A misty winter landscape in the Avon valley. The scene is dominated by a thick, grey mist that fills the valley floor and clings to the lower slopes of the hills. In the foreground, the dark, bare branches of trees are silhouetted against the mist. The middle ground shows rolling hills with patches of trees, their forms softened by the haze. The background features more distant hills under a pale, overcast sky. The overall mood is quiet and atmospheric.

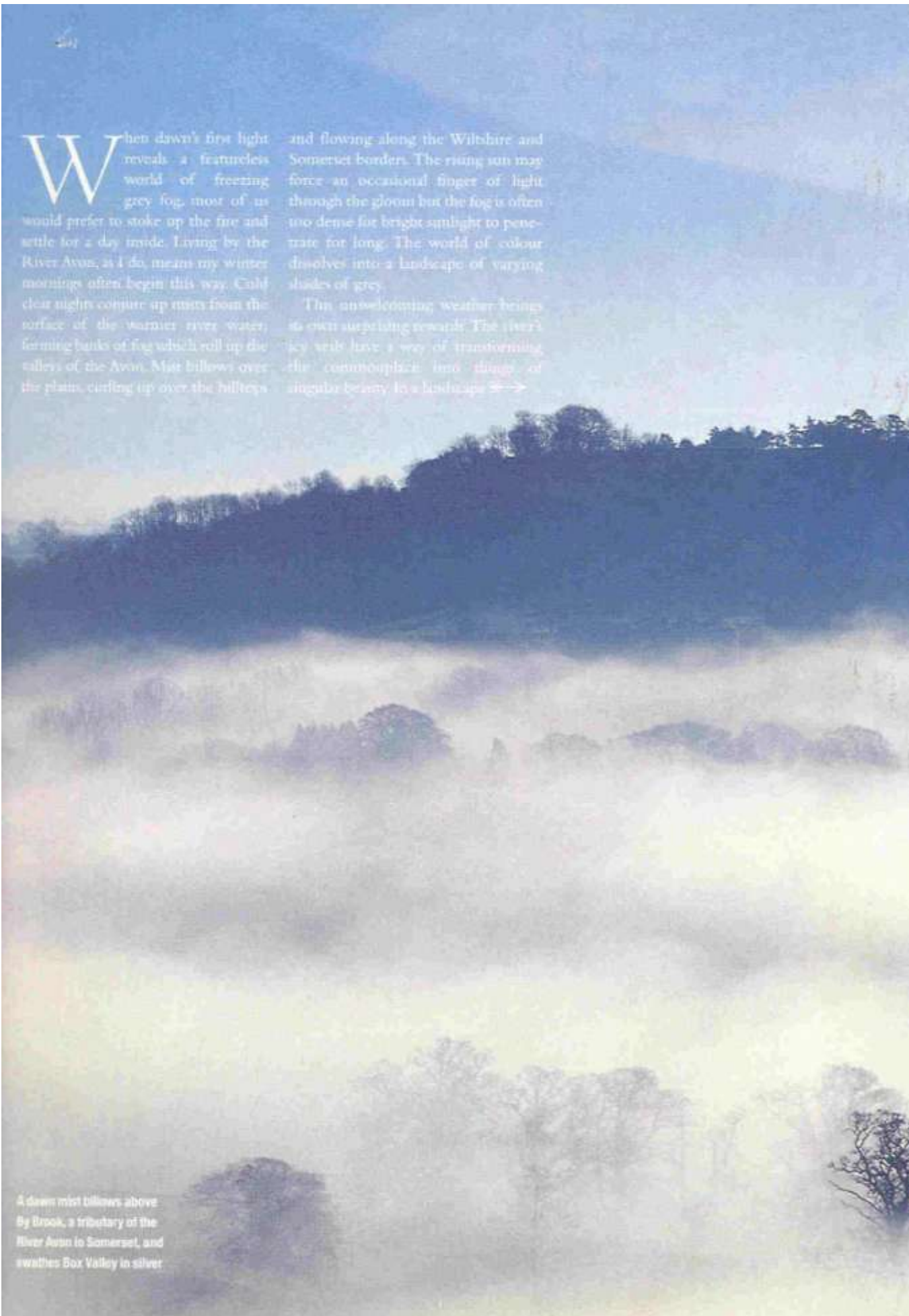
*The grey breath of*  
**WINTER**

Capture nature in all its mysterious beauty as mist  
and frost transform the Avon valley Text and photographs by Jane Gifford

When dawn's first light reveals a featureless world of freezing grey fog, most of us would prefer to stoke up the fire and settle for a day inside. Living by the River Avon, as I do, means my winter mornings often begin this way. Cold clear nights condense up mist from the surface of the warmer river water, forming banks of fog which roll up the valleys of the Avon. Mist billows over the plains, curling up over the hills

and flowing along the Wiltshire and Somerset borders. The rising sun may force an occasional finger of light through the gloom but the fog is often too dense for bright sunlight to penetrate for long. The world of colour dissolves into a landscape of varying shades of grey.

