Commended
• ‘Salmon Trout, Moruyah Heads’
Paul Cliff

Salmon Trout, Moruyah Heads

A man like a big bull seal, in Adidas and a red tracksuit, has slid excitedly down the seawall, like a spider tip-tripping across its web — to juggle his long-handled net and rod — and strain awkwardly to land the lithe, bowed, silver weight of a fish. Swung in a great dripping arc, it's transferred to his aching net. Then, laying both these devices down (like an outsize pool-cue and cue-rest), he dips in a paw to seize the fish by its jowls. Screws, and removes the orthodontory of hook — holds the fish prone on a rock, pulls his knife quickly from behind, and pushes the silver tip deep into its neck.

At this the fish flails hard, once: swims in a sudden film of red, haemorrhaged from gill to tail: kicks, as if another new fish might swim wholly out of it, or it might still flitter behind the rock, to find sanctuary yet …

But it can’t: Instead, its flesh slackens, consolidates, and its life distils to its glassy round eye: as if photographing this final resting moment of itself.

The fish severed forever from Moruya; Moruya forever severed from it.

The fisherman relaxes then. Zippo-lights a cigarette, and answers my ignorant question: It’s a salmon trout, he says. ‘Arrpis trutta,’ the Macquarie confirms: ‘Australian or native salmon; strictly, marine perch — a popular Australian sport fish.’ Which would explain the red tracksuit, the cigarette sucked lustily sideways — and the cocky, owzat gleam in his wicket-keeper’s eye, I guess — as the fish was neatly toppled two-handed, like the ball-snicked bails, into the plastic bucket at his feet.