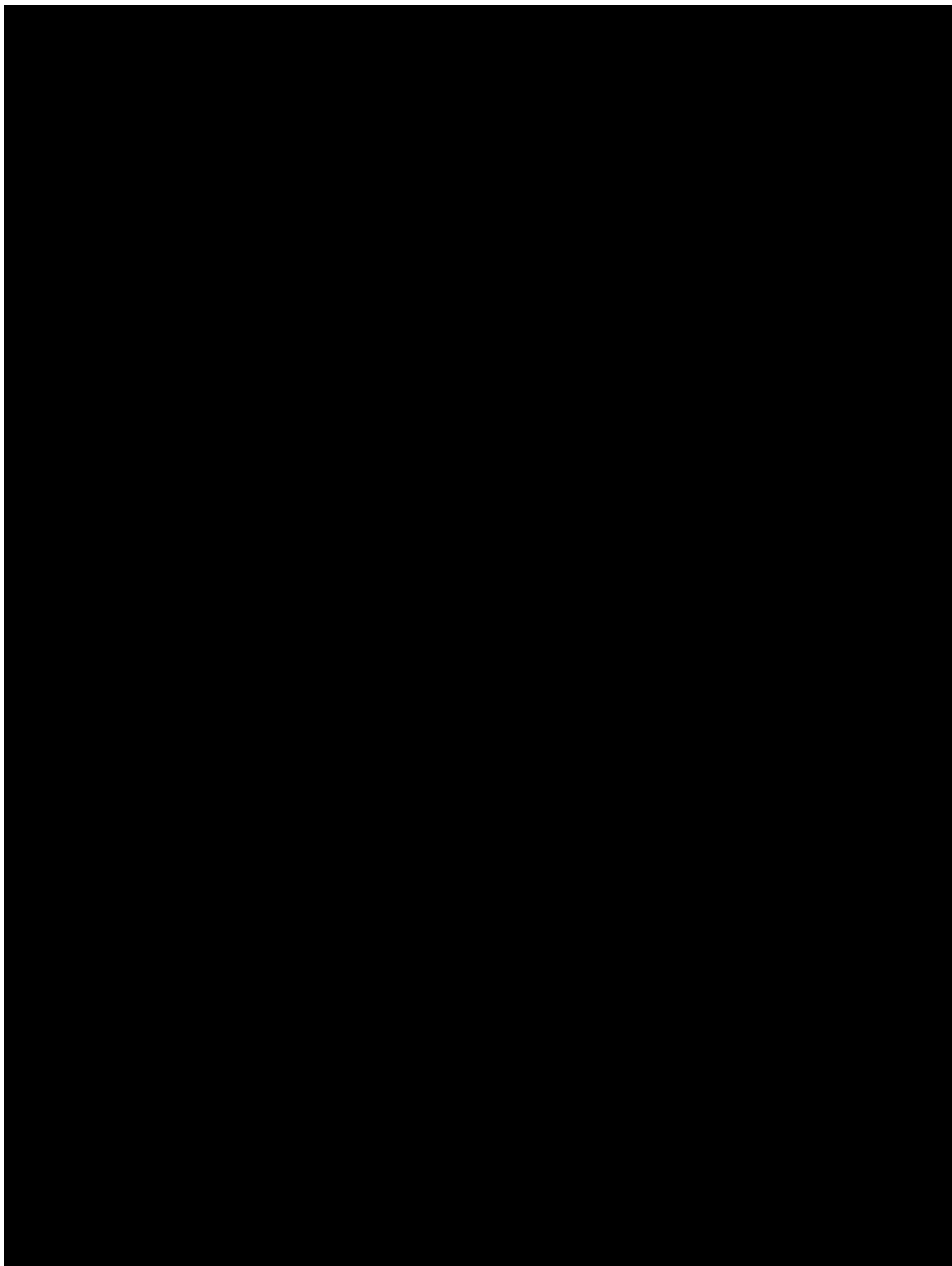


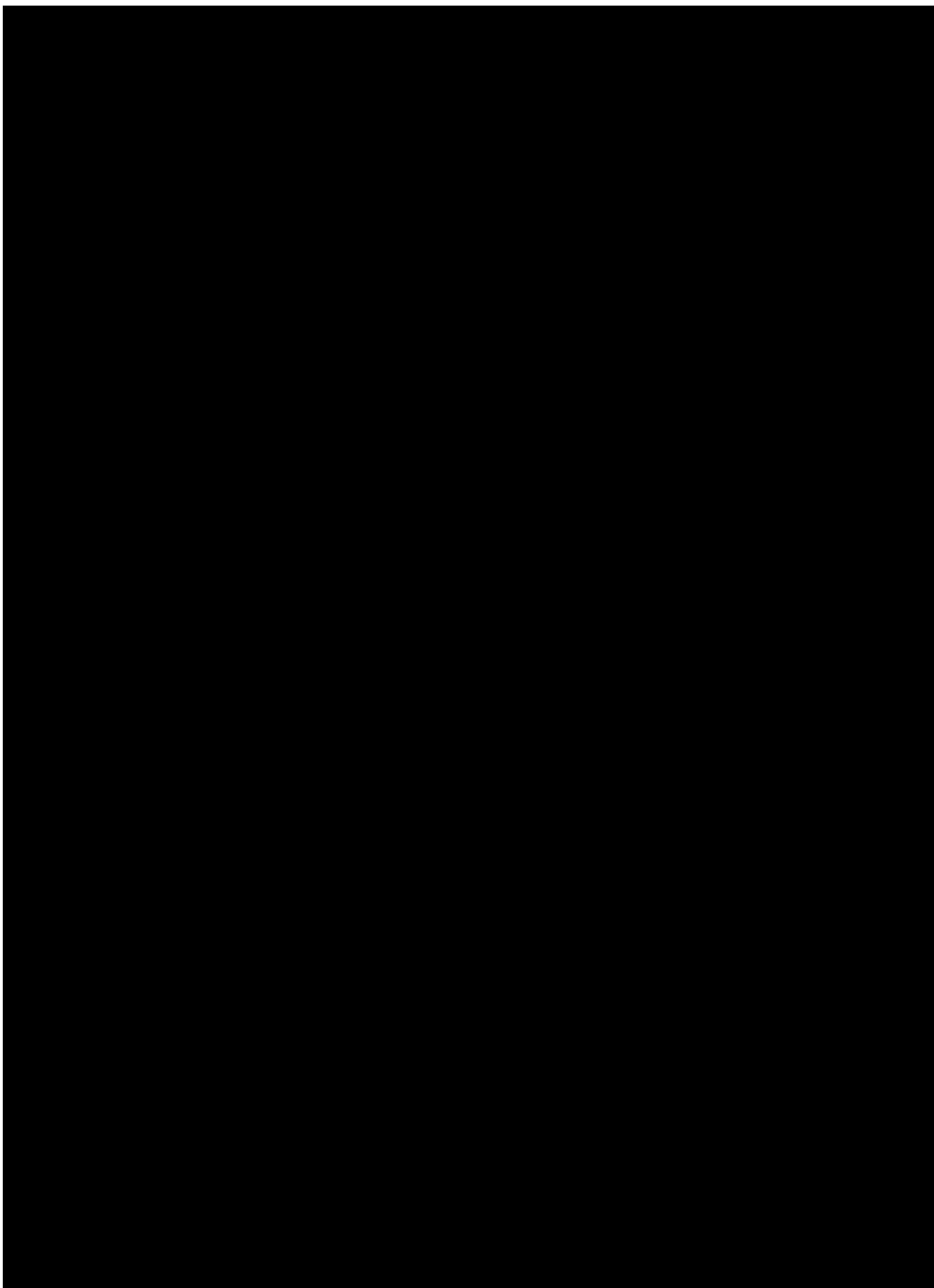




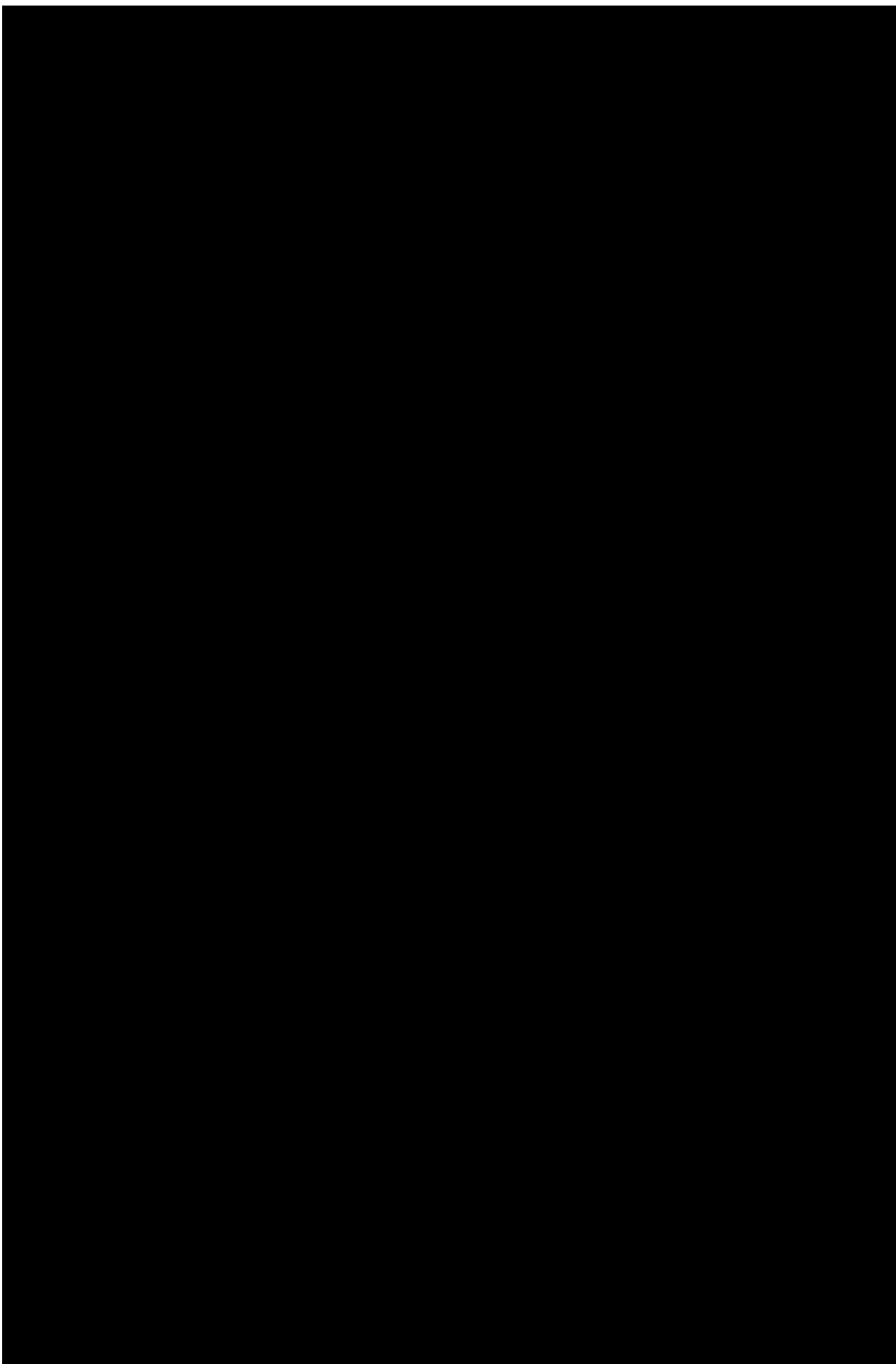


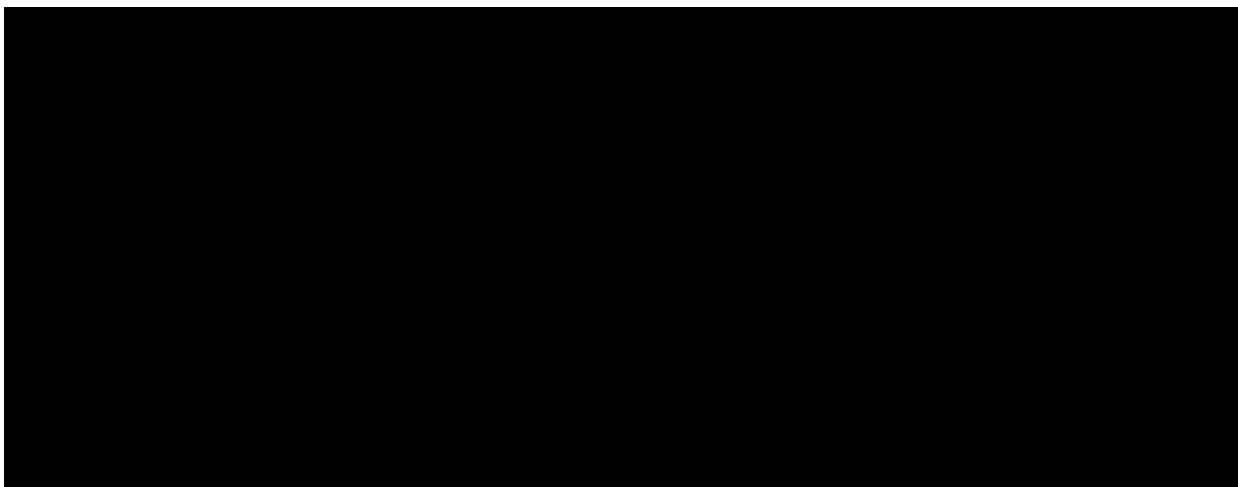












## Chapter 27

The meeting with Sean and Coult was remarkable and revealing about FBI management and the agency's approach to the January 6th investigations. Under the circumstances, I felt satisfied that I had disclosed concerning information to the proper authorities. I cited my training and experience and explained that the January 6th investigations failed to comply with the FBI's rules for case management. I registered my unease that our failures might constitute due process violations and conflict with our oath of office. The ASACs heard my points about the possible statistical manipulation of domestic terrorism cases. When I posited that the likely motivation was to support the political narrative that domestic terrorism was an escalating, nationwide threat, neither man tried to dispute my hypothesis or present a countervailing theory. Neither ASAC disputed that the Washington Field Office was intimately involved with the January 6th cases, even though the Jacksonville Field Office and its personnel were supposed to be overseeing the investigations. Coult twice mustered a patronizing refrain that I was [REDACTED] but did not dispute the veracity of my claims.