This unwelcoming weather brings its own surprising rewards. The river's icy veils have a way of transforming the commonplace into things of singular beauty in a landscape  $\rightarrow$



A dawn mist billows above By Brook, a tributary of the River Avon to Somerset, and swathes Box Valley in silver.





Filigree leaf patterns of frosted cotoneaster



A Friesian cow interrupts a breakfast of freeze-dried grass



Morning sun cuts through the mist at Bradford-on-Avon



Icy berries of common ivy, *Hedera helix*

where so much is obscured, small details come to the fore. Touched only by pale diffuse sunlight, the frost doesn't melt with the dawn. That drab pile of leaves you kept meaning to compost will remain a work of art throughout the day, the shape of each leaf etched in white, every vein distinct. And the cotoneaster you thought you might dig up now gives you reason for holding back by becoming a perfect example of fractal geometry picked out in a white relief. A lone rosebud, struggling against the odds to survive so far out of season, is now fringed with ice crystals and your eye is drawn to it for the first time.

Like waves across the shore, the mist rises and falls, revealing glimpses of the landscape. Sometimes it recedes far enough to expose the hilltops. Up here the sky above you is deep clear blue and the air smells sharp and strangely exhilarating. Beneath,

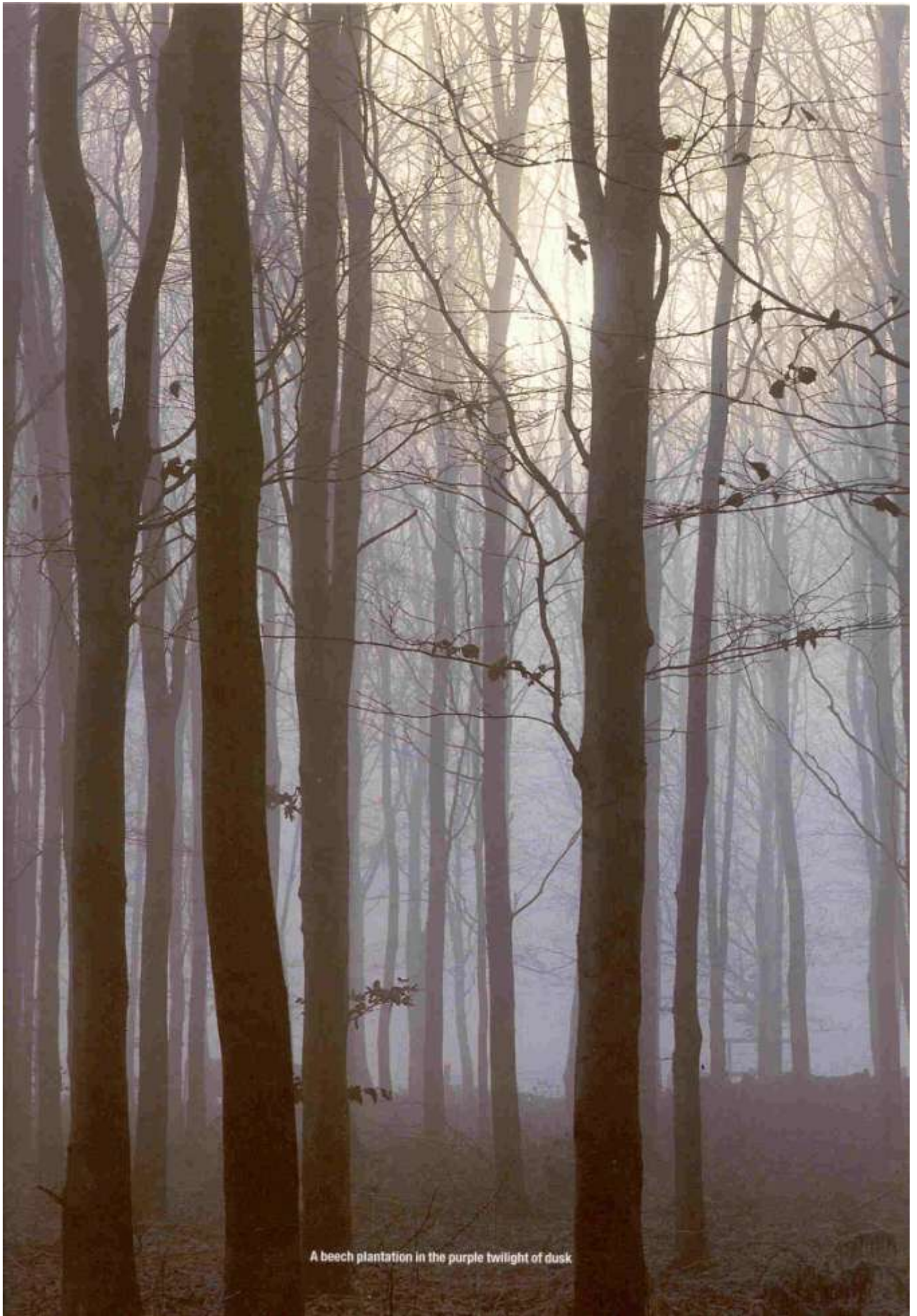
the mist eddies and swirls around the treetops. A house appears and vanishes with a bright flash as the sunlight hits the river for a moment. A small copse, once swathed in mist, takes on the air of a vast, mysterious forest. Perspectives are distorted and surrounding views are obliterated. You could be anywhere. The air is often completely still so that sounds are strangely amplified. When sunlight finally finds a way through, it is often accompanied by a light breeze. Ice-covered branches tinkle and sparkle like so many tiny chandeliers. You can hear the earth sigh as the cold releases its hold for a moment and the ice begins to melt.

