Words by Philip Watson
Photographs by Don McCullin

# STALK LIKE A MAN

**Shooting a deer is more rite of passage than sport. As you prepare to squeeze the trigger, you are acutely aware that you are about to extinguish the life of another living, breathing animal. Esquire's man in the field travelled to the west of Ireland to experience first hand the ancient art of stalking. He found himself changed forever**

An honourable stalker never shoots a stag while he's down: I'm carrying a rifle, but it's part of the contest to give him a sporting chance

A country practice: stalking is a generally accepted way of controlling the population of deer, which have no natural predators

**WE'RE WALKING SOFTLY THROUGH THE HIGH MOORS AND HUMPY MOUNTAINS,** communication limited to hushed whispers and hand signals. Our pulses are racing with expectation and the rigours of the hill climb when our stalker spots him way off, perhaps 500 yards away, resting in some long grass. "Stag. Fuck it. Get down." Donal Casey's hissed instruction is instant and definitive, and the four of us – Casey, his boss John Mangan, the photographer Don McCullin and I – dive for cover behind a bank of rocks. I may be carrying the bullets and a powerful rifle, but here in the uplands of the west of Ireland, Donal is master of all we survey. When he says get down, down you go.

I've come to Kerry and not, as is the standard British tradition, Scotland or the West Country, because I've heard that it's here that I'll find the best and most demanding deer-stalking in the world. A multitude of red deer roam openly throughout Britain – it's estimated that the UK red deer population exceeds 400,000 – but Kerry is famous in serious and skilled hunting circles as having one of the highest concentrations of rare, purebred, feral sika deer, of which there are perhaps fewer than 10,000 in Britain.

Sika are renowned for their secrecy and acute sensitivity – hence the preference, by most who hunt here, for camouflage rather than tweeds. Sika favour the heavy cover of forests and woodlands, and they are always on the move. Nocturnal creatures, they sleep in sheltered spots by day and can only be hunted at dawn or dusk. They have keen eyesight, hearing and sense of smell, and can move across the roughest terrain like a speedboat skimming waves. They can also swim, and jump up six feet or more, even from a standing start. All this makes sika far more elusive than red deer, and stalking them a far greater challenge. On this trip, we have already tried several methods – on mountain tops and ridges, the peripheries of woodlands and tree plantations and staying put in dense undergrowth to let them come to us. Stalking requires patience. This is my fourth time out, but the first on which I've even come close to bagging a stag.

The difficulty only adds to the prestige and atavistic attraction of stalking. To me, a first-time hunter whose shooting experience stretches to occasional afternoons aiming at clays and an

