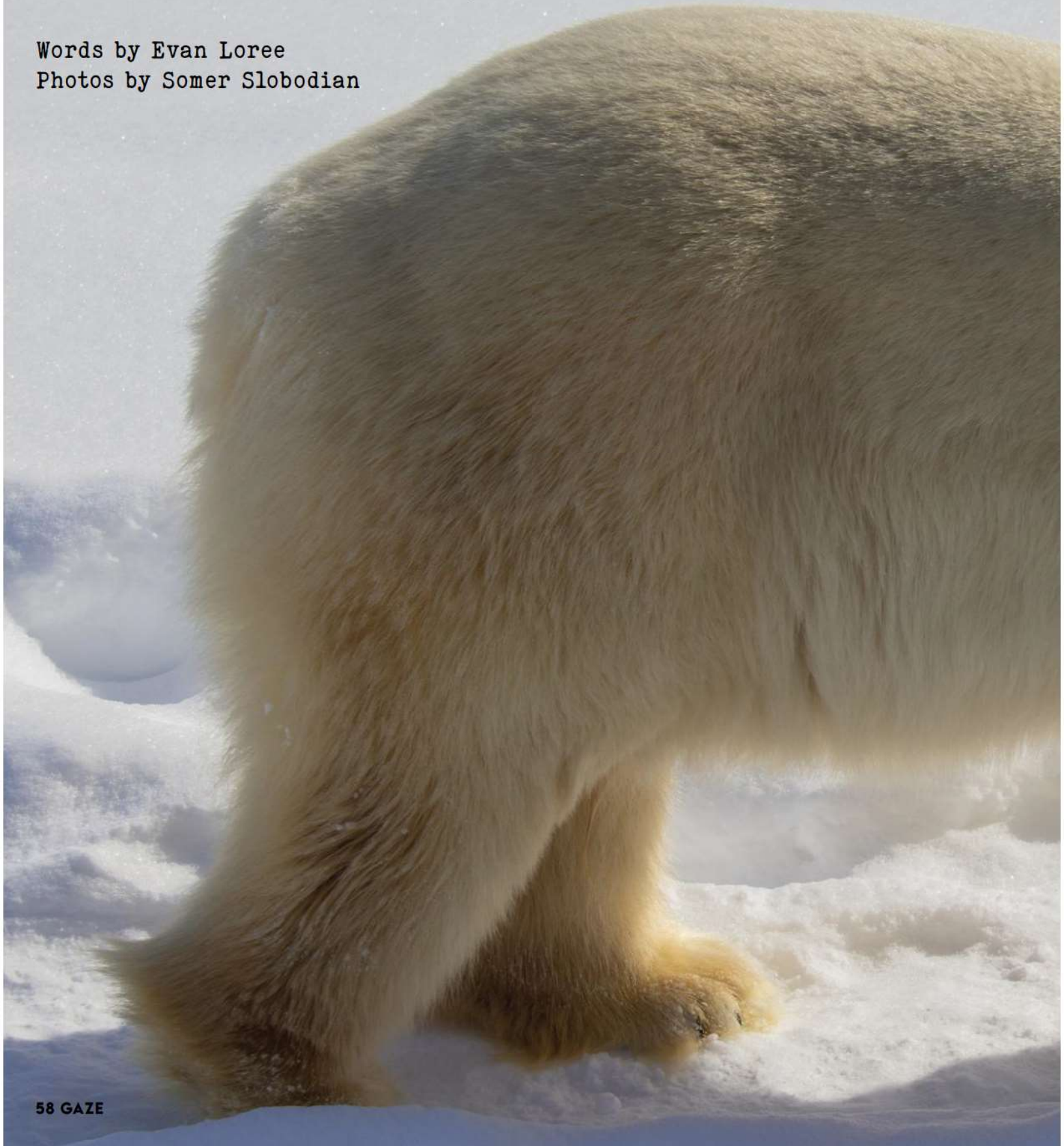


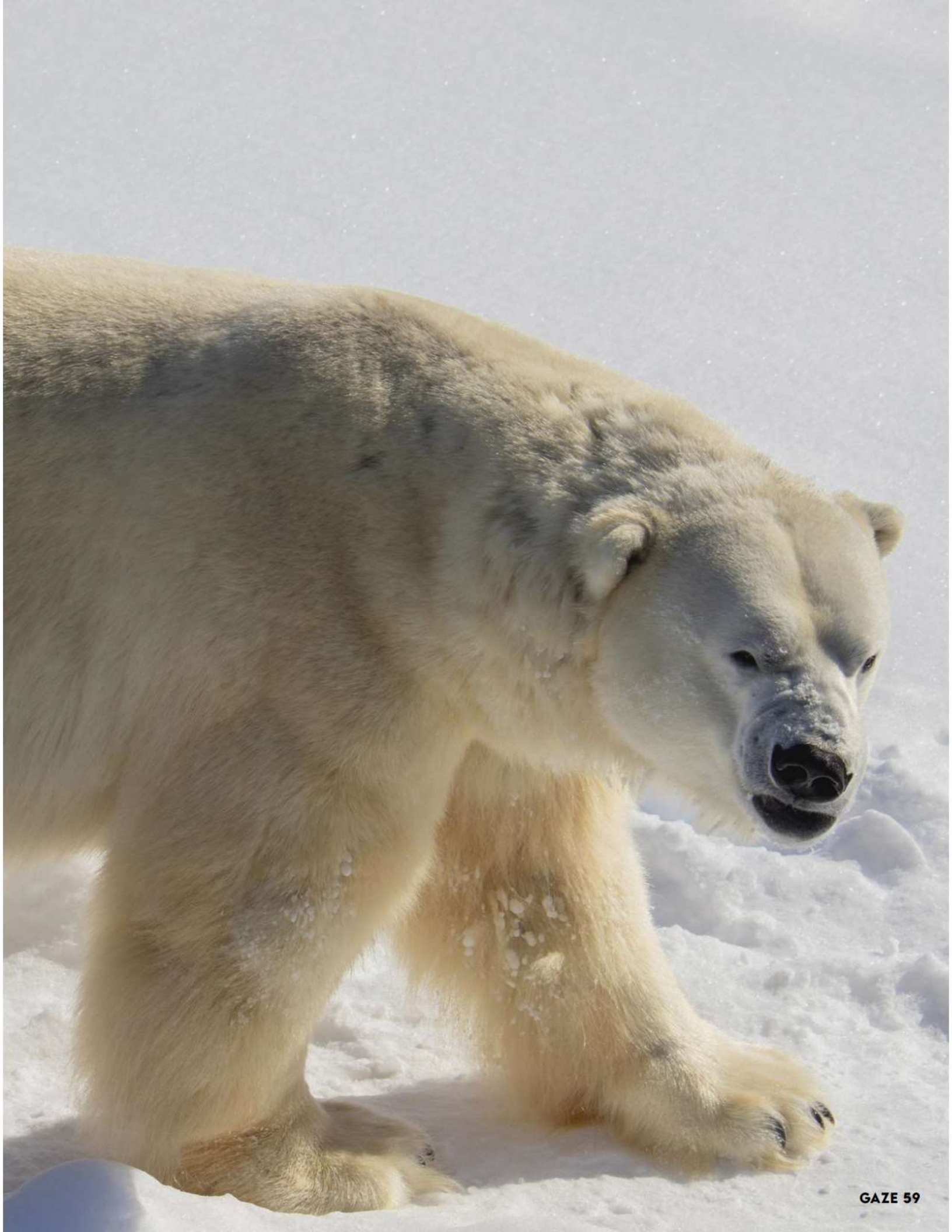
A VIEW FROM THE ICE

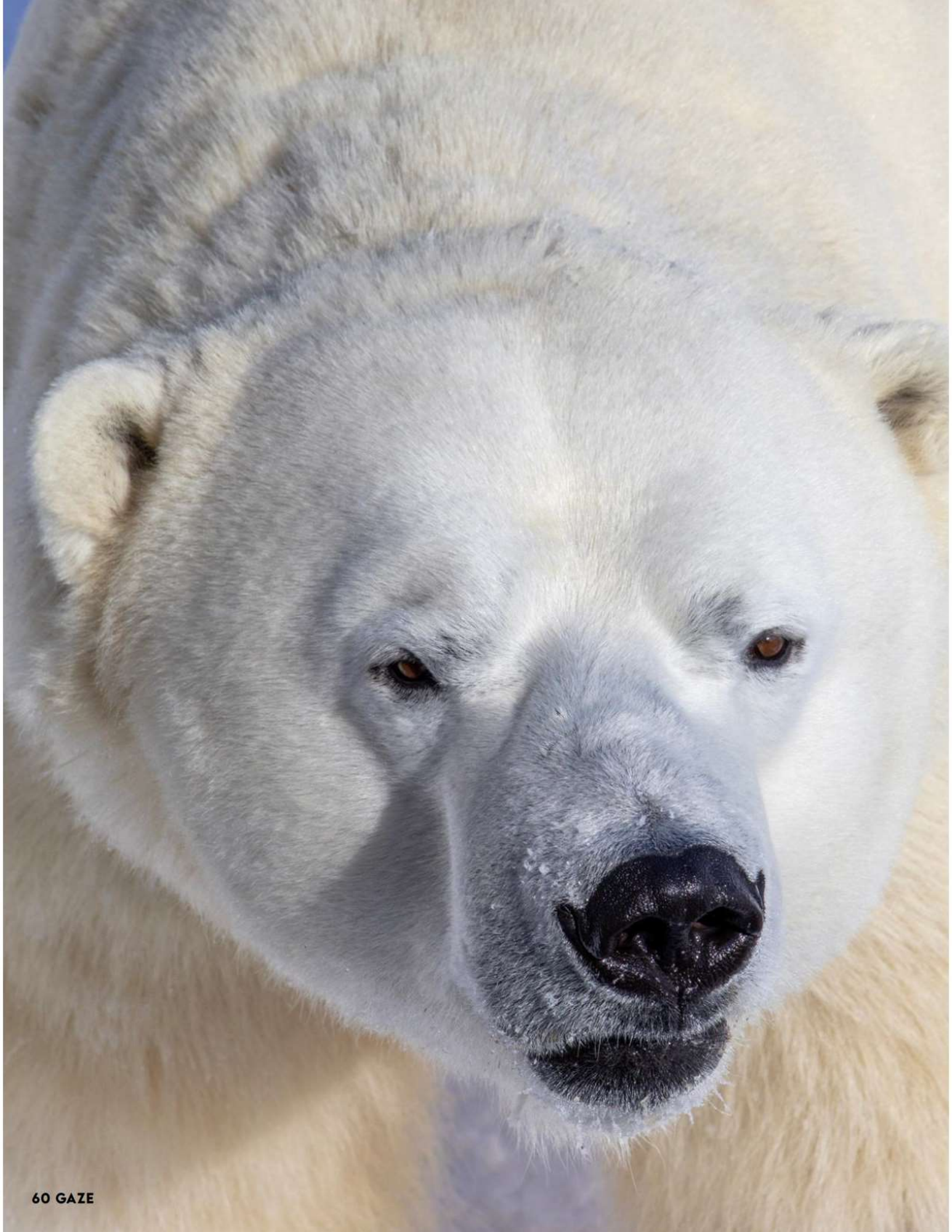
What the behaviour of bears today tells us about the Arctic ice tomorrow

Words by Evan Loree

Photos by Somer Slobodian









The view from the ice is bleak.