Occasionally it is cold enough for the frost to remain after the fog has cleared. When friends say there is nothing to like about a freezing British winter and talk of moving to a warmer climate, I think

of days like this and I know I would miss them. To see the countryside shimmering white under a hoar frost with every twig and blade of grass distinct against a cloudless sky is worth a little discomfort for me. With the sun on my back and the time to explore, it feels good to be alive. Warm feet are essential though and, as a photographer, hard to maintain. Stamping my feet and rubbing and clapping my hands to keep the feeling in my toes and fingers, I hold my breath to stop the viewfinder of the camera from steaming up.

You don't have to venture far to appreciate the transformations that fog and frost work on the landscape. A town centre looks good, too. When the overall picture seems gloomy, the reward is often in the details. But if the cold and grey are too much for you, it may help to know that on a hilltop somewhere the sun is still shining. ➤





A beech plantation in the purple twilight of dusk



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# COUNTRY LIVING

## Home from home

How to decorate a Georgian house &  
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Explore the spectacular landscapes  
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**Editor Susy Smith (right) with Deputy Editor Kathleen Corrigan**

*I promised last month that in the February issue I would introduce you properly to*

my Deputy Editor Kathleen Corrigan. Kathleen (or Kitty as she is better known) is usually to be found working away behind the scenes, spotting potential problems and making sure that all the wheels keep turning smoothly at the *Country Living* offices. She is, however, about to take up a new, front-of-house position. From our March issue until late summer, Kitty will be standing in for me as Editor while I am temporarily occupied with a new project – that of caring for the twins I am expecting in mid March!

So for several months I, like you, shall be keeping in touch with what is happening at *Country Living* by reading her First Words in each issue. All of us here have spent the last few weeks making plans for my absence and I can tell you now that we have some outstanding features coming up in 1998 that will keep you amused, entertained and informed on all of our regular subjects.

In the meantime, though, what of this February issue? Well, we always try to give you variety and this month is no exception. Firstly, if the new year has made you resolve to be more creative and put some of your design ideas into action, there are our features on making scented soaps (page 38) and decoupage (page 60) to get you started. I hope you enjoy our free booklet of cut-out botanical flower prints which decoupage expert Belinda Ballantine used beautifully to cover a wooden box for us. And

if, despite our feature, you still have doubts about your decoupage capabilities, come with us to one of Belinda's workshops to learn the craft at first hand.

We are also looking for volunteers to help us chart the wildlife of Britain's gardens. After the tremendous successes a few years ago of our Butterfly and Winter Bird Surveys, we're challenging you once again. This time, however, we're asking you to record, as creatively as you can, sightings of all species – birds, insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. The result will be a wonderful celebration, in pictures as well as words, of the great variety of wildlife that inhabits our gardens. Professor Chris Baines, who first introduced many of us to the unusual concept of creating a wildlife garden as long ago as 1985 with his book *How to Make a Wildlife Garden* (Elm Tree Books, £10.99\*), is just one of the experts who provide us with guidelines of what to look for when beginning a wildlife survey (see page 33).

Considering a much larger landscape this month is Jane Gifford, who often photographs for us – see her images in "Law of the Land" on page 54 – but rarely does she write as well. We couldn't resist her eerily beautiful pictures and poetic words about a grey and frosted winter's day spent in a valley near her home in Wiltshire (page 28).

Finally, if you live in an old house and are planning a renovation this year, don't miss our special decorating series which begins this month with the Georgian period (page 78) and continues in March and April with Victorian and Edwardian style. In each case we give a little of the historical background to each period and then suggest paints, wallcoverings, furnishings and lighting for an authentic look but with Nineties living in mind. In my quest for decorating ideas for my new home, I have been glued to the pages as the team here has been preparing them.

Anyway – enough. It is time now for me to say "Au revoir" and, until I pick up my pen again later in the year, to wish you many months of continued enjoyment of *Country Living* throughout 1998. SUSY SMITH

\* To order at the special price of £7.99 with free P&O, see our Where to Buy page



**Belinda Ballantine**



**Professor Chris Baines**



**Jane Gifford**

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