Fortune Cookies Between You and Me: An Experiment
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Any cultural group, no matter how great or small in number, whether its members are linked by choice or necessity, depends upon a utilization of shared language to remain intact. Visual artists, indeed, have continually developed and employed systems of iconography in order to communicate messages to specific audiences. My studies in art history have guided me to become particularly interested in the creation of visual lexicons within industrial societies whose members support a prolific production of images that seem to convey the sentiments of increasingly diversified sub-cultures.

For this project, I have conducted an artistic experiment that has allowed me to observe and interpret the evolution of symbolic language within one specific group dynamic. This experiment involves the simplest possible version of a cultural system, a group of two individuals, myself and a close friend and former roommate. The title for this project was chosen both because of the specific connotations of the idea of a "fortune cookie" within our sub-culture and also because of the interpretive act that is involved in the decoding of the message received from a fortune.

The first step in the process consists of my attempts to capture elements and moments of everyday life within our individualized community through photography. I have photographed people, places, objects, and situations that my collaborator is familiar with but have by no means striven to maintain objectivity in the making of the images. The photographs are products of very subjective, aesthetically-motivated, and personally emotional choices made from my perspective as member of a sub-culture of two.

After collecting and editing my images, I recorded brief descriptions of each photograph and attempted to predict my friend's reaction to each visual recording, writing down my thoughts for later use. The images were then sent to my collaborator, and she interpreted them, as well, describing and writing from her perspective without seeing what I had written. After receiving her reactions, I compared each of her responses with my own. The differences as well as similarities in our impressions of the photographs were then analyzed with the hope that I would be able to find some consistencies in the nature of our related viewpoints.

Several patterns emerged from my analysis, both in the nature of the continuities and discontinuities found in our explanations. There were only two instances in which my

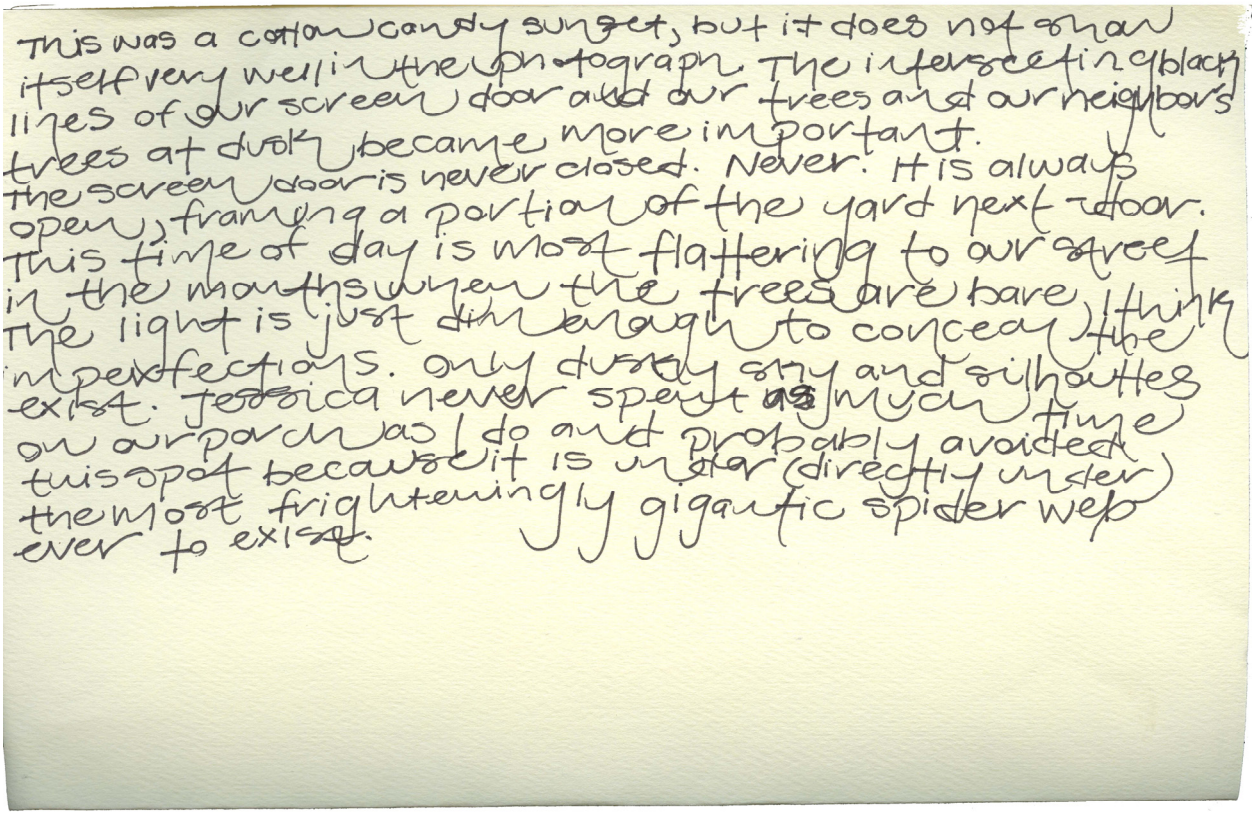
collaborator misidentified the exact nature of the subject used to create these two particular photographs. I realize now that symbolism present in these images was probably not very strong as their content relies too heavily upon particular instances that occurred at a time when my collaborator was not present. In several other instances her descriptions were also lacking in specificity because I chose subjects that are more representative of places and objects that we had discussed but that she had not often experienced visually.

Our descriptions seemed to match quite closely when one or both of two different factors affected the creation of certain photographs. The first factor that seemed to produce a predictable reaction was a focus upon a subject that I knew would disgust my collaborator. Based upon multiple conversations and experiences, I know that even the briefest mentioning of certain things (such as eggs) will elicit very specific reactions from my friend. The subjects that provoked a predictably disgusted reaction were items that had already essentially become symbolic triggers through verbal communication. Additional close matches came about through a similar process, though these images seem to be more reliant upon a visual trigger that leads to a recollection of a shared memory that is only loosely attached to the visible content of the image. Several images, for example, that both of us describe in terms of memories tied to place contain very little visual information describing these spaces in their entirety.

It seems, then, that the strongest visual symbols in our sub-culture have been adopted through either strong associations with emotional reactions or through the repeated visitation of certain themes in our everyday conversation. Our adoption of symbols in to our sub-culture, therefore, seems to follow patterns of visual acquisition in other contemporary cultures. We have created an efficient system of shortcuts for communicating complex emotions and also for expressing the ideas that we visit in discussions most often.

All of the photographs and descriptions used in the experiment are represented in the pages that follow. I chose to include the complete collection of images and handwritten text so that each photograph could exist in a space that would enable the viewer to contextualize it both through a comparison of text and image and through its formal qualities as they relate to the entire body of photographic work. This organization will hopefully help any viewer who is not a member of this particular sub-culture to gain a more complete understanding of formal considerations taken into account throughout the experimental process.



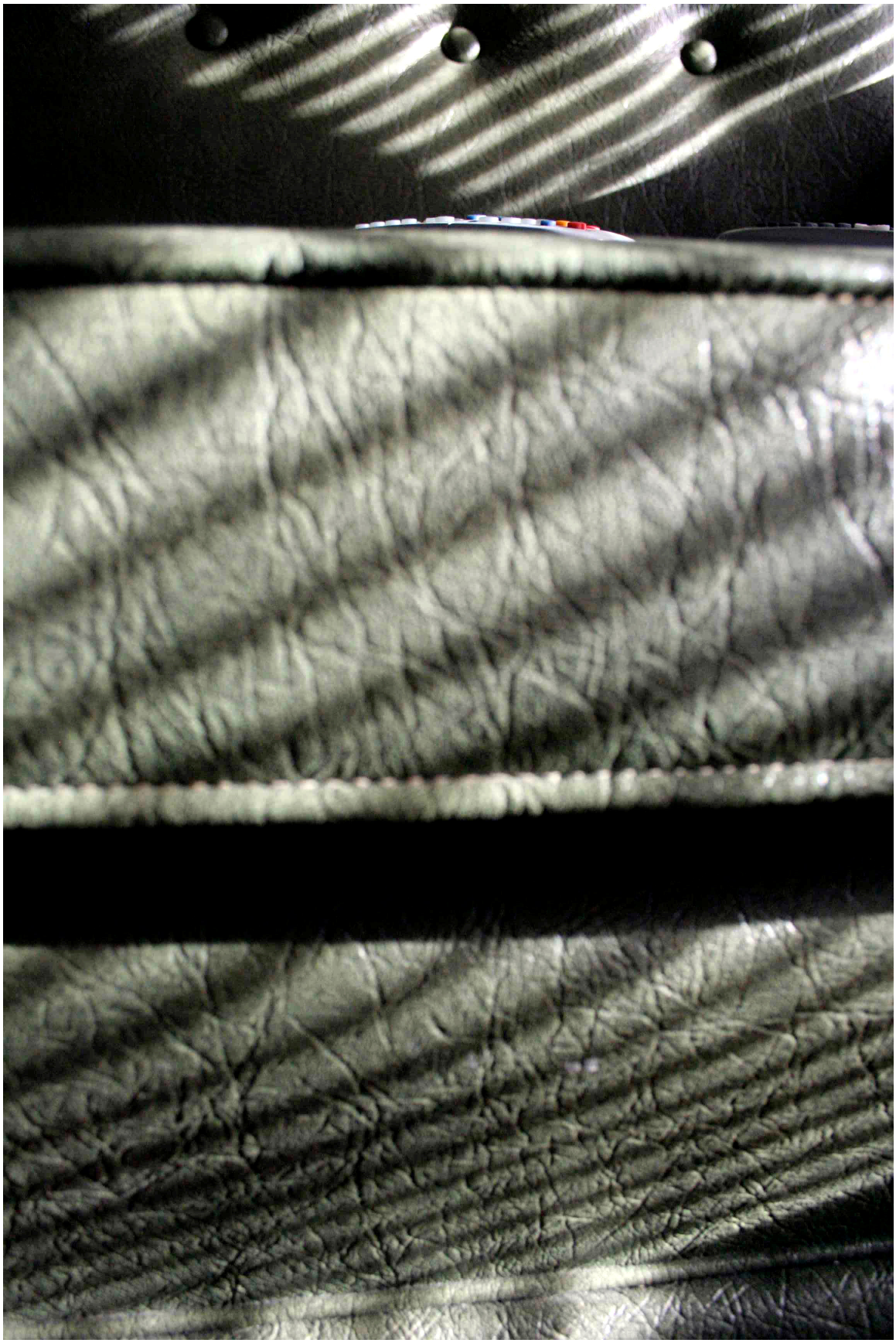


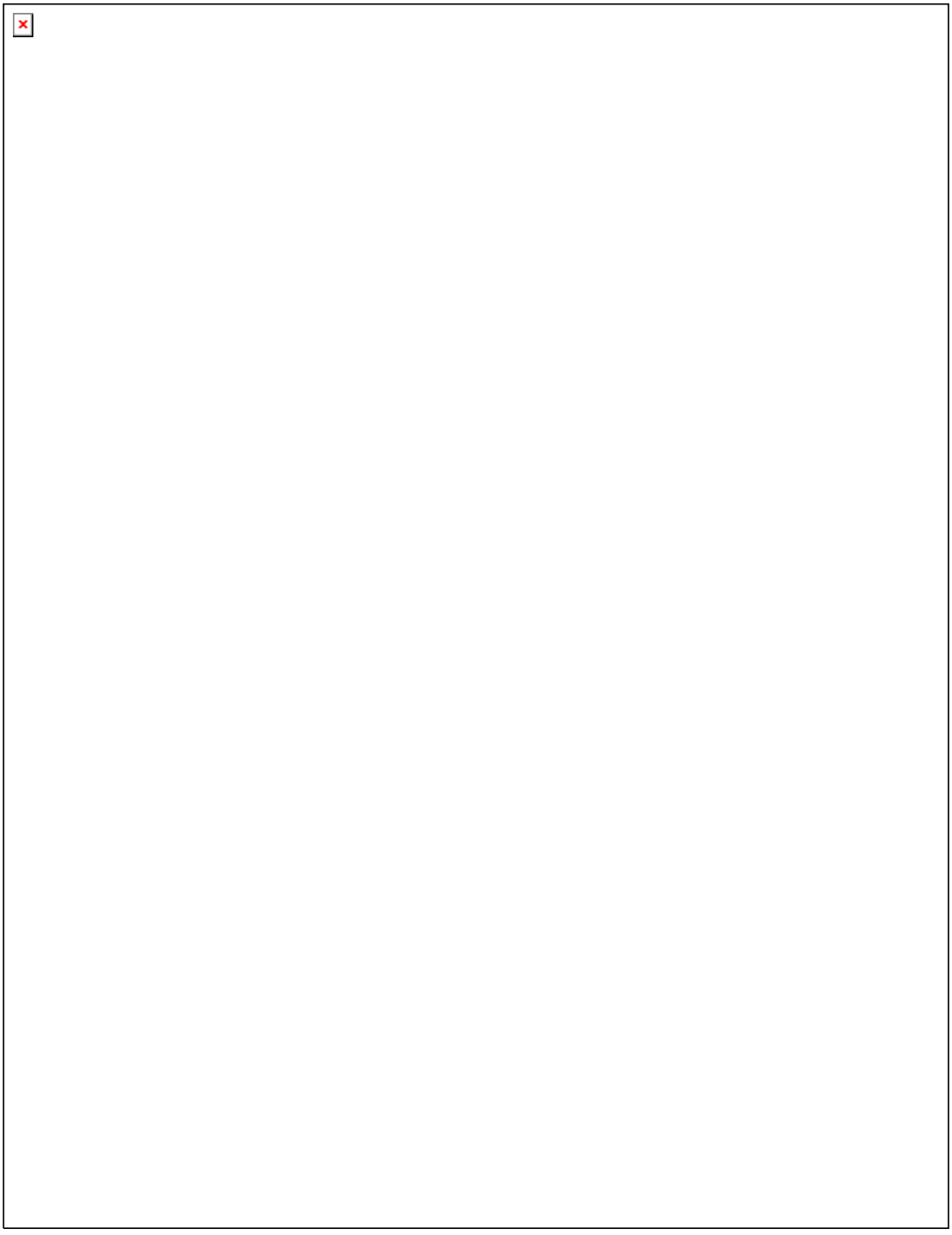
This was a cotton candy sunset, but it does not show itself very well in the photograph. The intersecting black lines of our screen door and our trees and our neighbor's trees at dusk became more important. The screen door is never closed. Never. It is always open, framing a portion of the yard next-door. This time of day is most flattering to our street in the months when the trees are bare, I think. The light is just dim enough to conceal the imperfections. only dusky sky and silhouettes exist. Jessica never spent as much time on our porch as I do and probably avoided this spot because it is under (directly under) the most frighteningly gigantic spider web ever to exist.

