Everywhere she sees secret paths to medicinal wells, to clandestine cairns venerating the ancient saints. At nightfall people place jugs of milk outside their doors for the faeries, so they won’t turn petulant and sour all the beer, and in the dead of night they bury live cocks to cure madness and disease. They tie sachets of grain and salt to their cows’ ears to protect them against the evil eye, smoke out their homes with juniper to banish malevolent spirits, worship the Virgin Mary in secret cults, hang twigs of rowan over their doors to keep the faeries from stealing their newborns and replacing them with pale, sickly changelings. Women secretly drink willow extract before sex and share clubmoss and faerie flax when their monthly blood fails to materialise. Through these acts, a constellation of invisible forces influencing everything in this sublunar realm reveals itself to her. With the right gestures at the right time and place, the right ingredients in the right combinations and proportions, these energy flows can be warped, manipulated for pure or less pure ends, though usually just for the purpose of cutting the strangulating ropes of hunger. A man gazes, defeated, at a barren strip of land, and when he bends down he doesn’t grab soil but a handful of dust. In the neighbouring rig the oats flourish in rich, fecund earth. Clearly his neighbour has muttered dark incantations in the night, stolen the fertility from his field in order to double his own. Day after day he sees his child wasting away, his pale thin wife fruitlessly foraging on the common grounds. One night he gathers nine stones from his strip of land and burries them in his neighbour’s field, where he takes nine handfuls of fertile soil to scatter over his own land…

But he has to be careful, he must creep in the shadows. Figures in long dark robes glide through the village streets. They spy through the windows of houses, eavesdrop in the market squares and on the roads. With iron rods they prick bodies, searching for the insensible spot where the Devil has touched them. Week after week they preach about Satan and Beëlzebub. In their sermons they transsubstantiate faeries into manifestations of the Devil, every chance meeting with the supernatural that has dwelled in the hills since time immemorial into a demonic pact. Everything is saturated with sinister significance: an egg that has vanished, someone looking at you askance, a bad dream, a fever or a sudden recovery. A cow secretes blood instead of milk, a harvest inexplicably rots in the field, the cattle is dying of a mysterious disease, the milk refuses to churn, the chicken lays no eggs or only eggs filled with blood… So look around. Look who is suddenly eating and drinking in abundance. Look whose cows’ udders are bursting with milk. Look whose eggs are bigger, whose crops are growing faster, whose butter is fatter. If the pig is suddenly wasting away, chances are someone else’s has grown thicker. If the milk doesn’t still the children’s hunger anymore, *someone* has spirited the cream out of it.