The poems of Malaye Jaziri (c. 1570-1640 CE) represent the fundamental genesis of Kurdish poetry, because he was the first to deploy Classical Perso-Arabic forms in Kurdish verse. He adopted and adapted the ruba‘i and ghazal, most notably, as forms for poetry in the Kurdish language, thereby establishing a written medium for the Kurdish poetic tradition, which, prior to his pioneering work, had been almost exclusively oral. As a language of literacy, in Malaye Jaziri’s handling, Kurdish emerged as a viable vehicle for poetic expression in the schools, royal courts, and written records of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, and his work left an indelible influence on Kurdish poetry today.

A ruba‘i is a short poem of four lines, typically arranged in couplets. Like other Perso-Arabic forms, the ruba‘i emphasizes sustained correspondence of sounds. Consistent end-rhymes are a hallmark of this tradition, along with frequent use of internal rhymes and alliterations. Akin to the ruba‘i, the ghazal constitutes a series of couplets with sustained rhyme, but the number of couplets can vary from seven to fourteen pairs, allowing for more discursive treatment of the ghazal’s common themes: love and longing, divinity and ecstasy. Each ruba‘i or ghazal maintains lines of uniform length, consistent in duration within a particular poem but open to variation across poems within the same genre. The paired lines constitute discrete poetic expressions in their own right, yet remain interdependent in relation to the poem as a whole. Every couplet sets up images in tension, emotions straining toward an articulation that eludes reductive treatment.

Malaye Jaziri’s poems address a Beloved of unspecified, indeterminate gender, and often close with a parting signature by his poetic persona (“Mala”), signaling the poem’s end and reflecting upon the nature of the poem and its addressee. Our translations endeavor to balance the feminine and masculine traits of the addressee, never explicitly indicating whether the Beloved is male or female, to preserve the poet’s deliberate ambiguity on this point. In keeping with this indeterminacy, the poems invite supple interpretations, capable of adapting each poem’s sequence of imagery to apply to a human lover, a deity, or a homeland.
You are my shelter from the sun, my skylight in a vaulted dome: my love, my wine, my cup —
the cup that ever satisfies and never sates. So let this valediction be enough:
Unless my one true love, besotted, saunters round to serve the wine,
that wine, for me, is utterly forbidden, nay, taboo two hundred times.
Beloved, I am but an ember in the fire of your beauty’s blaze;
Yet I suffice — a love more true than all the nymphs of long ago and far away.

I am like the thinnest crescent moon, the faintest glimmer of the sky;
Here mirrored in the goblet of your heart you glimpse my light.

Your dawning launched a siege against my heart and stole my soul,
which dwells in you, while I am nothing but a cage or shell.

It is your love, this rock-a-bye that sways me till I moan
from dusk to dawn, a rolling, tolling like a bell with leaden tones.

I said, “O, Moon, your crescent savors of the eyebrows of my Love.”
“Far from it,” came the answer. “No, I more resemble horses’ hooves.”

My cherished steward filled my cup before the dawn of time,
and I remain forevermore besotted with that wine.

My soul’s Beloved, thornless rose and life-spring of my soul,
the nightingale in vain may cry, but I have you to hold.

A hundred wrongs may fall upon me, yet I shall not leave your door,
for I am like a fly, and you are sugar-candy for my swarm.

If you should wish for my beheading, here I am at your command:
without delay, I’ll cut my head off. Such a keen-edged blade I am!

From head to toe, all metaphors aside, I burn as Mala now;
a Mala-moth I’ve burned: a muffled blaze, benumbed, without a sound.