I also made it clear that my concerns were not derived from political biases. I did not vote for President Donald Trump in 2020. Personally, I believed he performed very well as president of the United States during the first three years of his term. I planned to vote for his reelection in early 2020. However, I was greatly upset by our federal government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. I believe that "fifteen days to flatten the curve" ranks among the worst managerial decisions in the history of the country. I was also a registered voter in Iowa. The state was solidly in President Trump's electoral bank. As a protest vote, I supported the Libertarian Party candidate for president, Jo Jorgensen. All this to say that my objections to January 6th were not "sour grapes" for the 2020 presidential election result.

During the meeting, Sean was the consummate FBI manager. He used a lot of typical boss-speak about wanting to make sure "I was successful and the organization was successful." Sean led off the meeting with basic rapport-building skills. He attempted to connect with me about the upcoming NASCAR event in Daytona Beach that he planned to attend with his family. Sean also consistently used my first name throughout our conversation. Like Greg, Sean suggested the FBI's Employee Assistance Program as a potential solution for my concerns.

In my opinion, Sean was a dutiful FBI manager who was just going along with what his superiors told him to do. My disclosures and objections to January 6th did not penetrate his thought processes. Sean never disputed the veracity of my concerns. To the contrary, he acknowledged that I was not alone in my opinions within the FBI. My behavior was foreign and confusing to Sean. I studied and identified the FBI's deviations from its investigative rules, monitored case outcomes, and considered whether these conflicted with my oath to the US Constitution and citizens' due process rights. Sean seemed genuinely surprised when I told him that I did not believe the FBI's investigative process failures would be revealed during January 6th trials. The possibility had not crossed his mind. This was obvious from how the prosecutions of January 6th defendants were being adjudicated and meant that

he was not monitoring the cases. Sean was not a "true believer" in the January 6th prosecution nor was he an opportunist. He would have been happy to find an agreeable duty for me to perform during the takedowns in order to minimize drama and return to the status quo.

Coult drove the meeting and presented himself as my primary adversary. Unlike Sean, he was not interested in my success or reaching some sort of accommodation or solution to the predicament. I do not know if Coult believes the righteousness of the FBI's prosecution of January 6th subjects. But I am confident that Coult is ambitious. Overseeing the Jacksonville Field Office's investigations of these cases from a management position as well as his opportunity to discipline a subordinate were both opportunities for Coult to cement himself as a leader within the Jacksonville Field Office and gain a permanent position as ASAC.

Coult used a deriding and condescending style throughout our conversation. He was on a mission to establish a narrative and fact pattern that divorced my disclosures about FBI case management rule departures and heavy-handed arrest tactics from my willingness to participate in the operations. He alluded to potential consequences throughout the meeting but stopped short of making direct threats that could be construed as adverse repercussions in any future whistleblower proceedings. Instead, Coult continually spoke about wanting [REDACTED] that it was acceptable for me to raise concerns while repeatedly pressuring me to admit that I was refusing to do my job. He was visibly frustrated when I insisted that sounding the alarm through my disclosures compelled me to step away from the arrest and search operations. Essentially, my oath of office and the takedowns represented conflicting orders. I was defaulting to my oath and honestly believed this comported with my job responsibilities.

Coult was dismissive towards the oath of office. He went as far as listing adherence to the US Constitution second to FBI policy each time he spoke about his priorities. On one occasion when I spoke about duty to the country, Coult countered that my duties to the FBI were equally important. We both swore the same oath in order to become FBI special agents. I meant what I said. I cannot speak for Coult.

I found Coult's ignorance and verifiably false belief about January 6th subjects killing police officers monumental. How could a relatively high-ranking field office official and supervisor of the Joint Terrorism Task Force be so incredibly misinformed? Throughout our meeting, Coult accused me of leaning on biased talking points. His erroneous beliefs only spotlighted that he was either uninformed about the very cases he claimed to be supervising or he was consuming false, biased news very much like the content he accused me of relying on when I formulated my conclusions about the FBI's case management malfeasance and politicization.

At the conclusion of our meeting, I asked Sean and Coult for a timetable on any potential disciplinary action. They told me that those determinations would take a long time. I drove home in a state of limbo. Clarity arrived shortly thereafter—three-and-a-half hours later to be more exact. I received an email from Coult: