

Excerpts from *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*
by Barbara Kingsolver
Jigsaw Discussion - distribute 1 section per group (4 total)

The drift away from our agricultural roots is a natural consequence of migration from the land to factory, which is as old as the Industrial Revolution. But we got ourselves uprooted entirely by a drastic reconfiguration of U.S. farming, beginning just after World War II. Our munitions plants, challenged to beat their swords into plowshares, retooled to make ammonium nitrate surpluses into chemical fertilizers instead of explosives. The next explosions were yields on midwestern corn and soybean fields. It seemed like a good thing, but some officials saw these new surpluses as reason to dismantle New Deal policies that had helped farmers weather the economic uncertainties notorious to their vocation. Over the next decades, nudged by industry, the government rewrote the rules on commodity subsidies so these finds did not safeguard farmers, but instead guaranteed a supply of cheap corn and soybeans.

Corn and Soybeans. These two crops, formerly food for people and animals, became something entirely new: a standardized raw material for a new extractive industry, not so different from logging or mining. Mills and factories were designed for a multibranch production line as complex as the one that turns iron and aluminum ores into the likes of automobiles, paperclips, and antiperspirants. But instead, this new industry made piles of corn and soybeans into high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils, and thousands of other starch- or oil-based chemicals. Cattle and chickens were brought in off the pasture into intensely crowded and mechanized CAFO's (concentrated animal feeding operations) where corn - which is no part of a cow's natural diet, by the way - could be turned cheaply and quickly into animal flesh. All these different products, in turn, rolled on down the new industrial food pipeline to be processed into the soft drinks, burgers, and other cheap foods on which our nation now largely runs, or sits on its bottom, as the case may be.

We're a nation with an eating disorder, and we know it. The multiple maladies caused by bad eating are taking a dire toll on our health- most tragically for our kids, who are predicted to be this country's first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. That alone is a stunning enough fact to give us pause. So is a government policy that advises us to eat more fruits and vegetables, while doling out subsidies not to fruit and vegetable farmers, but to commodity crops destined to become soda pop and cheap burgers.

A majority of North Americans do understand, at some level, that our food choices are choices are politically charged, affecting arenas from rural culture to international oil cartels and global climate change. Plenty of consumers are trying to get off of the petroleum-driven industrial food pipeline: banning fast food from their homes and schools, avoiding the unpronounceable ingredient lists. [...] A lot of people at once are waking up to a troublesome truth about cheap fossil fuels: we are going to run out of them. Every food calorie we presently eat has used dozens or even hundreds of fossil fuel calories in its making: grain milling, for example, which turns corn into the ingredients of packaged foods, costs ten calories for everyone food calorie produced. That's before it gets shipped anywhere. By the time my children are my age, that version of dinnertime will surely be an unthinkable extravagance.