The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North
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“They fed it, not with any grain,
but always just with the thought that it might be.
And this assurance gave the beast so much power.”

These words of the poet Rilke refer to the unicorn (“this beast ... the one that never was”) and not the troll, but the medieval troll was indeed no less than the unicorn nourished by human “thought that it might be.” Unlike Rilke’s unicorn, however, which arose from “pure love,” the troll is awakened by fear; perhaps more like a nightmare than a dream — a nightmare begotten from the human condition of finding oneself in a world that is beyond our control, but that seems sometimes manageable enough for us to never completely accept an utter lack of authority. Total absorption in thought may sometimes be the closest we get to any sense of control and yet immersing ourselves into ourselves also deprives us of mastery. A dreaming human is a strange amalgamation of power and vulnerability. In the dream, existing only within our own minds, we are, in some sense, absolute rulers. And yet, in our sleeping state, we may often feel more vulnerable than ever. Death seems likely to come to us in sleep, in our imagination it is like sleep. In sleep we lose control, but, paradoxically, in sleep, and only there, we are actually in command of our own dream world, which still refuses to obey us.

Accidentally encountering the new, unfamiliar word “trollable” in a book, which turned out to be the latter half of the familiar “uncontrollable” split between two lines,
began the author on the track to the idea that there is a strange symbiotic relationship (though no etymological one) between the idea of control and that of the troll. The two rhyming concepts may become one through magic and witchcraft as there is no troll without magic and the essential focus of magic is control. The term control can thus signify both the impotent feelings of a human facing something occult and the primary raison d'être of all magical practice: the idea that a human, you or I, may wield the power to exceed her or his limitations and assume control of a universe so much larger than oneself that any reflection on its size inevitably leads to necessary questions of our own significance within it.

Stories about power must always also be stories about the trauma of impotence. The strong presence of magic, the great leveler, in human culture tells its own story about an obsession with power spawned by feelings of impotence. The hope of magic reveals the lack of hope in our existence. Through the realisation of our limitations comes the desire to overcome them, as if by magic.

Why do we see dead people? What function can a troll on a mountain ridge possibly serve? There is no easy answer to such questions, they are impenetrable dilemmas, but possibly anyone who has woken up with a strong feeling of an intruder in the house can attempt to claw at an answer. We all learn soon enough that bad things happen, experiences so horrible that even the scientific mind finds it hard to normalise them. Traumatic experiences are never only of the moment but are internalised and stay with us as an expectation of more and perhaps greater horror to come, perhaps culminating in the dread feeling that one is perhaps, or even unavoidably, unlucky. Having once experienced one’s fears will inevitably lead to an expectation, a dread, of more to come; thus trauma can easily be channeled through the troll, our enemy, that potent force always working against us. There is no need for an organised religion of the troll since it springs naturally from any and
all dismal experiences. The troll feeds, is nourished, on our fears. If men were in control, they would have no need for magic. Without traumatic experiences, there would be no trolls. If we did not all die, the undead would not pervade our culture.

As evident in many of the narratives explored in this book, the troll has a direct relationship with the inner lives of the humans who experience it. Its relationship with society is more indirect but should be equally evident from the narratives discussed here. The rules, myths, and dogmas of society at large unquestionably have a pivotal role in shaping the troll that the humans fear. The troll is though a human affect, a metaphor of unspecified fears that take form as the troll. In medieval Iceland, the troll was indeed more than a feeling—it was strangely real, as its counterparts are in various other cultures. Its reality though is still the reality of feelings—what else is the troll but feelings?—feelings that man wishes to control but may be crucially and inevitably beyond all control.