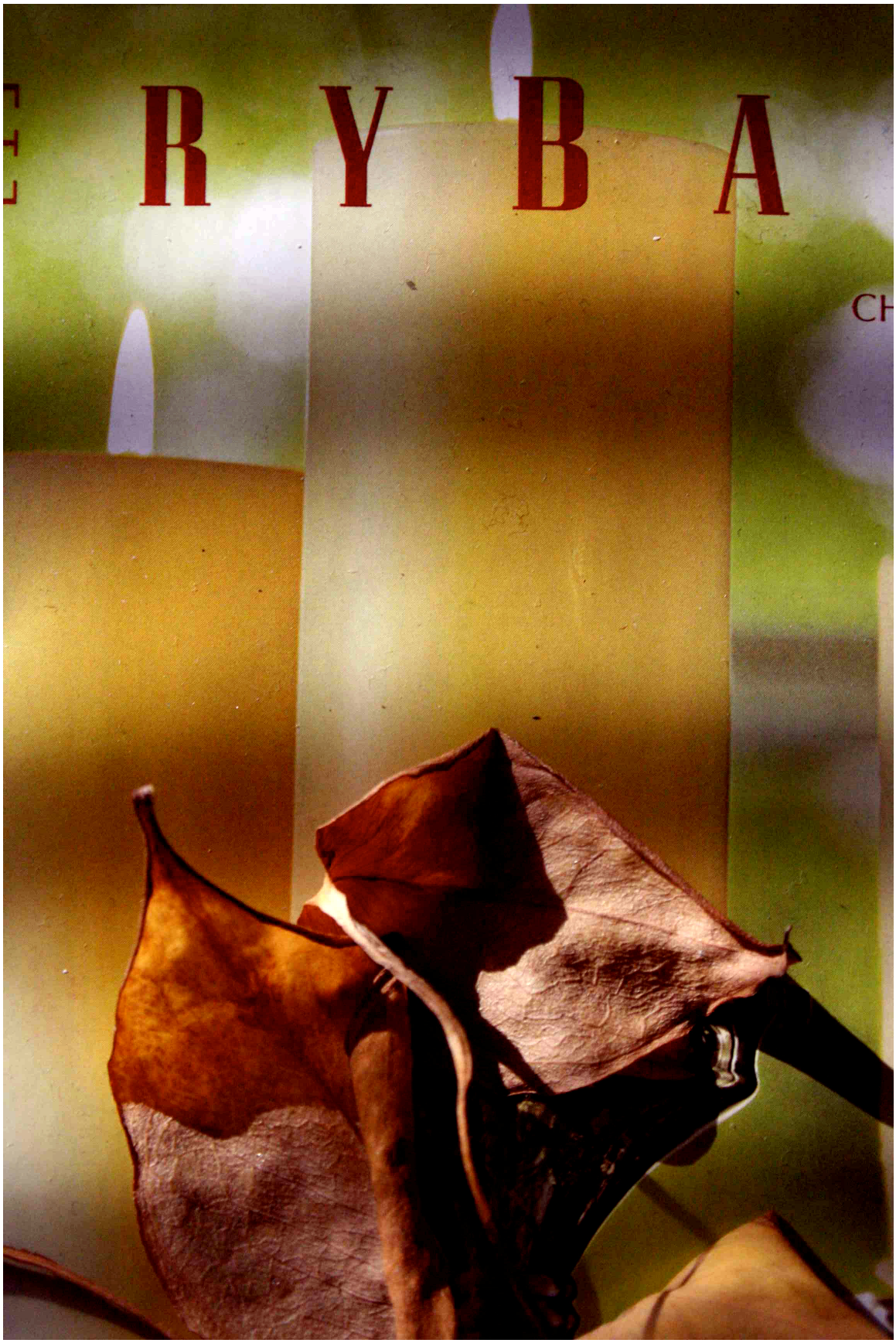
This photo blurs the natural & the man-made — the trunk of the tree is obscured by what appears to be a decorative iron railing, but it also replaces it, imitates it, makes it difficult to distinguish between what is natural and what is man-made. This is emphasized by the fact that the iron railing appears to be made in the art-deco tradition, a style that seeks to imitate or reflect natural lines. If I cover up the railing's curved edges w/ my hands, I can scarcely tell that I'm not looking at a silhouetted forest — but take the hands away and those gentle curves feel brutish and imposing. I think it's deliberate that the railing is out of focus — it forces emphasis on the trees. And that fuzzy outline is the only distinction between the tree's "trunk" and its branches. The fuzziness doesn't make it seem as "real" and I get a "man vs. nature" vibe... maybe that we, as humans, can never accurately divide or imitate nature.