When the snow falls, the banks are piled as high as three tall men in Cochrane, Ontario. It's a sleepy little town in the northern reaches of Ontario. Small, remote, cold in the winter, hot in the summer. Tourists come from all over to enjoy its famous snowmobile trails.

Cochrane is also home to a world-renowned wildlife centre dedicated to the care and research of polar bears. That's why we were there.

When we drove up to the Polar Bear Habitat to meet Amy and Kearin, the cold was already chasing the warmth from my morning coffee. The habitat's driveway was laden with snow. There were rows of green pine trees on either side sheltering us from the main road. A nearby snowmobile trail had fresh tracks in it. As we waited for Amy to meet us at the entrance, I took in the white world around me, feeling like I was standing in the centre of an empty canvas.

Amy was wearing a red winter coat with matching snow pants when she met

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us at the door, her freckled face flushed pink with the cold kiss of winter. She laughed about the weather. Compared to the last two weeks, today was warm. She took us up a snow packed path around enclosures A and B to what's known as the "holding centre."

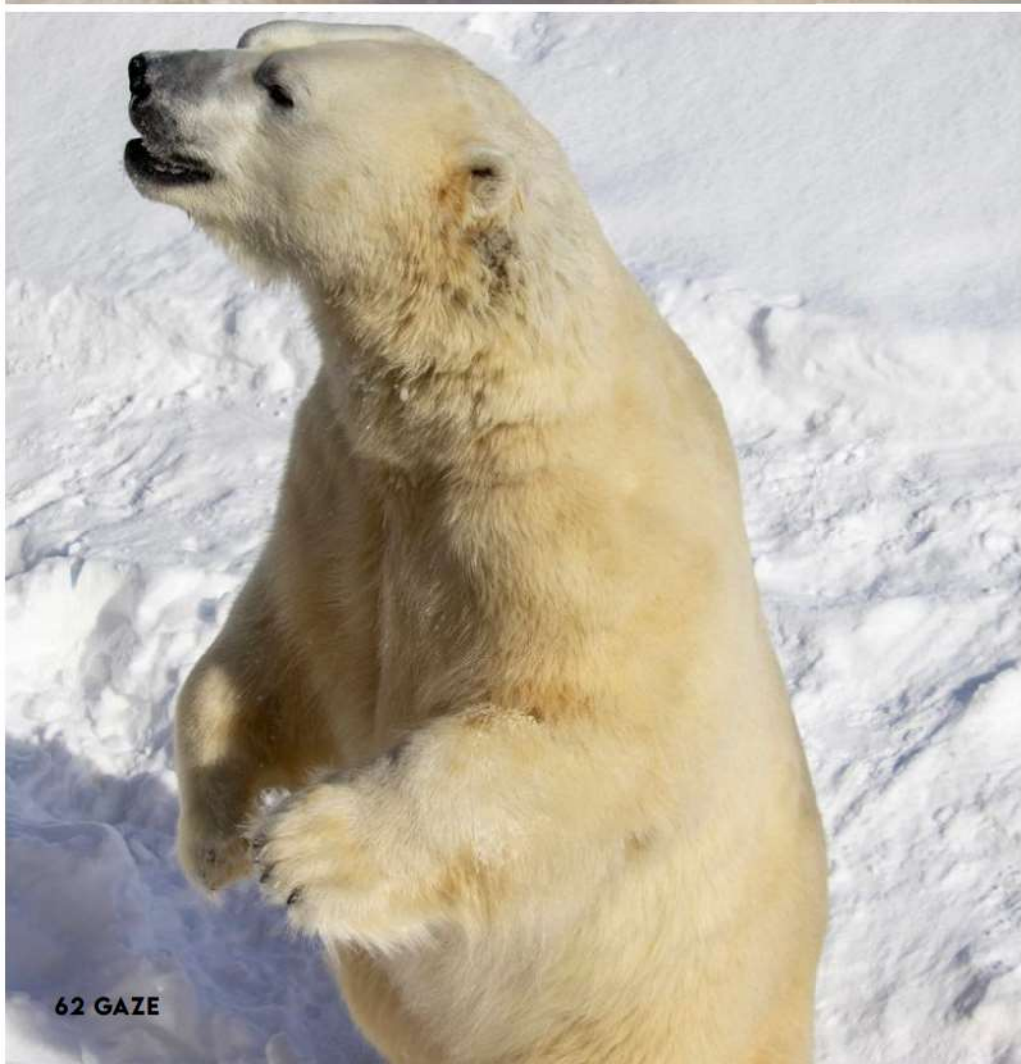
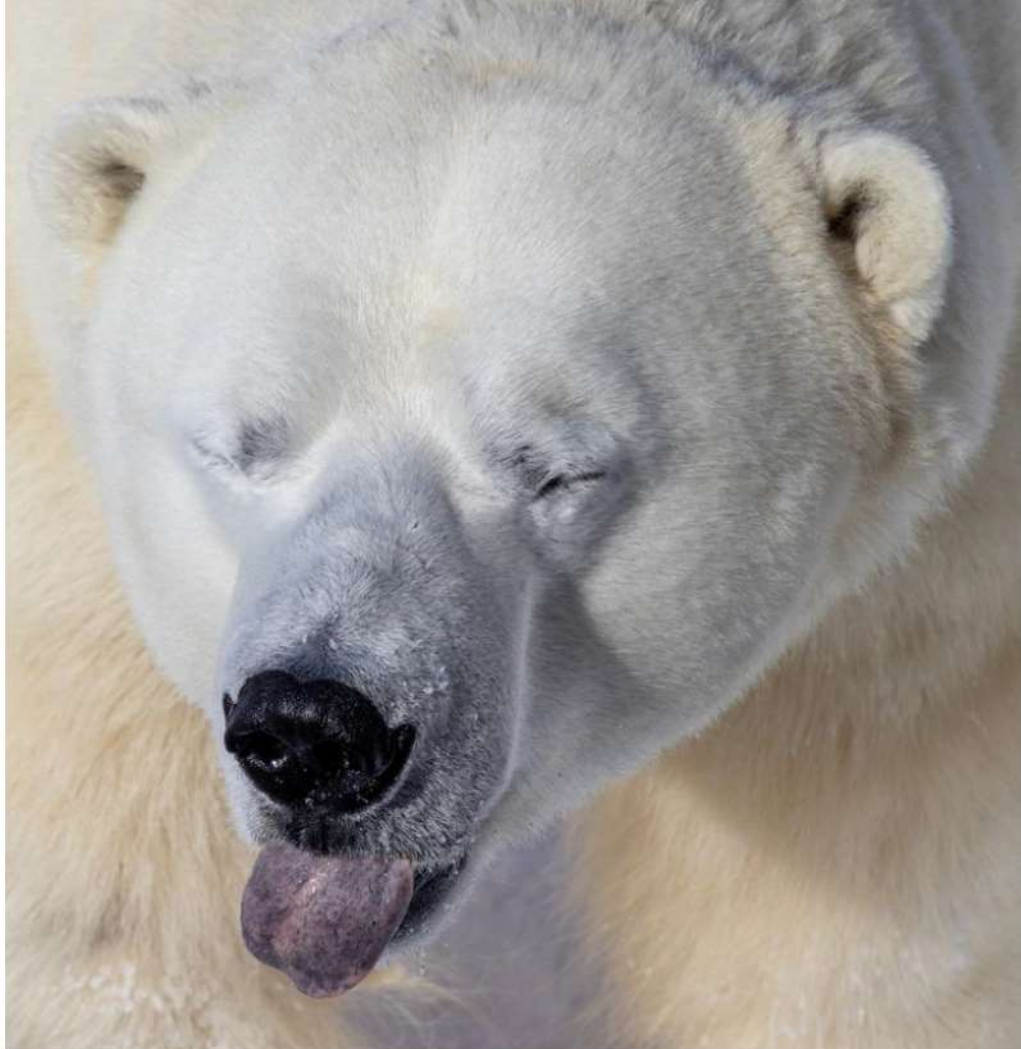
Inside, we were greeted by the smell of raw fish, standing water and damp fur. The office was on the left. Inside, there was a mural of a polar bear on one wall, and a steel table with two cardboard bear toys in the centre of the room. That was where they prepared the food. When the clock chimed it meowed like a cat. Amy and Kearin laughed every time the clock went off.

