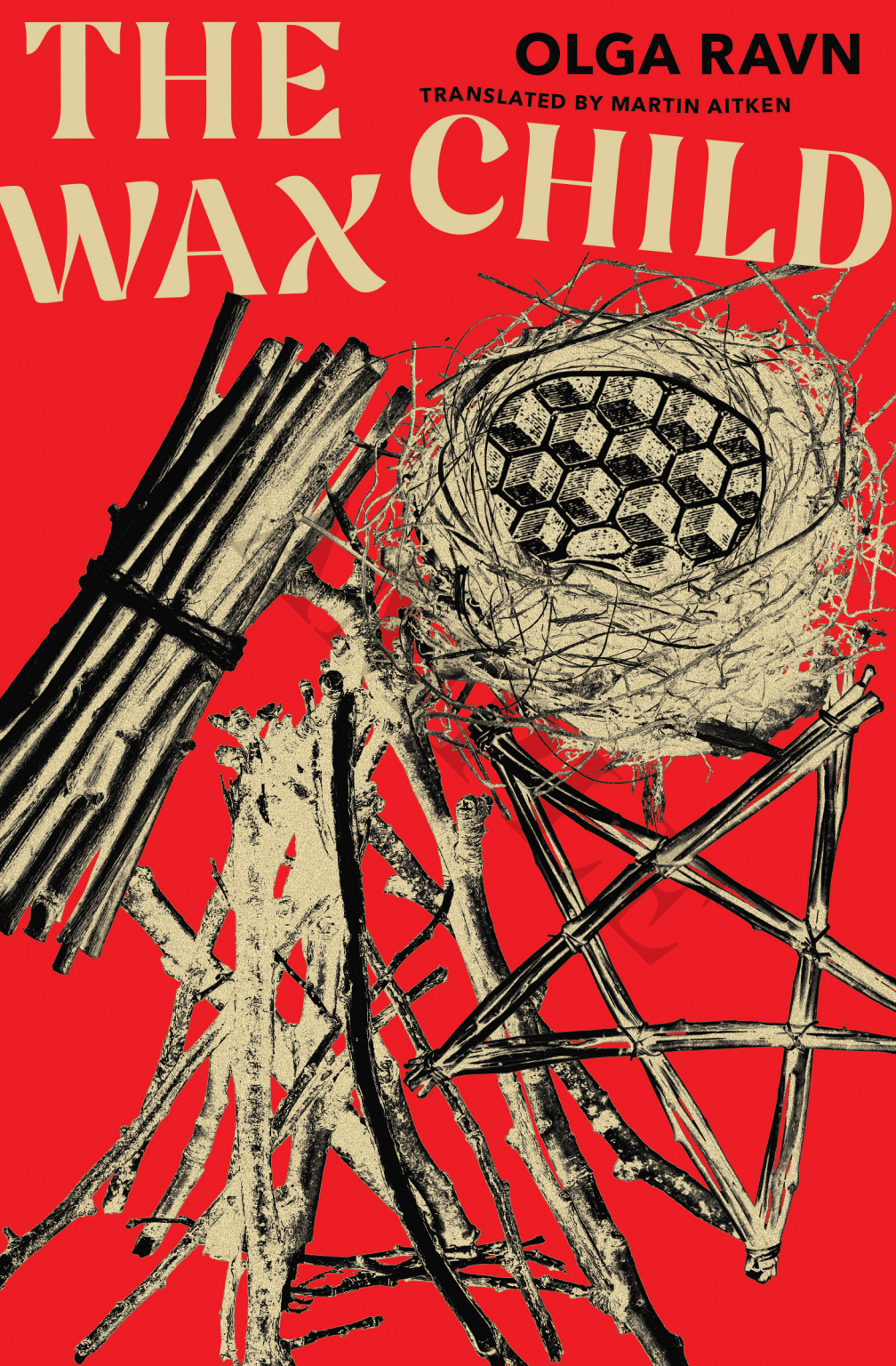
THE WAX CHILD

OLGA RAVN

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN AITKEN



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A RUMOUR OF WITCHCRAFT

I am a child shaped in beeswax. I am made like a doll the size of a human forearm. They have given me hair and fingernail parings from the person who is to suffer. I was borne by my mistress for forty weeks under her right arm as if I was a proper child, and my wax was softened by her warmth. After this time, she took me to a pastor; it was night, the church was dark and still, and he christened me, the wax child. I was an instrument. This was at Nakkebølle Manor, in southern Funen. My wax mouth cannot be opened.

I know the humans well, though they don't know me. I am an image, in the absence of a child. I have this bottomless, shaft-like longing for the woman who made me, whose name was Christenze Kruckow. Her sweat smelled so tangy, of ... cloves, perhaps. There were carriages and horses and soldiers. There was marjoram and thyme and rose hip. There were ships that journeyed far across the sea to lay claim to territory. There were ships filled with living bodies in the darkness of their holds. There was a scream. And a refinement. The finest pattern cast by the sun through the grill of the confessional. And through the towns

religious processions went, and chorused wonderful song. The year passed, and the years passed. And I was a wax child. I did not age. I lay in the ground and saw it all. Insects and worms approached, to retreat on sensing my poison. I saw the rising of realms, the founding of states, the centralizations of power. I saw the clouds hasten by. I saw the great black tongues of oil advance as the fern from the soil puts out its feelers. I saw hands be raised and clench into fists. I saw knives gleam, children play. I saw steam locomotives, the smallest particle split and exploded. I lay in the ground. And from there, at certain times of the month, I could observe the brilliant moon. No one was carrying me anymore.