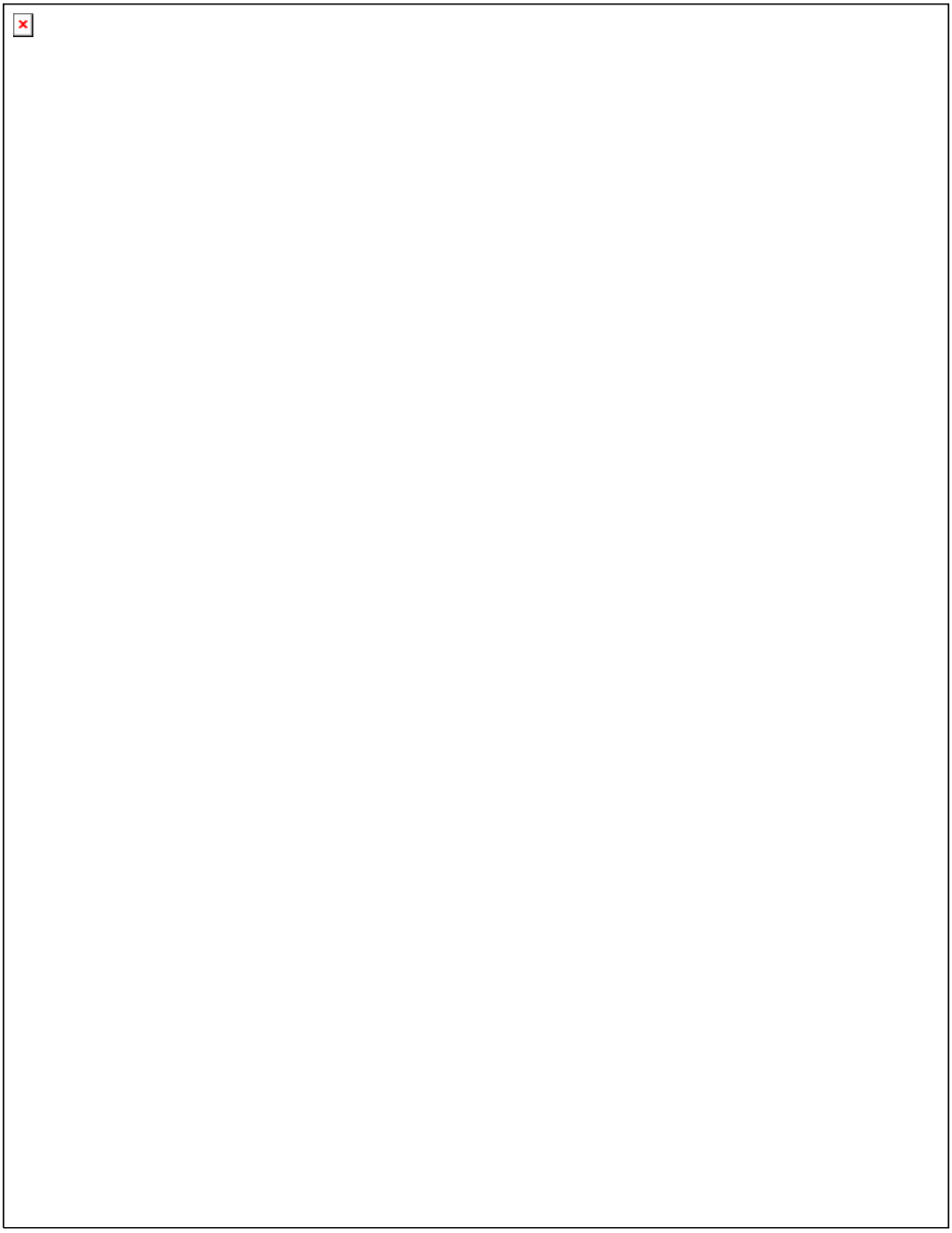




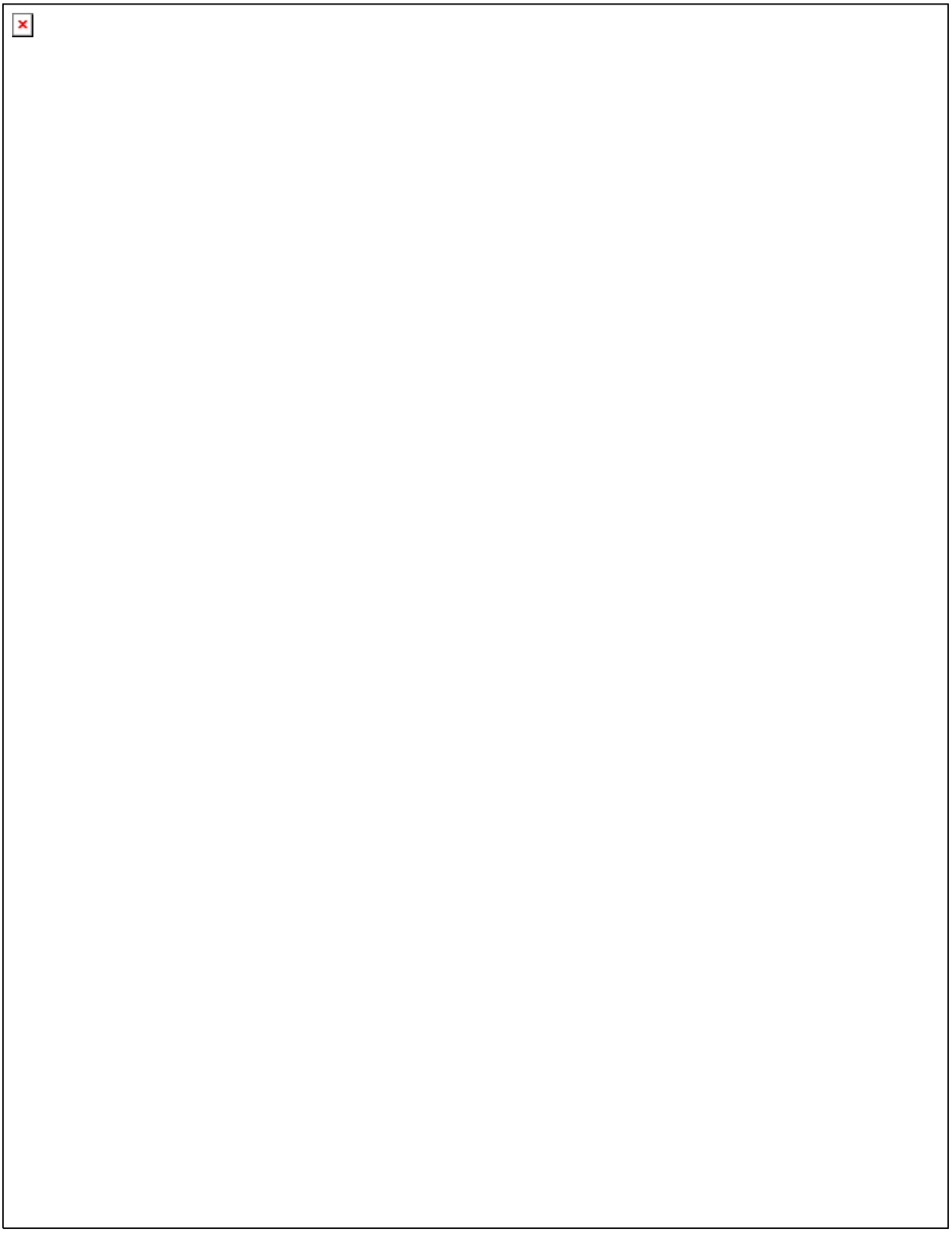




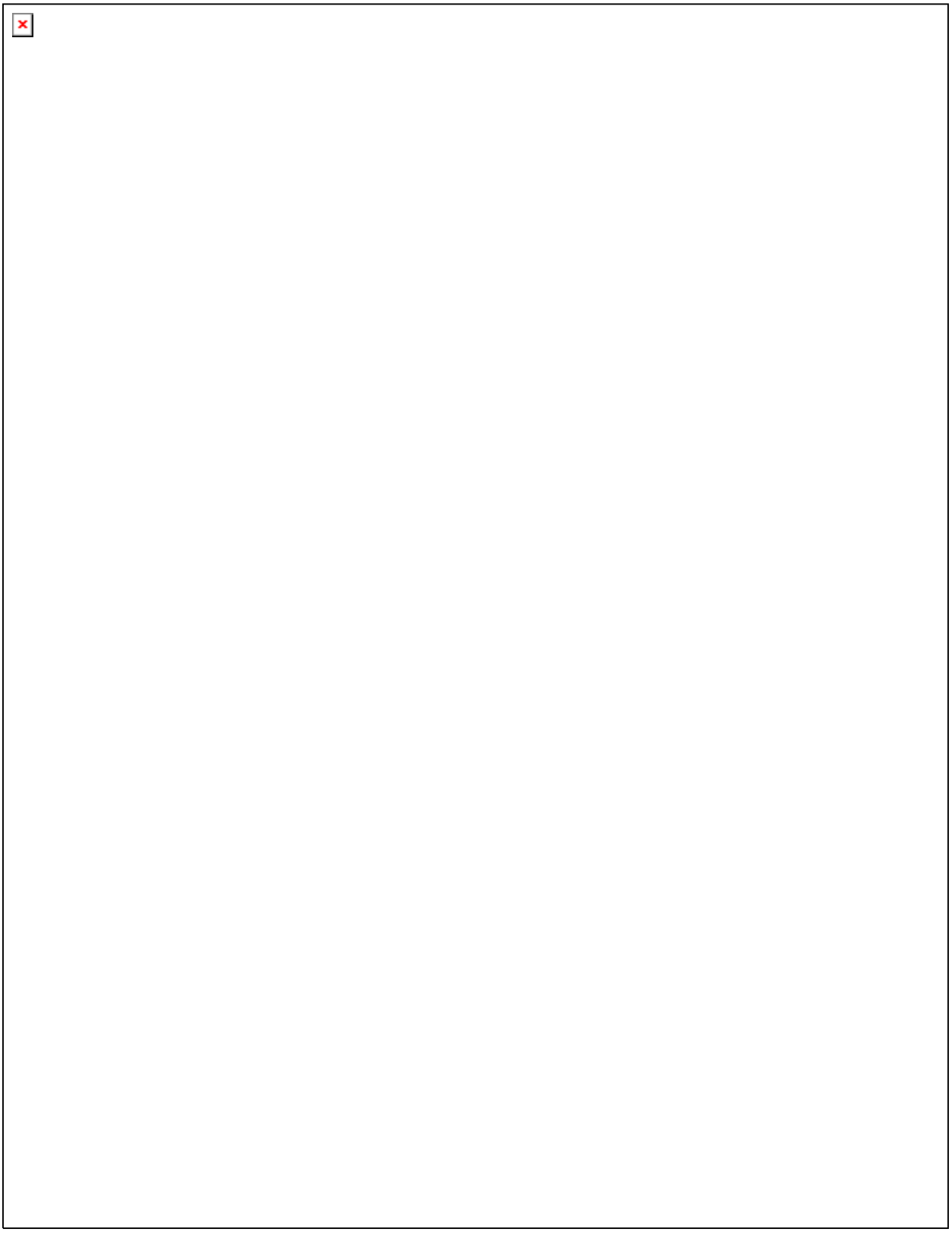

RYBA



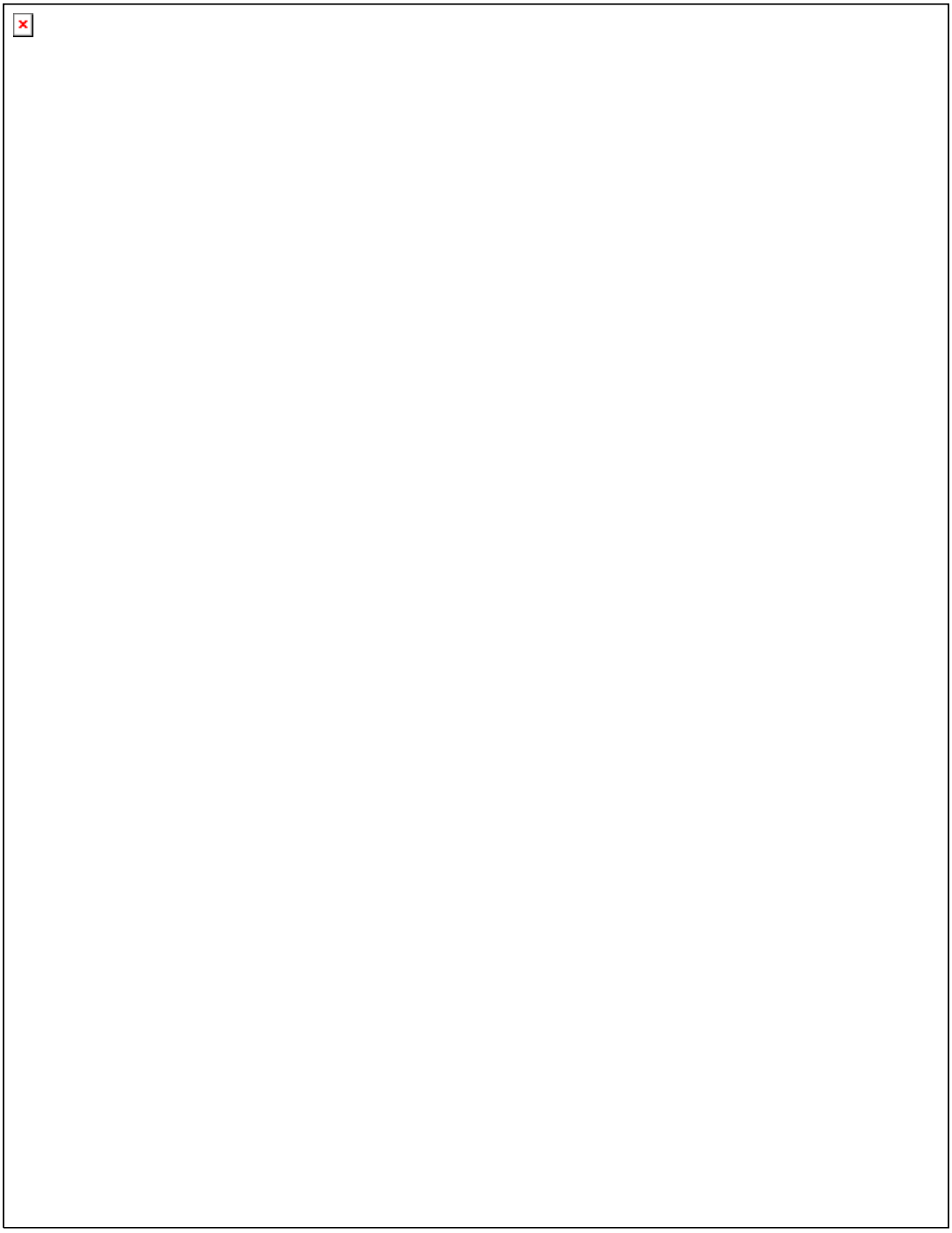




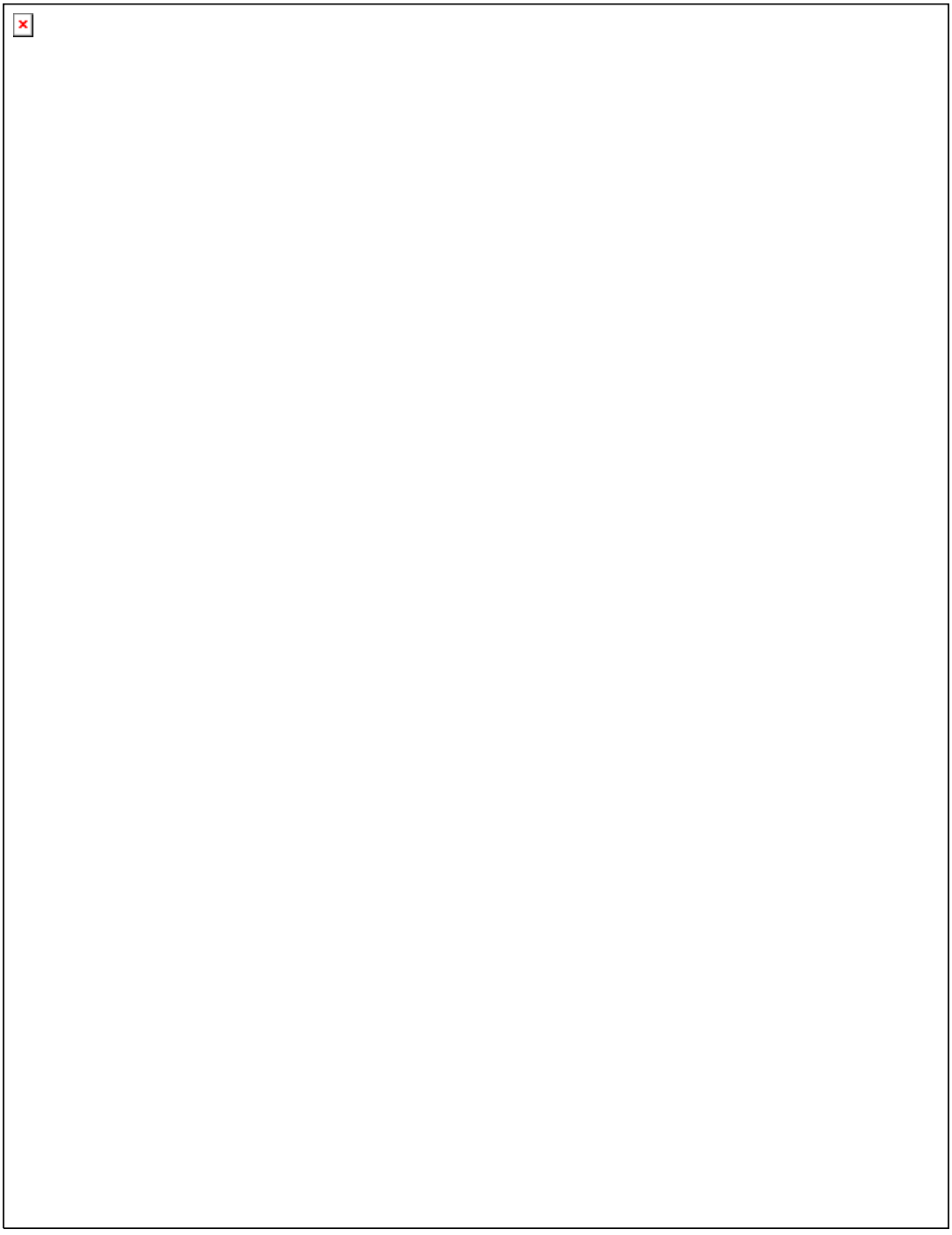

Tomato & Basil
BOMBOLINI
