

memories of pain, either. So I e-mailed Raphael Mechoulam to ask him why he thought the brain might secrete a chemical that has such an undesirable effect.

Don't be so sure that forgetting is undesirable, he suggested. "Do you really want to remember all the faces you saw on the New York City subway this morning?"

Mechoulam's somewhat oblique comment helped me begin to appreciate that forgetting is vastly underrated as a mental operation—indeed, that it *is* a mental operation, rather than, as I'd always assumed, strictly the breakdown of one. Yes, forgetting can be a curse, especially as we age. But forgetting is also one of the more important things healthy brains do, almost as important as remembering. Think how quickly the sheer volume and multiplicity of sensory information we receive every waking minute would overwhelm our consciousness if we couldn't quickly forget a great deal more of it than we remember.

At any given moment, my senses present to my consciousness—this perceiving "I"—a blizzard of data no human mind can completely absorb. To illustrate the point, let me try to capture here a few drops of this perceptual cataract, preserve one cross section of the routinely forgotten. Right now my eyes, even without moving, offer the following: directly in front of me, the words I'm typing on a computer screen along with its blue background and tumble of icons. Peripherally, there's the blond wood grain of my desk, a mouse pad (printed with words and images), a CD spinning red in its little window, two bookshelves crammed with a couple of dozen spines I could easily read but don't, a gray plastic heater grate, a blue folder (entitled "Pot clips") stuck into a standing file at an annoying angle, two hands with an unspecified number of flying fingers (Band-Aid on one hand, glint of gold on the other), one jeans-clad lap, two green-sweatered wrists, a window (its

green muntins framing a boulder with lichens, dozens of trees, hundreds of branches, millions of leaves), and, drawing a soft border around 90 percent of this visual field, the metal frames of my eyeglasses.

And that's just my eyes. My sense of touch meanwhile presents to my attention a low background drone of shoulder ache, a slight burning sensation in the tip of my right middle finger (where it was cut the other day), and the cool rush of air through my nostrils. Taste? Black tea and bergamot (Earl Grey), slightly briny breakfast residue on tongue (smoked salmon). Soundtrack: Red Hot Chili Peppers in the foreground, backed by heater whoosh on the right, computer cooling fan whoosh on the lower left, mouse clicks, keyboard clatter, creak-crack of those knuckle-like things deep in the neck when I cant my head to one side; and then, outside, a scatter of birdsong, methodical drips on the roof, and the slow sky tear of a propeller plane. Smell: Lemon Pledge, mixed with woody damp. I won't even try to catalog the numberless errant thoughts presently nipping around the writing of this paragraph like a fluttering school of fish. (Or maybe I will: second thoughts and misgivings arriving in waves, shoving crowds of alternative words and grammatical constructions, shimmering lunch options, small black holes of consciousness from which I try to fish out metaphors, a clamoring handful of to-dos, a spongy awareness of the time till lunch, and so on, and so on.)

"If we could hear the squirrel's heartbeat, the sound of the grass growing, we should die of that roar," George Eliot once wrote. Our mental health depends on a mechanism for editing the moment-by-moment ocean of sensory data flowing into our consciousness down to a manageable trickle of the noticed and remembered. The cannabinoid network appears to be part of that