

A soldier's letter home...

Written by Major Sullivan Ballou to his wife in Smithfield, Rhode Island

July 14, 1861

Washington D.C.

Dear Sarah,

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days – perhaps tomorrow – and lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall unto your eye when I am no more.

I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged. And my courage does not halt or falter. I know how American civilization now leans upon the triumph of the government and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing, perfectly willing, to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this government and to pay that debt.

Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but omnipotence can break. And yet my love of country comes over me like a strong wind, and bears me irresistibly with all those chains to the battlefield. The memory of all the blissful moments I've enjoyed with you come crowding over me and I feel deeply grateful to God, and you, that I've enjoyed them for so long. And how hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and see our boys grown up to honorable manhood around us. If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I loved you. Nor that when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.

Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless, how foolish I have sometimes been. But oh Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they love, I shall always be with you in the brightest day and the darkest night. Always. Always. And when the soft breeze fans your cheek, it shall be my breath. Or the cool air on your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.

Sarah, do not mourn me dead. Think I am gone and wait for me. For we shall meet again.

1. Using clues found in the letter, what do you **know** about Sullivan Ballou? Construct a detailed “biography” of his life using evidence from this letter.
2. Explain why Ballou is fighting in the Civil War. What is his motivation?
3. Which side is Ballou fighting for in the war? What evidence would support your belief?
4. Did this letter help you make a connection with a fellow American from the 19th century? Explain how reading his words did or did not help you “know” him better.