All Natural



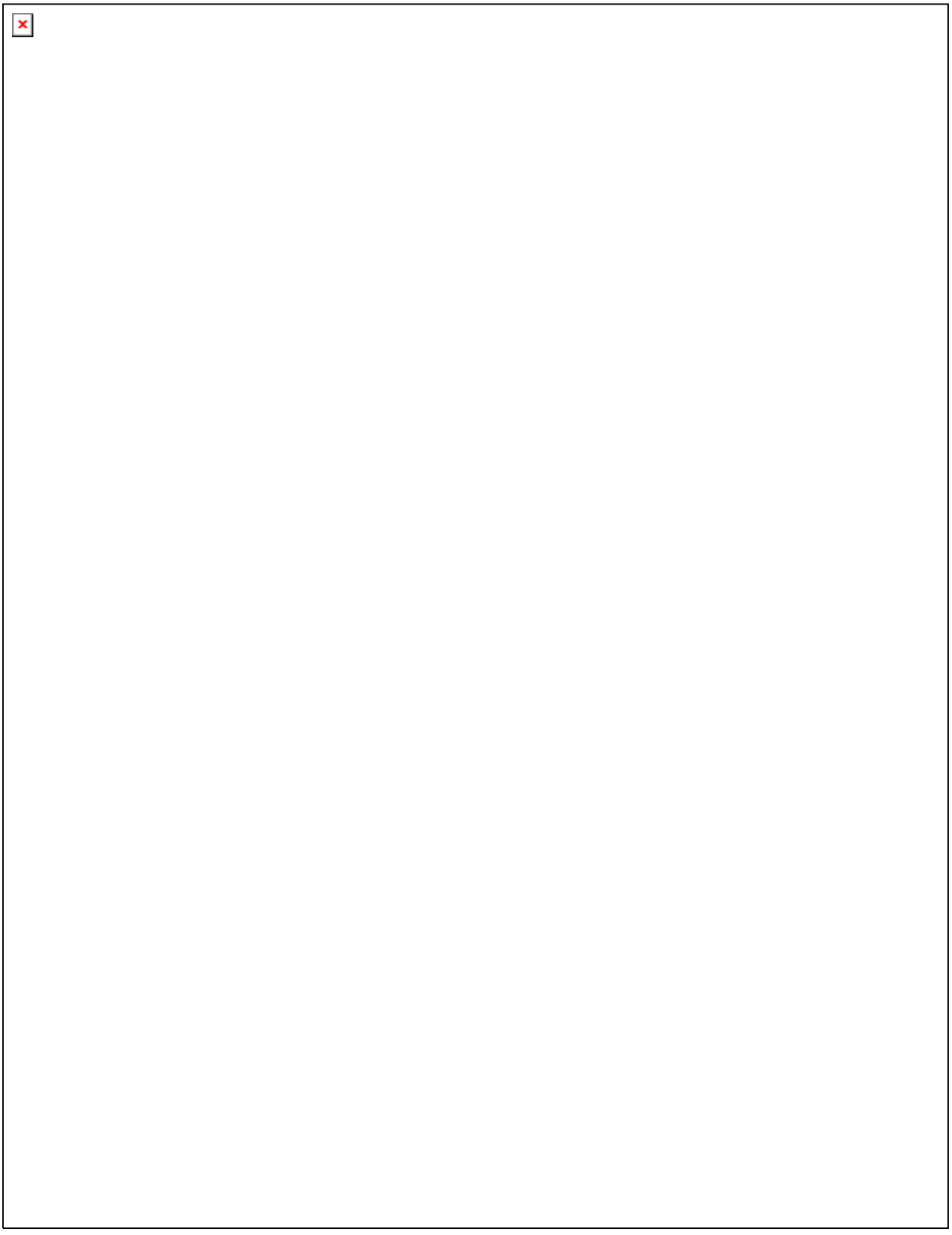




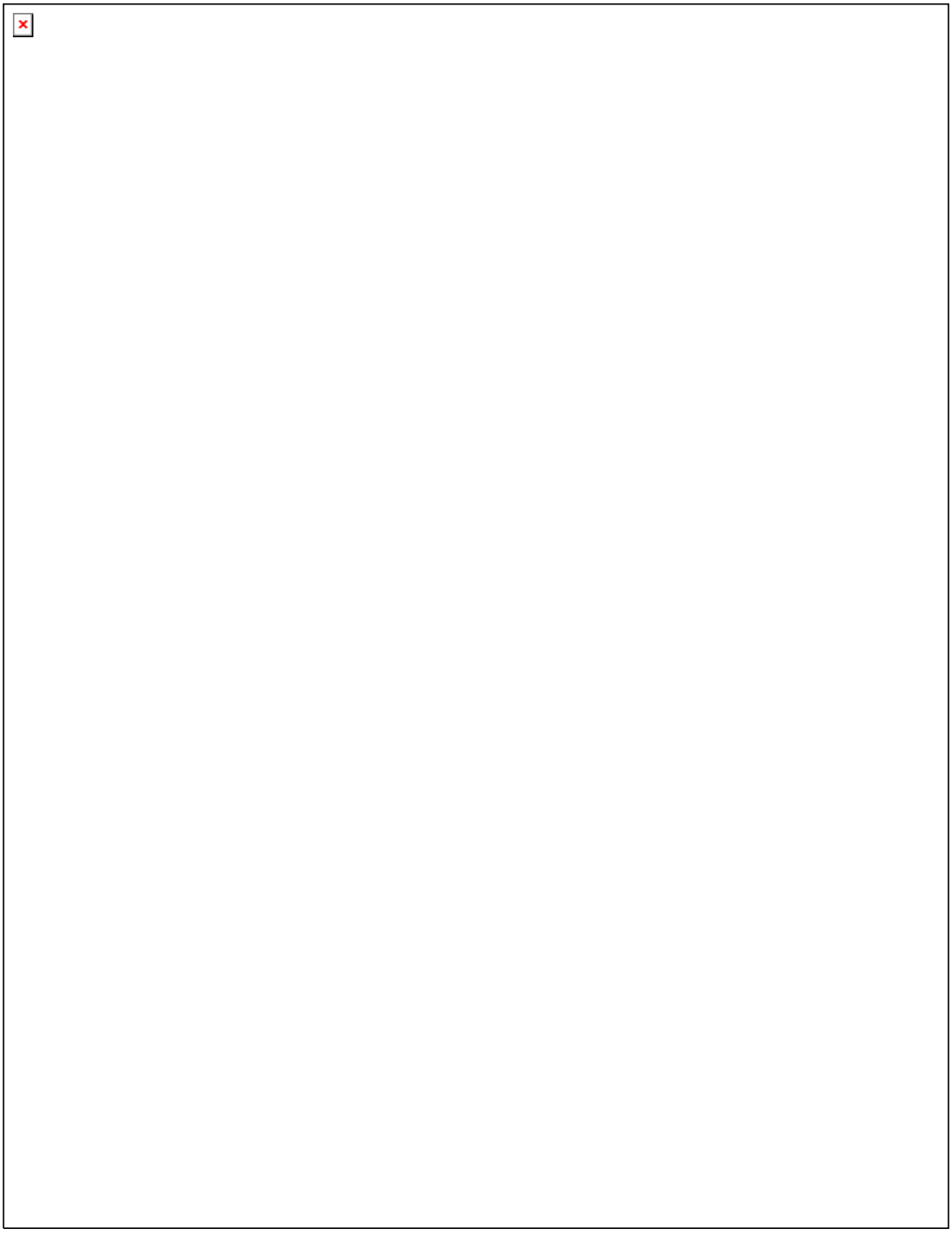




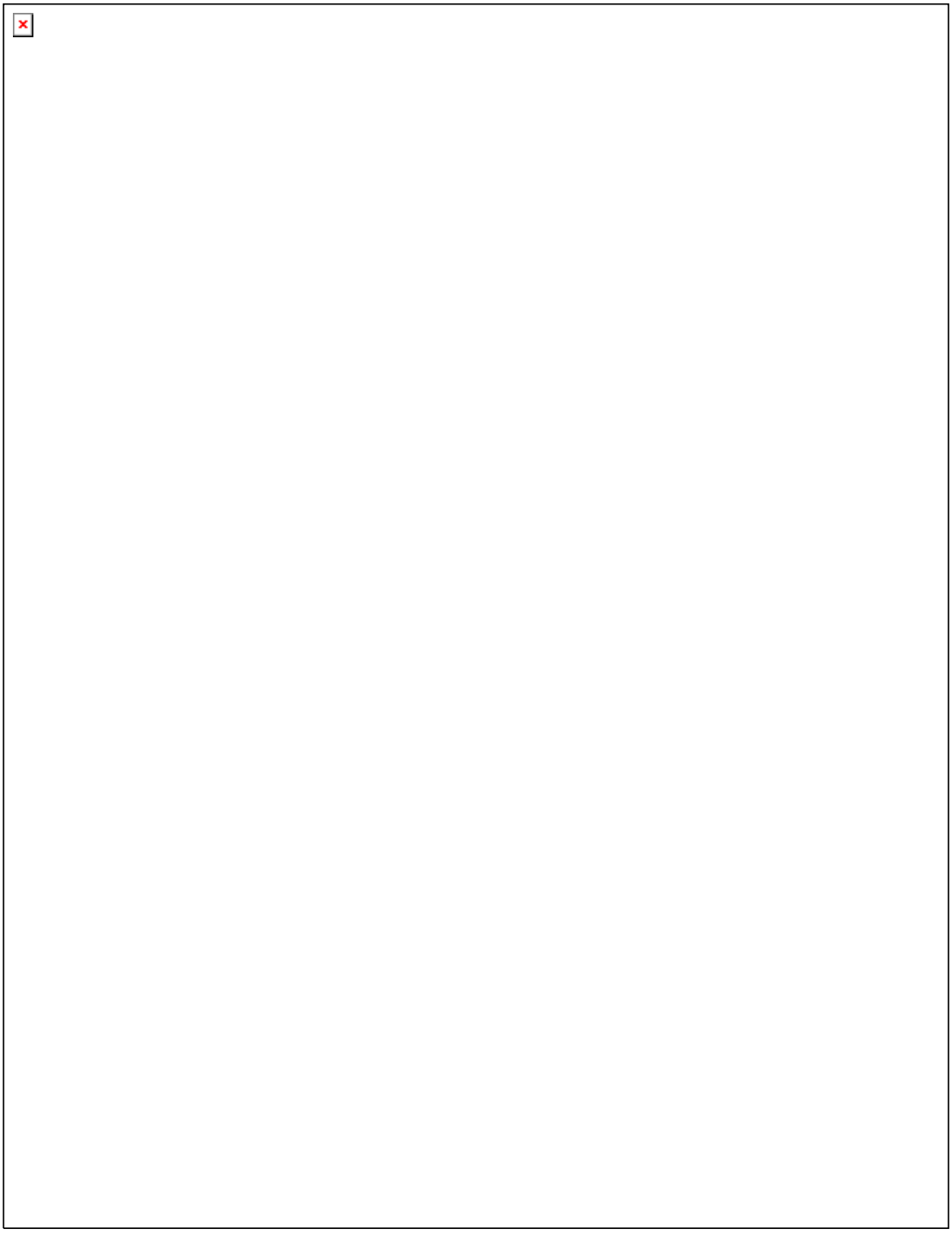




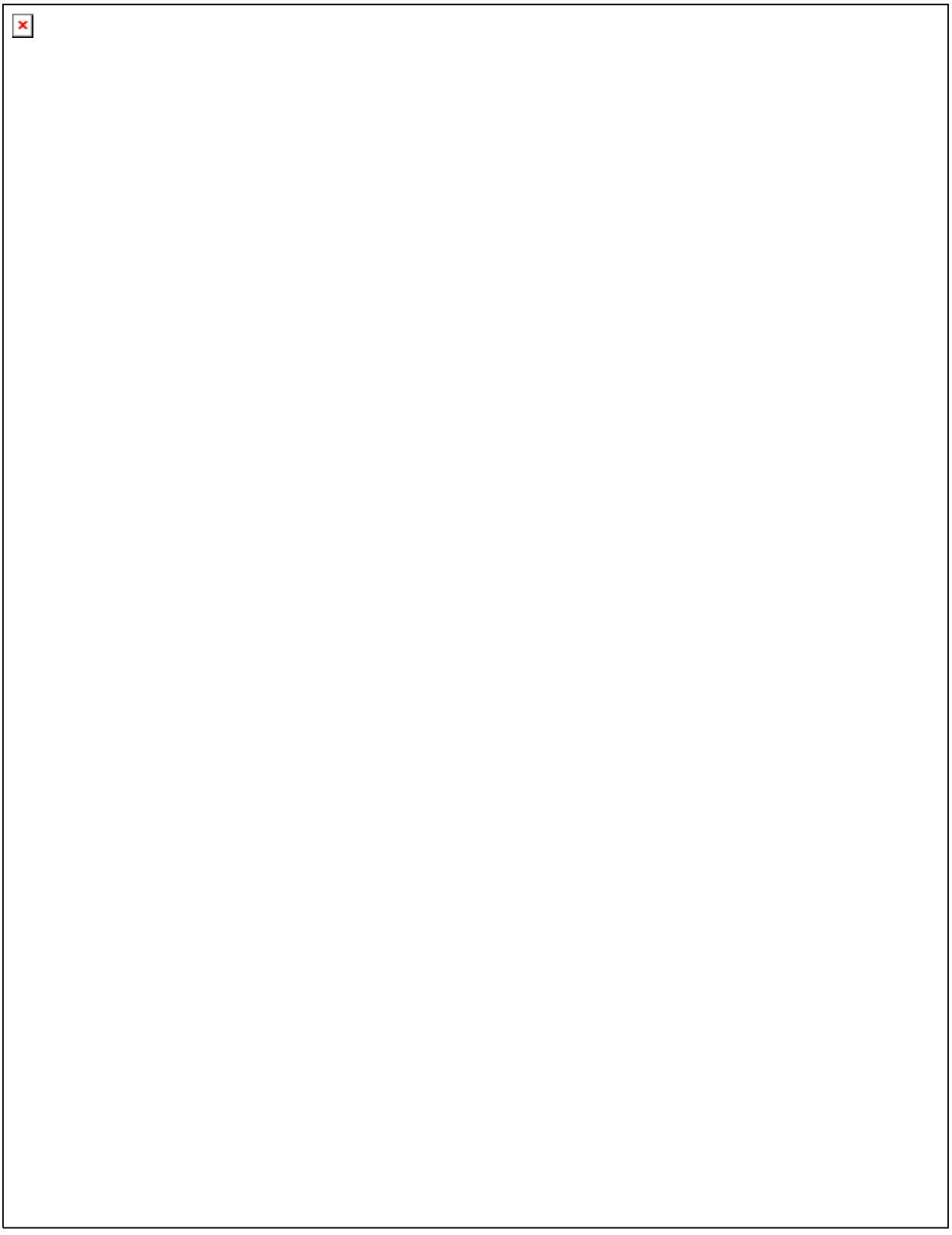




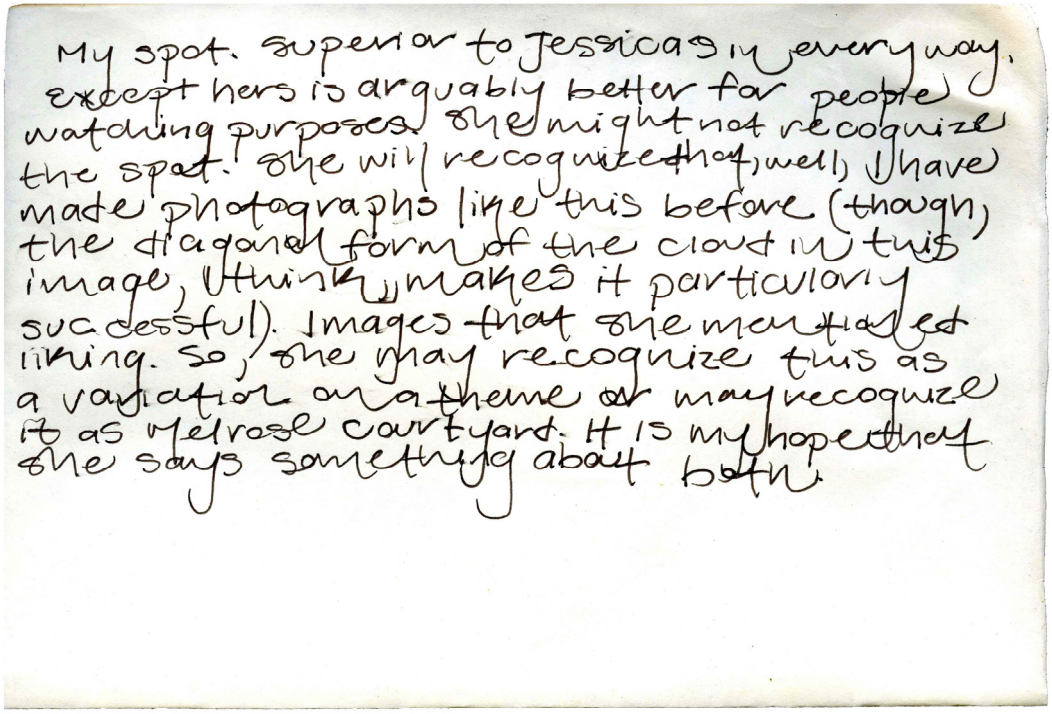




