What is the relation between charisma and information? How fast can a well-turned phrase move? How does it age? In this
issue of The Distance Plan we consider how, occasionally, facts or argumentative claims float free from their point of origin to
become hyper-portable and cross-disciplinary. We call these mem-
orable, animated phrases “charismatic facts” and suggest they can
be found at the intersection of flair and research, savvy and data,
linguistic craft and political utility. Though charismatic facts may
remain lightly tethered to, and therefore validated by, their authorial
or institutional home, they are at the same time unordinary in that
they are used freely by a range of speakers, from scientists and
activists to TV anchors, politicians, and family members at dinner.

Adaptive to a range of narrative maneuvers, such as com-
parison and analogy, a charismatic fact can be used to present
new or under-disseminated knowledge in a more versatile format.
A charismatic fact may draw on cultural particularities to illuminate
broader political trends, for example: “1965 was the year in which
the French fashion industry for the first time produced more trou-
sers than skirts.” 1 A charismatic fact might also lean on rhetorical
strategies such as relativity or orders of magnitude: “In China alone,
more cement was used in the three years from 2008 to 2010 than in
the entire twentieth century in the United States.” 2

Charisma has a dubious history, associated with lending
a shimmer of power or unearned appeal to persons and objects.
We did not ask our contributors in this issue to limit themselves
to current discussions about fake news or the aporia of adjudicat-
ing truth on social media. Rather, we asked them to consider the
nature of charismatic facts, what they might be, what narratives they
might make or unmake. In a time of overwhelming scientific con-
sensus and huge amounts of academic writing devoted to climate
change and the Anthropocene, it has nonetheless proved remark-
ably difficult to marry climate science with charismatic speech. The
political will to act remains siloed and fragmented. We wondered
if these movable facts might be resilient to distortion. Thought in
another way: how and how far can language travel without stripping
itself of meaning?

But, the concept of charismatic facts also faces a curatorial
problem. How does one pick portable facts out of a global tragedy?
Scientists and activists, let alone those who have experienced
the violent effects of climate change, could reasonably reject
such a strategy as vulgar, distasteful, and small. A tragedy of
such scale and complexity should not be addressed with an un-
ethical appetite for clickbait journalism and meme-able quotabil-
ity. And so, we left charismatic facts open to rejection. In his book
The Great Derangement, Amitav Ghosh points out that contempo-
rary literature has so far failed to seriously take up the challenge
of global climate change. In this issue, we consider why writers
have been reluctant to translate global climate change into narra-
tive, and if Ghosh is right to say that posterity will judge our literary
moment as a period of great delusion and denial.
Long associated with unwelcome prophesy, poets have unsurprisingly been more willing to take on the simultaneously ungainly and tragic topic of environmental destruction. In her poem, Rae Armantrout writes, “It’s true things fall apart. / Still, by thinking we heat ourselves up.” This issue of The Distance Plan pairs narrative and poetic voices, so that intellectual thought can be warmed by the heat of feeling, the critical by the poetic. When presented with the concept of charismatic facts, some poets focused on fact, others on the vatic quality of language. It has been said of the Trump era that civil society will bear down on language to an extraordinary degree. In poetry, language is allowed to be direct and incantatory as when the collaborative, crowd-sourced poem Executive Orders decrees that we should “put all the diamonds back in the ground.”

Advocates for an immediate and decisive response to the environmental situation find themselves in a peculiar situation: in Washington DC anthropogenic climate change is still considered under debate – more than half the members of the US House of Representatives declare themselves skeptical about the human causes of climate change — while the US public is already experiencing what paleoecologist Jacqulyn Gill has called “empathy saturation” for victims of environmental disaster.

In their paired texts, father and son Gabriel and Boaz Levin reflect on the Palestine-Israeli conflict and the difficulty of building narratives around political and human rights tragedies that unfold over decades. How do writers remain vigilant witnesses and how do artists remain sensitised observers? The challenge “for any artist with a realist bent set to grapple with the political everyday,” says Boaz Levin, is to “come to terms with the brutality of fact.” Or, as Gabriel Levin observes, “our lives/brim over with the commonplace: clods loosened/where the pitchfork lies by the wall, nosy bees/ in the rosemary, and hey, wouldn’t it all be just/fine if not for the new breed of mosquitoes/bloodletting at low altitudes? I flap the covers . . . What else awaits the avid/reader this morning? The Brutality of Fact.”

This issue offers the idea of charismatic fact as provocation rather than fixed concept, as something prompting further thought and welcoming opposition. Our contributors gesture towards the potential instrumentality – as well as liability – of charismatic facts in the public discussion of climate change. In their crystalline portability and ready-to-handedness, do charismatic facts offer frustrated climate scientists a discursive strategy for making their arguments not just heard, but repeated, and circulated, even while retaining their core meaning? Can the ‘stickiness’, the ear-worminess, the dynamism of a charismatic fact be put to work in aid of a more informed, participatory discussion? Rather than fear-driven sound bites that bring paralysis to our confrontation with the gravity of contemporary climate science, we ask whether that charismatic facts, as information in motion, may collectively pull us forward into new and urgently needed discussion.