

KINFOLK



PRINT

From the pleasures of paper to the power of the written word

INTERVIEWS

Anh Duong, Benjamin Booker and Shirin Neshat

FEATURES

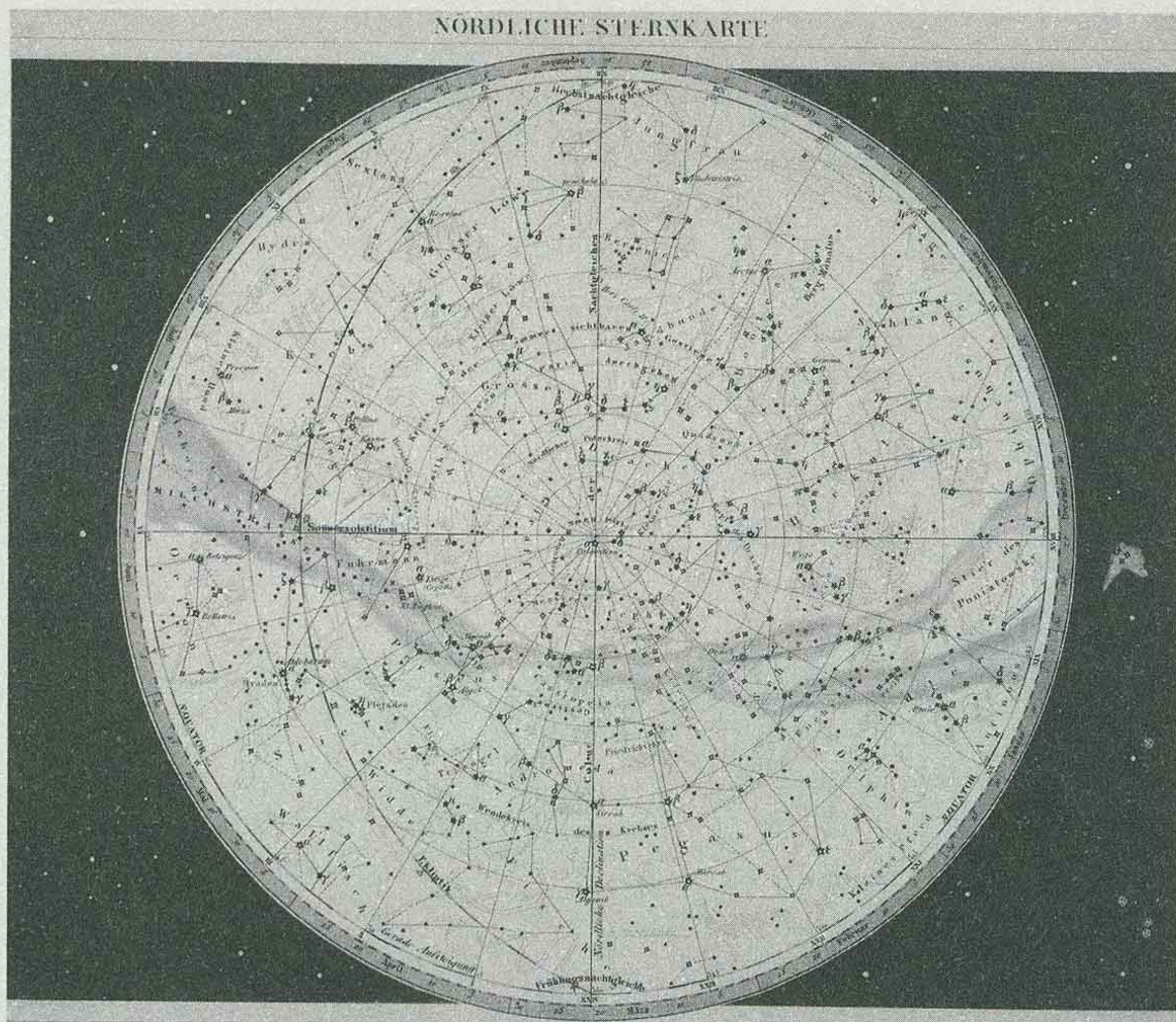
Self-Care, Clichés and Valentine Schlegel

ANDRÉ ACIMAN

The late-blooming author on literary seduction

Rock the Cradle

Lullabies have the sedative power to soothe — and to scare.



