from Barbara Newman, *Making Love in the Twelfth Century: "Letters of Two Lovers" in Context* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 239-242.

Newman's translation:

A Religious Woman A. to Her Friend G.

To G., her only rose, A. sends a chain of precious love.

What is my strength that I should endure, that I should have patience while you are away? Is my strength the strength of stones that I should await your return—I, who do not cease mourning night and day, like someone who has lost hands and feet? Everything that is joyous and delightful seems, without you, like mud to be trampled underfoot. Instead of rejoicing I weep; never does my spirit seem happy. When I remember the kisses you gave me and the merry words with which you caressed my little breasts, I want to die because I am not allowed to see you. What shall I do—most wretched me? Where shall I turn—poor little woman?

O if only my body had been consigned to the earth until your longed-for return, or if the translation of Habakkuk were granted to me so that I could come just once and gaze on my lover's face—then I would not care if I died that very hour! For no woman born in the world is so lovable and charming and loves me with such intimate love, without feigning. So I shall not cease my endless mourning until I can deserve to see you.

Truly, as some wise man said, great is the misery of a person who cannot be with the one he cannot be without! As long as the world endures, you will never be erased from the center of my heart. Why should I say more? Return, sweet love! Do not delay your journey any longer; you should know that I cannot bear your absence any longer.

Farewell, and remember me.

Selections from Newman's commentary[1]:

The three letters of love between women are arranged in order of increasing intensity. This remarkable message is one of very few surviving testimonies to a medieval lesbian relationship. While the theme of the absent beloved is common to other letters in this collection, one sentence goes beyond the topoi of friendship: "When I remember the kisses you gave me and the merry words with which you caressed my little breasts [refrigerasti pectuscula], I want to die because I am not allowed to see you." Were the two discovered and separated? As Dronke remarks, this recollection of a past erotic encounter differs from a robust metaphor or the anticipation of a future meeting.

[1] As with our use of her translation of the first letter in the three-letter sequence, Newman's comments that trace phrases shared between this letter and other letter collections included in her larger study are not included in this excerpt. However, readers are *strongly* encouraged to seek out Newman's complete book in their library (or, if their library does not have access to it, using ILL).

Ernstpeter Ruhe is so distressed by the writer's apparent lesbianism, which he says would indicate "an otherwise wholly unknown species in the history of the genre," that he thinks the text must need emendation. But the writer clearly uses feminine grammatical forms for both herself (*miserrima, pauperrima, mortua*) and her beloved (*nata, grata, que*). There is no ambiguity. As Dieter Schaller points out, heterosexual love is just one of many sentiments conveyed in what we have chosen to call "love letters." The medieval *epistola familiaris* can also encompass friendship, love of family, religious enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), devotion, flattery, pleas for help or counsel—and in this case, same-sex passion.

The writer is not without learning. she mischievously cites a passage from Augustine's *De Trinitate*, where the theologian laments the misery of humankind without god, and adapts the saying of "some wise man" to express the personal misery of living without her beloved. her letter also alludes to a famous Old Testament episode (dramatized in *The Play of Daniel*) in which an angel seizes the prophet Habakkuk by the hair and flies him off to feed Daniel in the lions' den. The writer's wish that she too could magically travel by such means recalls a letter from Alcuin to Archbishop Arno of salzburg, which interestingly is known only from Salzburg manuscripts. Hence Schaller suggests that the women responsible for these letters might have lived in that city. The freedom of mobility assumed in this letter suggests that they might in fact have been canonesses rather than cloistered nuns. Tegernsee had frequent communications with Salzburg, so it would not have been surprising if the monks had ties with a women's community there. It seems more surprising that they preserved such a letter—and unthinkable that any monk would have written it in the persona of a woman.

I cannot take seriously Plechl's suggestion that even this should be regarded as a "model letter" (*Musterbrief*) because it demonstrates stylistic parallels with others in the collection. If no letter can be considered genuine unless it is totally free of formulas and topoi, what would be the point of writing model letters in the first place?

Chain of precious love (*vinculum dilectionis preciose*): cf. Jerome, Epistulae 82.11 (*dilectionis vinculo*)

What is my strength that I should endure? (*Que est fortitudo mea, ut sustineam?*): Job 6:11 (*Quae est . . . fortitudo mea, ut sustineam?)*

Is my strength the strength of stones? (*Numquid fortitudo mea fortitudo est lapidum?*): Job 6:12 (*Nec fortitudo lapidum fortitudo mea*)

Love, without feigning (*sine simulatione . . . dilectione*): Romans 12:9 (*dilectio sine simulatione*)

If the translation of Habakkuk were granted to me (*si translatio mihi concederetur Abacuc*): Daniel 14:32–38; Jerome, *Epistulae* 3.1 (*O si mihi nunc Dominus . . . Ambacum ad Danihelum translationem repente concederet*); Alcuin, *Epistolae* 10 (*O si mihi translatio Abacuc esset subito concessa*)

Great is the misery of a person who cannot be with the one he cannot be without *(magna miseria est hominis cum illo non esse, sine quo non potest esse)*: Augustine, *De Trinitate* 14.12.16 (Magna . . . hominis miseria est cum illo non esse, sine quo non potest esse, Pl 42: 1049)