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CURSES, FOIBLED AGAIN

Somewhere, Donald Barthelme writes of spending East Texas afternoons in the hills shooting peccadilloes—which he described as the unnatural offspring of a mating of a spotted peccary and a nine-banded armadillo.

We remembered Barthelme's chimeric reminiscences recently—resting with our eyebrows in traction, badly sprained by sudden and frequent raising at biotech-related notes in the nation's mass media:

- New York City Mayor Ed Koch dismissed his city's Commissioner of Business Development for owning some \$10,000 worth of stock in Enzo Biochem. The company had gotten city help to relocate to an abandoned municipal morgue rather than moving out to New Jersey—a deal that involved a \$10-million development bond issue and a \$710,000 Urban Development Action Grant (*Bio/Technology* 4:16, Jan. '86). The move into the neighborhood of New York's Bellevue Hospital was opposed by some community groups, who had hoped the aged pathology lab would give way for housing. The company has been quoted as saying it had "absolutely no knowledge that a government official may have owned stock while its deal was pending." And the commissioner himself said he had discussed his holdings at several public hearings and had not been swayed by his financial interest in the company.

- Advanced Genetic Sciences (Oakland, CA) has certainly endured more tribulation than it deserves, and perhaps the strain is beginning to tell. The company has served bravely in the vanguard of biotechnology, patiently doing the scientific and regulatory groundwork for the nation's first field test of a recombinant organism. The company saw all that work turn to dust and ashes at a January 27 board of supervisors meeting in Monterey County, the area chosen to release the company's long-bottled-up ice-minus *Pseudomonas syringae*. At that meeting, by most accounts a shrill confrontation with the uninformed, state and federal regulators had to admit that they had never actually seen the proposed research site—which proved to be in a more heavily populated area than the regulators had understood from AGS.

Just one month later, almost to the day, the director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's pesticide office publicly accused AGS of performing unauthorized release experiments a year ago—by injecting recombinant *P. syringae* into the bark of trees planted on a lab rooftop. Here, AGS and EPA disagree about whether sub-cambial injection in isolated trees qualifies as containment.

- The Stockholm stock exchange halted trading in the stock of Fermenta, a successful Swedish company that earned \$43 million last year, up four fold from the year before, according to Reuters news agency. The stock tumbled, however, when the company's founder, principal owner, and chief executive, Refaat el-Sayed, resigned after admitting that he did not have a Ph.D. in microbiology from U.C.-Davis.

- G. D. Searle's new television advertisements for its aspartame product, NutraSweet, show quick shots of cows, fresh milk, bananas, and all things wholesome in the background. Meanwhile, a Voice assures us that aspartame, though not found in nature, is made of natural substances naturally found in all of these good natural things. While this is undoubtedly true, it is also true of such tempting natural treats as ricin, rattle-snake venom, tetanus toxoid, and any other protein anyone can name. Sadly, our Oscar for worst disingenuous in an insupportable role goes to a subsidiary of Monsanto, which puts a strong corporate emphasis on science education.

This is a list of petty offenses, if offenses they are at all. There is nothing heinous and no real harm done that we can see—except to the credibility of biotechnology in general. For the most part, Enzo, AGS, Fermenta, and Monsanto have seemed to us to be doing worthy things well. These peccadilloes, do, however, bespeak failures of nerve, common sense, energy, or patience. Even as we have preached the gospel of biotechnology's high character, we have listened ourselves. We have come to expect better.

—Douglas McCormick