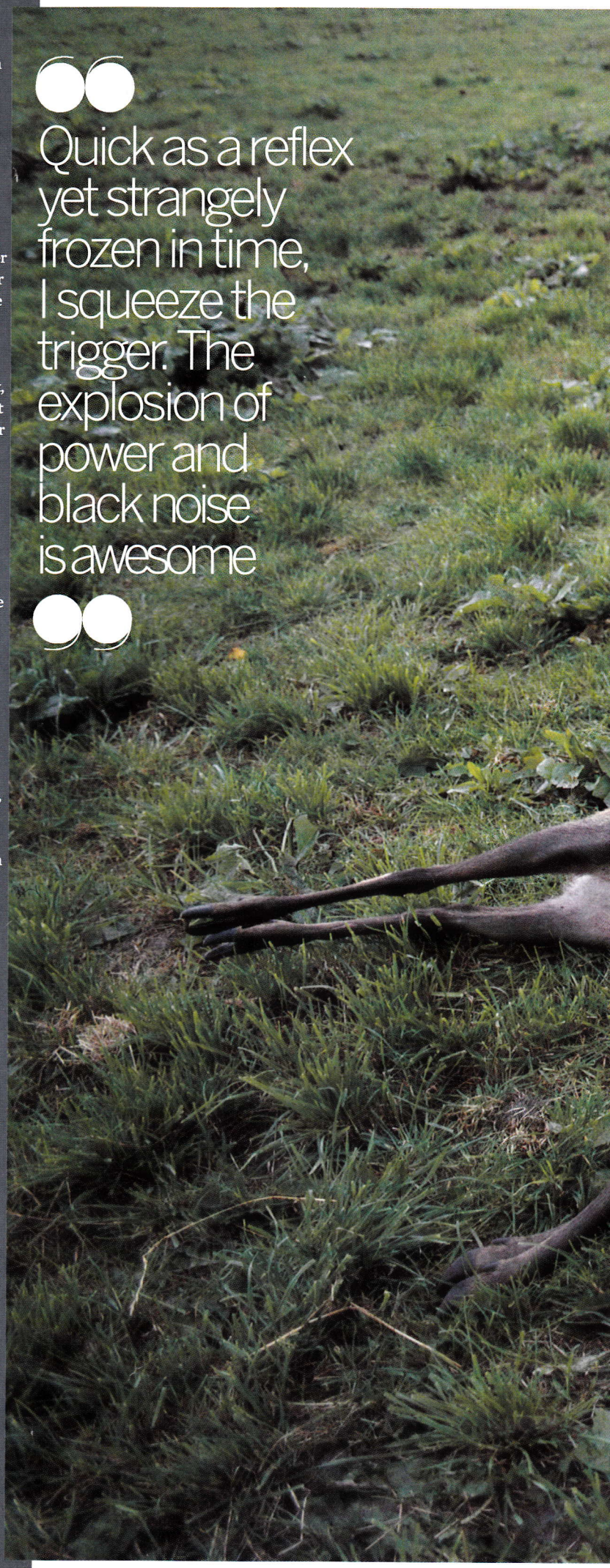
evening or two firing a handgun at a London gun club, stalking represents an entirely mythical domain. Clay-pigeon shooting is fun, and more difficult than I'd imagined – they fly past you at all angles, and you need speedy reflexes and a quick eye – but it's hardly a test of man against the elements. Shooting at a gun club is more testing, and the nervy, sweaty physicality of it unexpected, but it's somehow too sanitised, too much about the Magnum machismo of firepower alone. I've been invited to shoot grouse and other game birds in some handsome places, but I sense that I wouldn't like the trappings, all that up-for-the-Glorious-Twelfth social climbing, all those Vinnie Jones and Guy Ritchie types taking pot shots at snipe. Stalking deer seems a truer contest, the ultimate thing you can do with a rifle without heading off to hunt bull elephants in Botswana or Osama bin Laden somewhere in Afghanistan.

**LEAVING THE OTHERS BEHIND, DONAL AND I SPEND THE NEXT HALF AN HOUR OR SO CLAMBERING AROUND BEHIND,** and moving closer to, our prey. Donal is all theatrical energy now, scampering across boulders and boggy plains, head bowed, arms down, body close to the ground, occasionally throwing up strands of grass to ensure that we remain downwind. Like a platoon commander on a perilous mission or an orchestra conductor directing a first-time soloist, his hands instruct me by turns to stop, stay low, move on slowly and again to get down. We stop behind a clump of faded purple heather and shock yellow gorse to check our progress. "How you feeling?" he asks. "Just relax. One, two, three... breathe."

I look around and take in the view, trying to calm my nerves. The scene is spectacular, the sun dropping low into the mackerel sky and a thin mist scurrying up from the valley below. It's a warm, close, still September evening and the light is diffuse, muted. The summer here has been uncharacteristically dry, yet the hills and fields are permeated with such deep and rusty greens, reds and browns that it's almost as if the landscape retains a memory of the rain. It's only later, though, that I really take all this in. I'm concentrating so hard on what I've learned on the practice ground and on previous stalks, and I'm so fearful of what's going to happen next that I can feel the pressure pounding inside my head.

"There's your stag: 100 metres across in the long grass. Looks like a seven-pointer."

Donal is looking through his powerful binoculars and smiling; I'm peering through the telescopic sight of my rifle and frowning. For one thing, I've got no idea where he means. To Donal, a vastly capable and intuitive stalker who's been hunting in these mountains since he was 12 and who resembles *Top Gun*-era Tom Cruise, the stag's antlers are like beacons across a glassy sea. To me, a callow and wholly inexperienced hunter who, dressed in ragged-edge camouflage, looks like a cross between an emaciated Action Man and an etiolated Christmas tree, the antlers are indistinguishable from the general blur of grasses, rushes, ferns, bracken and sedge. With the light fading and the mist rolling in, the only



"Quick as a reflex yet strangely frozen in time, I squeeze the trigger. The explosion of power and black noise is awesome"