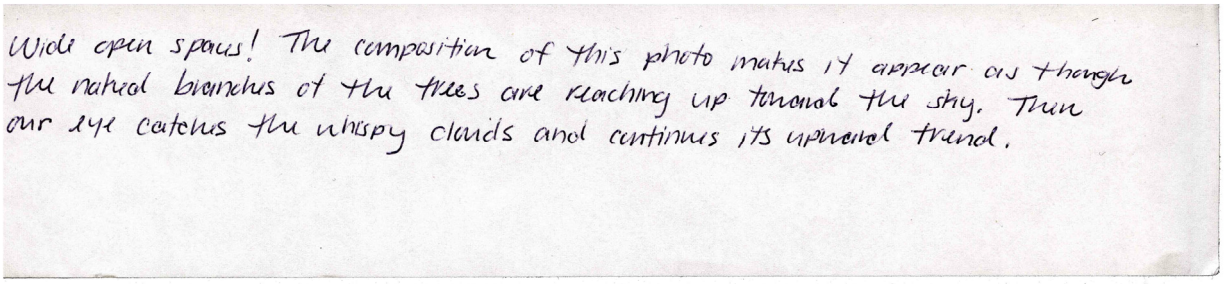








My spot. superior to Jessica's in every way, except hers is arguably better for people watching purposes. She might not recognize the spot. She will recognize that, well, I have made photographs like this before (though, the diagonal form of the cloud in this image, I think, makes it particularly successful). Images that she mentioned liking. So, she may recognize this as a variation on a theme or may recognize it as Melrose courtyard. It is my hope that she says something about both.



Wide open spaces! The composition of this photo makes it appear as though the naked branches of the trees are reaching up toward the sky. Then our eye catches the wispy clouds and continues its upward trend.



