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Grade 6

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I opened my eyes and looked around. In my one-year-old eyes, I could see so much: the orange glowing sunset sparkling over the Saba River like rhinestones, the many plants along the river catching the sunlight like emeralds, and the water a shimmering flow. The sky was like something out of a dream, with the clouds like cotton candy and the glowing sun was amber. I remember the smell; it was like nothing else. I heard the rush of the water. It sounded like an orchestra, tuning their instruments, preparing to play its ancient song, a song it has played for thousands of years. It demands respect and asks us to protect it from losing its natural beauty.

In a way, water is like us, it can take many different shapes, sizes and forms. The Saba river begins high in the mountains of Western Japan, and graciously flows through valleys and rice fields on its way out to meet the Pacific Ocean. It meets the ocean in the town where my mom grew up, where I spent the first year and a half of my life, and where I visit year after year. In a field near the river, I learned how to walk and said my first word, “wan wan,” which means “dog” in Japanese. My mom, dad and I used to have picnics by the river, and my grandma used to take me on walks there too.

My family would tell me stories about the river. In old Japan, people believed in supernatural beings called Kappa, which took care of the water and kept it clean. But as Japan industrialized, the Kappas couldn't take care of the water anymore, so they left the job to humans. I don't know if these spirits are real, but I do know that I love, respect, and care for this river.

Over the past few years, I've realized how much we are ruining our relationship with water. Water used to be something that we loved and respected, but now we just use it, taking it for granted. Aldo Leopold once wrote, “What and whom do we love?... Certainly not the waters which we assume have no function except turn turbines, float barges and carry off sewage.” This quote makes me think about how humans are using water, not loving it. We treat it like a puppet, making it work for us; we treat it like we created it just for us to use. But the reality is, that water was here before us, provided life for us, and we're not repaying the favor. We need to open our eyes and hearts and realize how big of a problem we are causing. All over the world, rivers are being dammed, polluted, and depleted. I wonder if rivers do have spirits; is it the song of the spirits I hear? The Saba River is very important to me, and I will continue to love and care for this river as long as I can.