confronted instead with that camion, arranged with loose-fitting wooden plank benches to sit on; and it was before we met I faced the dirt highway. But there were blue and yellow macaws in a towering dead tree and caimans lying in the open by the ponds in the cattle paddocks – not sure how the cows could drink there beside all those teeth – and rheas, those South American ostriches, with purpose they went strutting through the grasses beyond the road – and to find these animals without even trying made Beni seem a wildlife wonderland. So it didn't matter about the patchy rain that fell on us or the dust kicked up that teased our eyes.



The plaza in San Ignacio de Moxos, Beni, Bolivia.



The train station in Guajara-Mirim, Brazil. The trains don't run anymore.



A simple restaurant, San Ignacio de Moxos, Beni, Bolivia.

When we met, if I wasn't smiling it's because the wooden plank seating, after hours, bumpy road, does little good to the posterior.

O Mamoré, what do you really think of Trinidad? The low buildings around the central plaza, the palm trees and the melting in the day's heat, is it to your liking? It can be the sound of the town – the groan of pick up trucks and the buzz of moped and motorbike that swarms the air is unsettling but the Benianos are resourceful people, in tank tops and jeans, removed from the centres of Bolivian power in the Andes, neglected they may say, and proud of their lowland *camba* Spanish and their camba culture that inherited more from El Andalus than from La Paz. And I need a hat for the sun is fierce. Do you know that in the evening when the locals promenaded and moped-buzzed around the plaza I pondered how it would be to run a little English school there?

O Mamoré, tell me how it was, the Beni, for you saw the Spaniards arriving late, one of the last blank spots in South America on the European maps. You knew the pre-conquest civilisations, the people without a name who built vast canals and mounds across the savannah in a system of agriculture unique to the Amazon basin – they fooled the scientists, didn't they, who thought that because Amazonian soils are infertile, despite the jungle, humans in any numbers could not subsist there. Isn't it strange how they're trying those old ways again, the farmers growing crops on mounds, raising fish in the canals, facing the annual flooding with that prehistoric methodology that reduces the need to slash new areas of jungle every few years when the soils become depleted? You saw the indigenous peoples who came later, you watched as they faced the missionaries and their languages merged, as diverse groups they were reduced to the singular Moxeño people, old ways forgotten.

Did they really benefit from Christianity? You saw the nineteenth century rubber boom and best of all you must know the truth of El Dorado: that legendary city of gold that many a fortune-seeker staked their future on, the city that was never found. But perhaps the only El Dorado was always, rather, the twisting and turning you!