No one listens to a thing I say. Although I speak all the time. I am a lump of beeswax shaped in the image of a newborn child. I am no more than what may melt and stiffen again in the night. No one comes to me here. I lie and speak with my eyes. My family no longer exists, or rather: my kind of family, a very large one, no longer exists. And still I speak. A steady stream of words that slip from me without cessation, and I too am inclined to think it is often an embarrassment. But I cannot stop it, my mouth will not desist, though I don't know how the words get out—I have no larynx, no vocal band, no tongue. But who does it interest? Children should be seen and not heard, as they say. But then I've already told you, I am not a child, only something that looks like one. Something that longs to be one. I'm an internal event. By nature unfinished, or condemned to anticipation, awaiting my mistress, who since she is dead comes no more. Now I speak again to the soil that covers my face. Now I speak again to the semi-carbonized, the soon composted apple someone tossed, in the place where I lay.

There was a night when I was still lying in the bed of my mistress. Yes, I remember it. She wakes with a start, sits up, looks out. Others, in the surrounding houses of the town, wake in the same manner. They don't know why. They are possessed by such a strange feeling. I observe them. I hear their thoughts. There's something not right, something awry. The salty air—as if the sea has flooded into their rooms. They don't know it yet, but still they sense it. The Earth turns slowly into modernity. And in the space of an imperceptible moment, the old world has succumbed conclusively to the new.

Whenever a woman nearby to me was about to give birth, I would lie in the ground and feel almost exalted, as if the arrival of every child was a chance for me to find a place in the world, for my soul to dart into one of those newborn infants, my mouth to open and expel its very first cry. But I remained there.

Whenever a woman nearby was about to give birth, a messenger would make haste to the midwife and whoever else the pregnant woman had asked to help. All let go then of whatever was in their hands, and came as quickly as they could. Some in the night, others in the frost of morning; with fleetness of foot they came, and barely inside the door would take upon them the housekeeping. They would introduce a new and temporary regime, which meant that those who normally frequented the house would have to find new places to stay. I saw these women form a ring around the one in labor and lead her to the bath house. I saw them douse the burning-hot rocks with water; I saw the steam and the scalding herbs. They undressed the birthing woman, and the naked one was Anne Bille, the young mistress of Nakkebølle.

And by the stone wall of the bath house they had placed me in the ground, and I lay and listened there as Anne Bille gave birth to the first of her children. And the midwife came then with her long strides, known for her skill of directing into another the pains of the woman in labor, and it would be said then that she who received the pain of the travailing woman held the skin girdle. And the women of the household took turns to hold the skin girdle on Anne Bille's behalf. And my own mistress, Christenze, could hold it the longest, and it was said then that this was because she had never lain with a man and therefore possessed a virgin's strength. And later in the morning, Eiler, Anne's husband, returned to the manor, and he stood and kicked at the gravel outside the stone bath house, and said, I heard it myself, to the midwife, that this was a dreadful racket his wife was making in there, and how much could such a thing hurt, and I saw then the midwife's eyes narrow, and without him understanding what was happening she gave him the skin girdle to hold and immediately he fell to the ground and cried, O, help me, I feel such terrible pain, and all the women then laughed, Christenze and Ousse and the others too, they shrieked with laughter, and Ousse said: There, she certainly gave you the skin girdle to hold, that you may learn what your woman endures to bring your offspring to the world.

But every time Anne Bille gave birth, no matter who held the skin girdle, the child died in the days that followed. I heard one of them scream as if death had appeared before it, and soon it expired at Anne Bille's breast, not a single night old. Others were blue and lifeless, too small at birth to survive. Then one day my mistress said to Anne: Anne, I have noticed you are rather unwell. Come to me and I will give you sheep's milk. You have borne four children, and none is alive. Let me help you to keep the next. And my mistress went and milked a sheep. In the kitchen, she took up some of the milk on a spoon and as she heard Anne approach the door she picked from her pocket, with two fingers, a spider and placed it in the milk so that the attercoppe was concealed in it. She stood with the spoon ready when Anne came in, and obediently Anne went to the spoon, put the spoon without a word into her mouth and swallowed the milk and the spider unknowingly in one gulp, and went on her way. At this time she was eight months pregnant and was full of hope and anxiety, and would accept any advice. And when the child came it was alive and well-

formed, with the correct number of toes and fingers, a girl with chubby cheeks, and Anne sat up in her maternity bed and was radiant, a sigh of relief went out, not only over Nakkebølle, but over all of southern Funen—at last a healthy, bouncing baby was given to Anne, and she swaddled the child. But the next morning the newborn lay cold in her cot. It was Ousse who discovered it, and Anne turned away onto her side in the bed with her back to the child and said nothing. I shall let her be, so you can say goodbye, Ousse said, but Anne did not reply, and Ousse went then to the kitchen, for she was a servant girl, to share the solemn news. And there she sat as yet when Anne came bounding with the child. It lives, it lives! she cried, and held the child out for them to see, and Ousse and Anne bent over the newborn and it was true, the face, with its closed eyes, widened and crumpled, the mouth shaped the smallest of movements, and the lips parted slowly as if to expel a tentative sound. There, you see, Ousse! Anne cried. She lives! And the child's mouth opened and out came not a sound but a spider; and they stood then, as if they were petrified, and gaped at the infant as the spider scuttled across her face and jumped away, and Anne screamed and let go of the child, whose body fell to the stone floor.