**Documentary Theory**

In the photo, the beautiful boy wears

a formal suit. He seems asleep except

he’s lying in

 the surf, which

he can’t feel. Nor could I look

till now, which is a form

of cowardice, my old-fashioned

sense of decency obsolete.

It’s true sometimes

I peek. Because pornography

exposes what we want to see, writes

Barthes, it failsto move us. But add

a little

 flaw—frayed

sweater edge, hint of red-eye

from the flash—and

it devastates. Maybe the photographer

moved in close, then backed up

to get a better

shot, which

makes it worse, though a certain

callousness is required

for art. I want to think

tenderness keeps burbling up

in us, an impulse to protect the ones

who suffer most, which makes us humans

good, though that often isn’t true, or

it’s more complicated . . .

That photo for example

was made public by an NGO,

its violation of common

decency,

 someone must have

thought, counterbalanced

by the idea that those who saw it

would be roused

 to help other children

abandoned but alive. These days

the logic’s changed again:

most advocates ask

those who look

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