

## **Voices — Essay entry for the 2025–2026 Buffs One Read Contest by Diyora Daminova**

The air in Tashkent vibrated with contradictions: Soviet concrete blocks shadowing crumbling mosques, centuries of tradition trembling under the weight of a hesitant modernity. I always felt like a ghost in my own city, lost, restless, aching. Something was missing — always missing — and my mind hunted for it, never naming it, only feeling it as a pulse, a fire, a silent scream trapped inside me. I was certain of nothing. I only knew the ache that demanded to be answered.

Reading *Callings* reminded me that purpose often begins in dissonance — that quiet, burning rebellion that hums through your bones when the world tells you to stay small. My story starts there, in that rebellion, in that refusal to disappear.

### **The History That Raised Me**

Few in the world know my home. Say “Uzbekistan,” and most faces go blank. Yet this land carries a history that refuses to stay silent. Our nation’s name — Uzbek — means ‘owner of oneself,’ a declaration of independence and self-mastery. Yet for centuries, that ownership was taken from us.

Before empires and ideologies, my ancestors were nomads — *kochevniki*, as Russians named us. To us, it meant more: people of the open steppe, wanderers who belonged everywhere and nowhere. We rode horses under the endless sky, followed the sun, sang to the horizon, and dreamed without permission.

Then came the conquerors. Arabs brought faith, Mongols brought fire, Russians brought hunger and control. They took almost everything — our lands, our resources, even our voices. Our language was reshaped, banned, twisted into Cyrillic. Hands that did not love us tried to erase us. Today, Uzbek exists in two alphabets — a fractured tongue for a fractured soul.

At school, our history was censored. Yesterday was erased. We were taught that silence was safer than truth. I grew up rootless — loving a homeland whose name I did not know, proud yet confused, carrying a lineage no one dared speak aloud.

My parents carried it heavier. They lived through the collapse of the world they knew. Everyone became an orphan. The light at the end of the tunnel was a lie. Freedom came suddenly, like a storm, and no one knew how to grasp it.

### **The Spark That Changed Everything**

When the electricity went out, I would sit on the cracked stairs outside our house and look up at the sky. The city would fall silent, swallowed by darkness, and above it all the stars would appear — fierce, alive, unblinking. Sometimes they shimmered softly, like

whispers. Sometimes they burned so bright they hurt to look at. But they were always there — unerasable, ungovernable, free.

Those stars were my first teachers. They told me that even in darkness, there is something that refuses to disappear. That was a possibility. That was hope.

When I told people I wanted to be an astronaut, they laughed. “That’s not for you,” they said. But every laugh, every doubt, every patronizing smile — it all turned to fire inside me. Their disbelief didn’t extinguish my dream; it forged it. Every *no* became a spark. Every limit became a challenge.

At first, I dreamed of leaving — of escaping the silence, the obedience, the centuries of heaviness pressing down on my people. I wanted to believe that somewhere beyond the horizon, the world was brighter, freer, kinder. I wanted to fly far enough that the weight of history couldn’t reach me.

But dreams are stubborn things. They evolve. Mine refused to be escape. It became rebellion — it became purpose. I began learning engineering — each new concept a brick in the bridge I was building.

When I finally boarded a plane to Colorado — ten thousand kilometers away, heart pounding like a launch countdown — I realized I wasn’t running anymore. I was rising. I was becoming.

## **Becoming My Calling**

Coming to the U.S. felt like stepping into another lifetime. The air moved differently here — freer, yes, but lonelier, thinner, like it carried expectations I had never known. I was no longer “the girl who dreams too much.” I was an engineer in the making. And yet, even in this new world, I carried the weight of two identities: one forged in a homeland of silence and survival, the other in a world of possibility and exposure.

In quiet spaces of learning and discovery, I realized my past was not a limitation — it was a lens. The endurance women in my hometown had learned — surviving the erasure of identity, misogyny, exploitation, and a society determined to diminish us, to deny our rights, our voices, our potential — became the wellspring of strength I now draw on to create. The silence that once felt suffocating became the foundation for listening deeply, imagining boldly, and daring without limits.

*Callings* reminded me that purpose is not stumbled upon: it is forged, piece by piece, from resistance, rage, refusal, pain, and perseverance. All the hardship, all the no’s, all the boundaries we are forced to navigate — they are the raw materials of meaning. Every limit is an invitation to rise higher.

For me, purpose is flight: not to escape, but to return.

Uzbekistan once built aircraft, reaching toward the stars. After independence, the stars went quiet. But I still look up. I want to be the first woman from independent Uzbekistan to go to space — not to leave, but to remind my country that we still can, that we always could.

I want to bring back that fire — the fire my ancestors carried galloping across the endless steppes, unbound by borders or fear. I want my people to remember that “Uzbek” once meant *owner of oneself* — and that we still are.

## **The Rise**

Now, I see my calling in everything — in the satellites I build, in the girls I mentor, in the stories I tell. My work is never just aerospace; it is flight for those crushed by history, by injustice, by silence.

Dave Isay writes, “May you live with courage always.” For me, courage is remembering where I come from — and rising anyway. Daring to speak, daring to exist, daring to claim space in a world that tells you not to, simply because you are different. The very fact that I am here, that my voice carries, proves that humanity can be more than the circumstances we are born into.

I am the echo and evolution of my ancestors. I am the daughter of people silenced for generations. When I say “my people,” I mean everyone. Women, dreamers, wanderers, survivors — anyone told to be small who chose instead to grow. My people are those who endure, who protect, who rise without breaking what is sacred.

And I am here. I rise — for them, with them, because of them. *And my voice carries.*