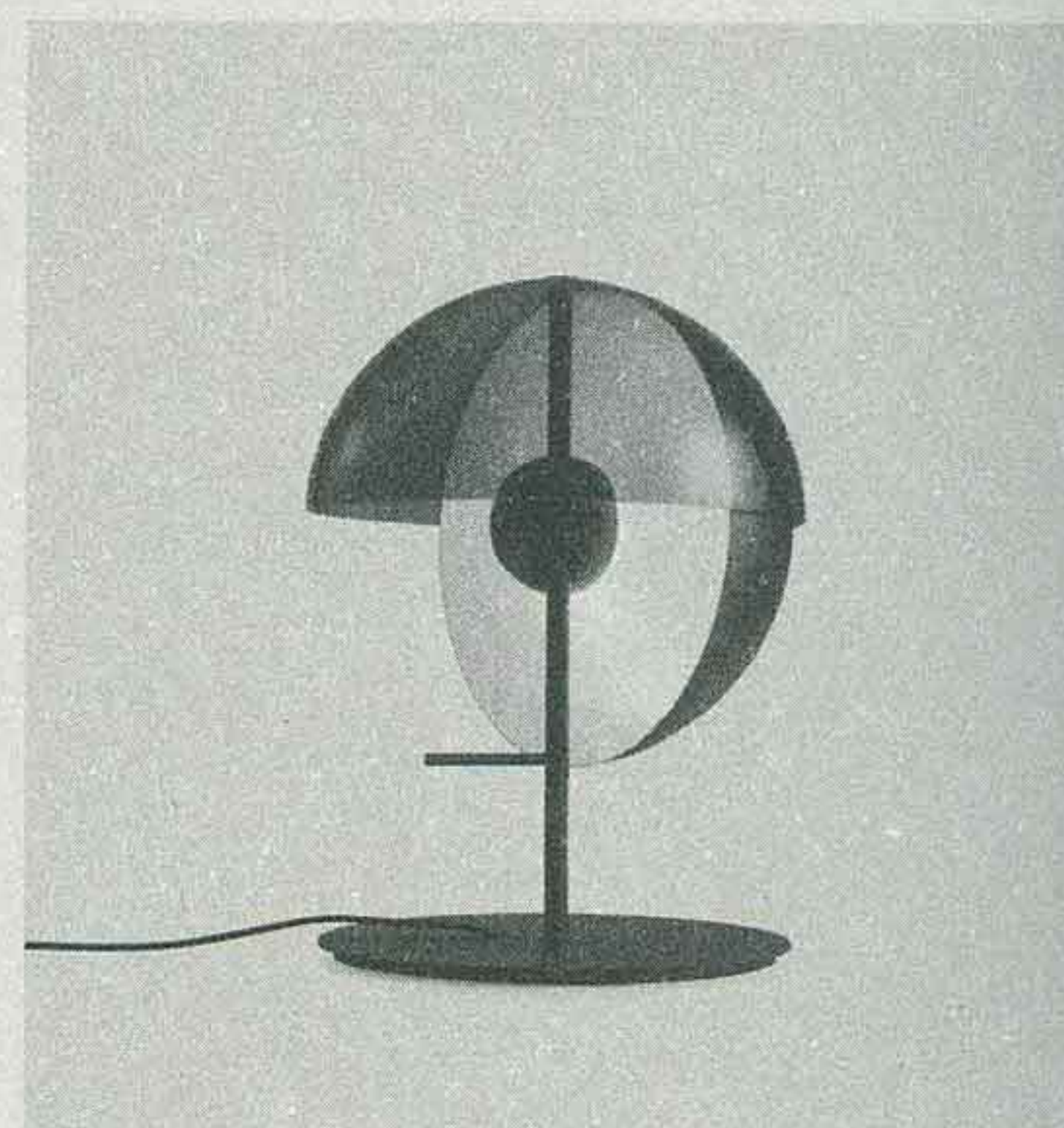
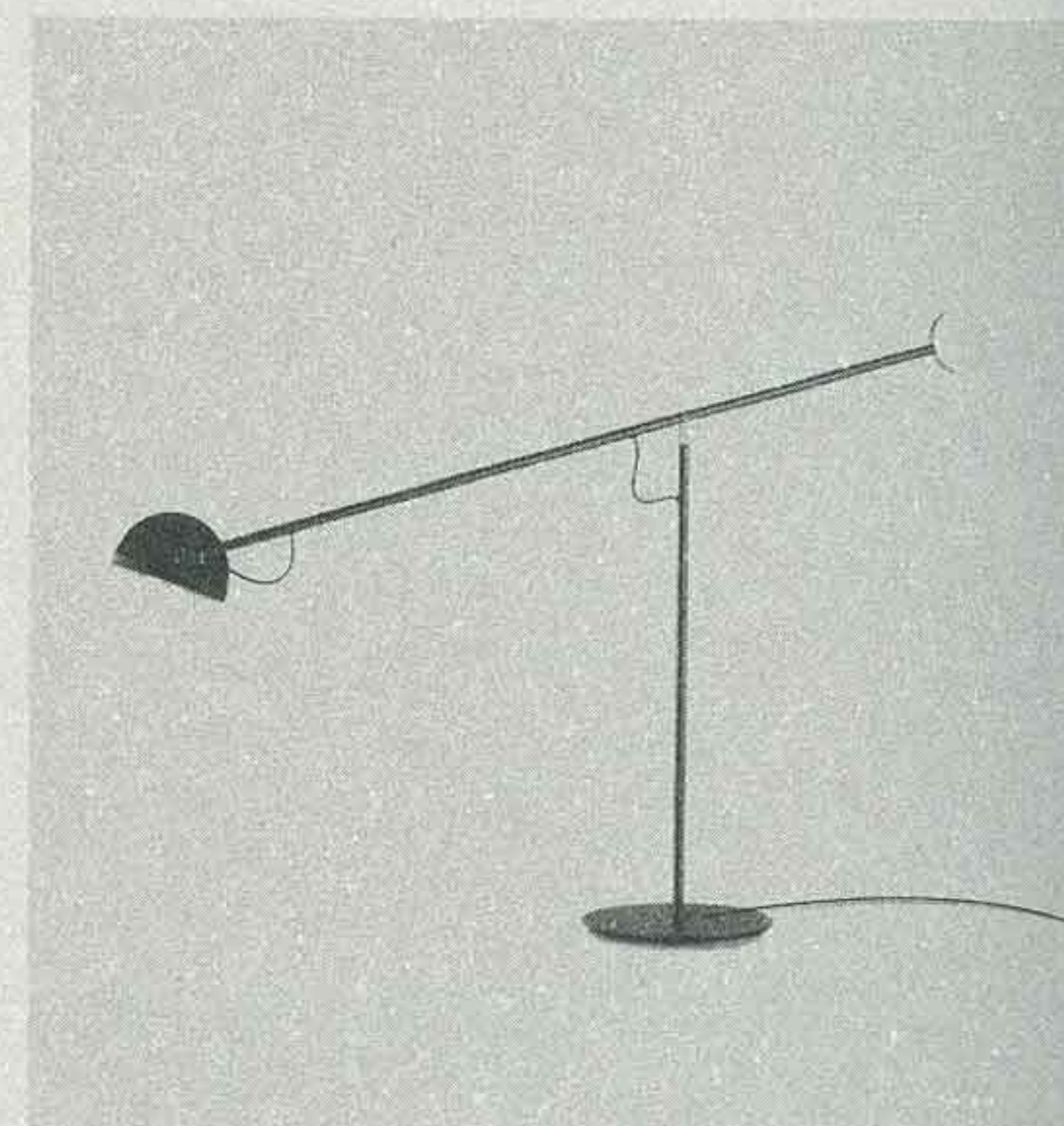
Lullabies are often at the center of the most intimate moments between a child and their loved ones. A private space forms around singer and audience—a kind of temporary, invisible womb—in which begins what Spanish playwright Federico García Lorca called “a little initiation into poetic adventure.” Like magical incantations, these typically slow tunes, limited in melodic range, are transformative. As Lorca put it: “The mother transports the child beyond himself, into the remote distance, and returns him weary to her lap, to rest.”

