***JOHN DONNE***

John Donne was born into a Catholic family in 1572, during a strong anti-Catholic period in England. Donne’s father, also named John, was a prosperous London merchant. His mother, Elizabeth Heywood, was the grand-niece of Catholic martyr Thomas More. Religion would play a tumultuous and passionate role in John’s life.

Donne’s father died in 1576, and his mother remarried a wealthy widower. He entered Oxford University at age 11 and later the University of Cambridge, but never received degrees, due to his Catholicism. At age 20, Donne began studying law at Lincoln’s Inn and seemed destined for a legal or diplomatic career. During the 1590s, he spent much of his inheritance on women, books and travel. He wrote most of his love lyrics and erotic poems during this time. His first books of poems, “Satires” and “Songs and Sonnets,” were highly prized among a small group of admirers.

In 1593, John Donne’s brother, Henry, was convicted of Catholic sympathies and died in prison soon after. The incident led John to question his Catholic faith and inspired some of his best writing on religion. At age 25, Donne was appointed private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England. He held his position with Egerton for several years and it's likely that around this period Donne converted to Anglicanism.

On his way to a promising career, Donne became a Member of Parliament in 1601. That same year, he married 16-year-old Anne More, the niece of Sir Egerton. Both Lord Egerton and Anne’s father, George More, strongly disapproved of the marriage, and, as punishment, More did not provide a dowry. Lord Egerton fired Donne and had him imprisoned for a short time. The eight years following Donne’s release would be a struggle for the married couple until Anne’s father finally paid her dowry.