They had cameras trained on the bears all day long and kept a rigorous record of everything they did.

"We have the largest set of polar bear data anywhere on the planet," says Amy. She explains that they keep running files on everything the bears do and update them every 15 minutes.

Amy is the head bear keeper at the Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat. Kearin is one of the animal care assistants and the team's newest member. Three male polar bears, Inukshuk, Ganuk and Henry call this place home. When Amy and Kearin talk about them, they light up.

Caring for a bear sounds a lot like caring for a pet. Amy and her team



members wake up early, arrive at the habitat, feed the bears, put out their toys, let them out and clean up their pens. To keep the bears engaged, and to prevent them from getting stuck in a routine, they will often hide food around their enclosures and feed them at different spots each day.

I remember watching Kearin spoon feed Ganuk through the fence. Here was this woman of average height, fresh out of university, hand feeding an 1,100 lb. animal that could tear her to bits. It was surreal how much he looked like my dog as he licked the raw meat from Kearin's spoon.

Still, Amy insists they are not pets. "They are not tame in any way. They are their own creatures. They do what they want. They are habitualized, they are not domesticated," she says.

As wild as they are though, there is a bond between the bears and their keepers.

You can see it in the way Ganuk and Kearin stare at each other through the silver chain link fence between them. You can hear it in Amy's laugh when she talks about their quirks.

It's a place of relentless optimism. And, for a moment, as I watched Kearin ambling along with Ganuk on opposite sides of the fence, I forgot how vulnerable this species really is.

Polar Bears are what Amy calls an "indicator" species.

"We're not going to lose polar bears and everything else be fine. If we lose polar bears this is because we've lost everything else," she says.

As the ice melts, polar bears lose access to hunting grounds. As the ice melts earlier and earlier, they have less and less time to hunt. As the ice disappears, the algae that clings to it dies. When the algae die, so does the arctic cod. When the cod disappears, the ringed seals disappear too. Ringed seals are the polar bear's primary food source. If the bears disappear, it's because the entire Arctic food chain has collapsed.

It's hard to predict how much longer polar bears will be around. Amy





estimates about 100 years, depending on the steps we take to mitigate the effects of climate change.

"We're probably not going to be able to save polar bears in the wild, so what is the point of everything you do here?" Amy recalls being asked by a shrewd and skeptical visitor.

She doesn't always have an answer.

"But I think it's also the question that forces me every

day to keep going," she says.

Amy is a vegetarian. She religiously turns out her lights and does whatever she can to reduce her own impact on climate change. But it's not enough.

"Even if every single individual human being changed their ways, it's still not going to matter because we need industry to change," Amy says, still smiling.

She reminds us not to give up, as the cat clock meows



once more in the background.

Her optimism is infectious.

"If I think too far into the future, I just... you get overwhelmed," says Kearin. She sounds a little less hopeful than Amy.

