

BELIEVING

When I was eight I was a Catholic
for a while. 1946, Kraków, it was
time to start school, and only

the parochial ones were working.
So my parents said we had converted
during the war. That got me in.

My best grades were in Catechism.
I wasn't Catholic, but I wasn't
sure what I was. In church I

carried a censer and had my first
communion in white shorts. The priest
taught us to swallow the Host. You

weren't supposed to chew it, even
if it felt as if you would gag.
The sisters gave us colored pictures

of saints if we did well in class.
I remember confession, boys shoving
to get the soft priest. Sometimes

you didn't know who was in the
confessional. You had to sift your
sins; the priest wanted not just

a lie, but something like stealing
a soccer ball or looking at your
mother in the bath. He would ask:

How many times? Then you could get
away with a scolding and three quickly
said Hail Mary's. You wouldn't want

to confess really dark things, like
looking with the janitor's son at
his younger sister's sex, poking

her with a fork. The priest would be
angry, and who knows what the gilded
black woman on the altar, the one

I didn't believe in, but who looked
at me as I walked in my white robe behind
the priest, who knows what she might do.