Paradoxically, the lullaby is a uniquely adult genre. The musical simplicity allows for textual inventiveness, and it is a blessing, in many ways, that children cannot understand the words—as the lyrics often would do little to soothe young minds. In Japan, for example, traditional *Itsuki* lullabies served as a pressure valve for poor teenage girls employed as live-in nannies, who could sing of their despair and traumas without fear of censure. Russian women have experienced the same release, with their East Slavic lullabies often concerning wicked husbands.

Some spiritual traditions impose strict rules on who can perform certain lullabies, and for which audiences. Many unmar-

ried Italian women would not sing them, ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax discovered in the 1950s, because childbearing was intimately associated with the act of sex. For the Yanyuwa people in Australia, numerous lullabies are said to have originated during the mythological period of prehistory known as the Dreamtime. “They tell us about the country. They are maps which we carry in our heads,” Mussolini Harvey, a Yanyuwa man, has explained. “Some of these songs are dangerous, they are secret and sacred. This is why many are exclusively meant for, or sung by, only one sex.”

Often simultaneously tender and terrifying, both of the present and tied to ancient traditions, lullabies help form our sense of self and also embed cultural memories within us. Composer and performer Sophia Brous says she learned this in her research for her song cycle *Lullaby Movement*. “Prompting a connection to these melodies was like connecting to a person’s essence and essential being, taking them back to deeply intimate, loving, but sometimes also painful memories,” she says. “The vulnerability that a child feels at the edge of sleep, and the salve of the voice that is comforting and calling as night drifts in, remains with us forever.”



OUT LIKE A LIGHT

by Harriet Fitch Little

Poltergeists have long been associated with flickering bulbs. Mediums believe that it's a friendly way that ghosts have of reminding the living of their presence, while more hardheaded ghost hunters think the dimming of bulbs is the result of spirits using electricity as energy. Like the twilight zone, there's something about the liminal state of a flickering bedside light that strikes our suggestible minds as mysterious. In his poem *Locksley Hall*, Alfred, Lord Tennyson sets the scene for an occult encounter. The spirit will come, he says, “Where the dying night-lamp flickers, and the shadows rise and fall.” Perhaps it's the supernatural making itself known. Perhaps it's that old houses—the ones that feel so spooky—often just have faulty wiring. Either way, best to keep a spare bulb in your bedside table. (Top: Ginger Portable Lamp by Joan Gaspar, Center: Copérnica Lamp by Ramírez i Carrillo, Bottom: Theia Lamp by Mathias Hahn. All by Marset Lamps.)