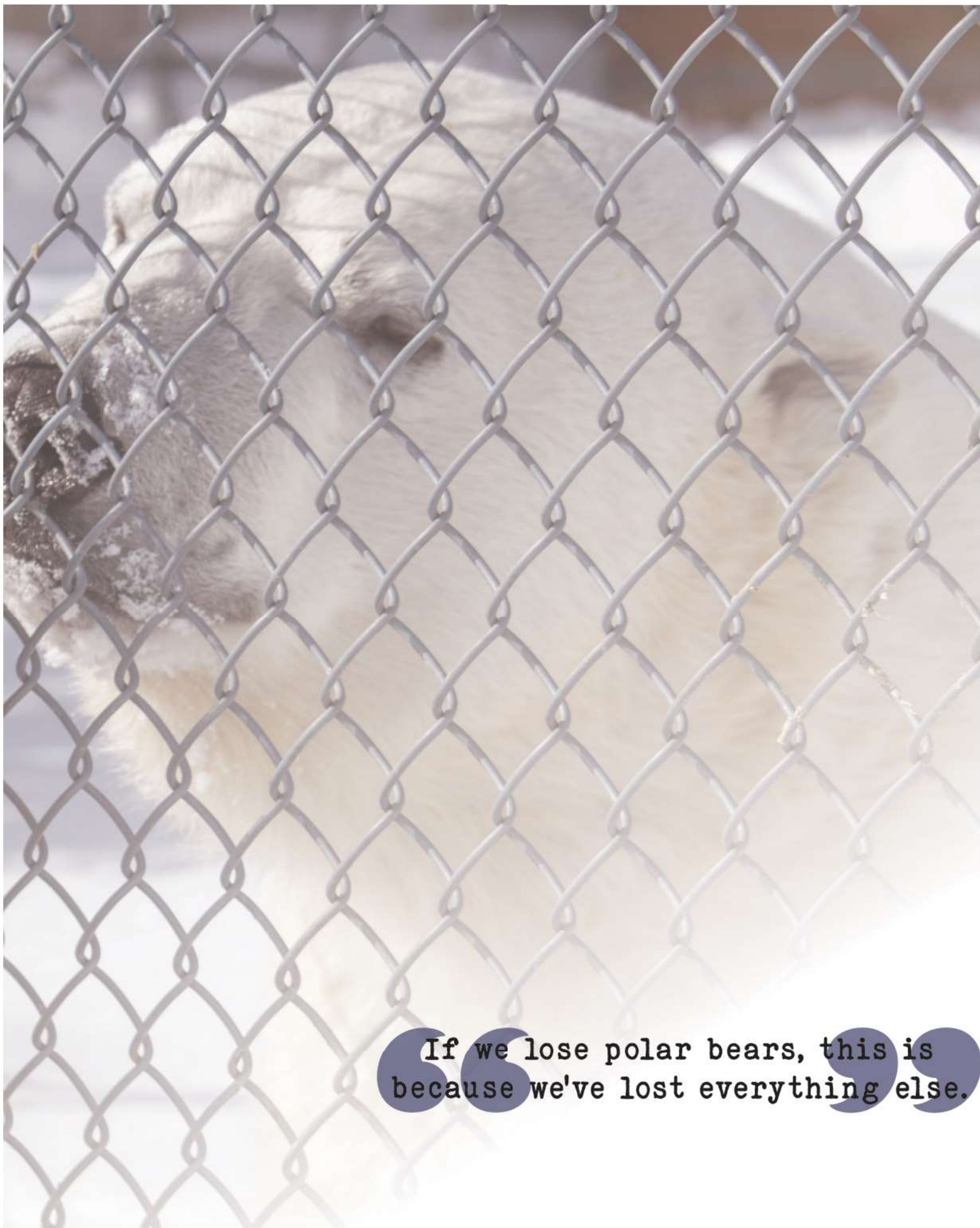
At the end of the day, she loves her job, and she loves the bears.

"Just one day at a time is kind of my motto."

It's a special thing to see a bear ambling alongside his keeper through a chain-link fence. Still, I am struck by a strange thought while watching Kearin play with Ganuk like this. What if all this is just one long goodbye?

Kearin says she'll be amazed one day when she looks back on all this. I hope this place will still be here when that day comes.





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