Excerpts from the YA novel *Out of My Mind*, by Sharon Draper.
I'm surrounded by thousands of words. Maybe millions.

Cathedral. Mayonnaise. Pomegranate.
Mississippi. Neapolitan. Hippopotamus.
Silky. Terrifying. Iridescent.
Tickle. Sneeze. Wish. Worry.
Words have always swirled around me like snowflakes—each one delicate and different, each one melting untouched in my hands.

Deep within me, words pile up in huge drifts. Mountains of phrases and sentences and connected ideas. Clever expressions. Jokes. Love songs.

From the time I was really little—maybe just a few months old—words were like sweet, liquid gifts, and I drank them like lemonade. I could almost taste them. They made my jumbled thoughts and feelings have substance. My parents have always blanketed me with conversation. They chattered and babbled. They verbalized and vocalized. My father sang to me. My mother whispered her strength into my ear.

Every word my parents spoke to me or about me I absorbed and kept and remembered. All of them.

I have no idea how I untangled the complicated process of words and thought, but it happened quickly and naturally. By the time I was two, all my memories had words, and all my words had meanings.

But only in my head.

I have never spoken one single word. I am almost eleven years old.

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I can't talk. I can't walk. I can't feed myself or take myself to the bathroom. Big bummer.

My arms and hands are pretty stiff, but I can mash the buttons on the TV remote and move my wheelchair with the help of knobs that I can grab on the wheels. I can't hold a spoon or a pencil without dropping it. And my balance is like zip—Humpty Dumpty had more control than I do.

When people look at me, I guess they see a girl with short, dark, curly hair strapped into a pink wheelchair. By the way, there is nothing cute about a pink wheelchair. Pink doesn't change a thing.

They'd see a girl with dark brown eyes that are full of curiosity. But one of them is slightly out of whack.

Her head wobbles a little.

Sometimes she drools.

She's really tiny for a girl who is age ten and three quarters.

Her legs are very thin, probably because they've never been used.

Her body tends to move on its own agenda, with feet sometimes kicking out unexpectedly and arms occasionally flailing, connecting with whatever is close by—a stack of CDs, a bowl of soup, a vase of roses.

Not a whole lot of control there.

After folks got finished making a list of my problems, they might take time to notice that I have a fairly nice smile and deep dimples—I think my dimples are cool.

I wear tiny gold earrings.

Sometimes people never even ask my name, like it's not important or something. It is. My name is Melody.

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Dad took videos of me as a baby getting fed, getting changed, and even me sleeping. As I got older, I guess he was waiting for me to turn over, and sit up, and walk. I never did.

But I did absorb everything. I began to recognize noises and smells and tastes. And music.

I suppose it's a good thing to be unable to forget anything—being able to keep every instant of my life crammed inside my head. But it's also very frustrating. I can't share any of it, and none of it ever goes away.

Mostly, though, I remember words. Very early I figured out there were millions of words in the world. Everyone around me was able to bring them out with no effort.

Everybody uses words to express themselves. Except me. And I bet most people don't realize the real power of words. But I do.

Thoughts need words. Words need a voice.

I love the smell of my mother's hair after she washes it.

I love the feel of the scratchy stubble on my father's face before he shaves.

But I've never been able to tell them.

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I have a television remote control clicker attached to my wheelchair, very close to my right hand. On the left side I have a remote for the radio. I have enough control in my fist and thumbs to push the buttons so I can change the station, and I'm really glad of that! Twenty-four hours of big-time wrestling or the home shopping station can drive a person nuts! I can adjust the volume and even play DVDs if someone has popped one in the player for me.

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I've seen dozens of doctors in my life, who all try to analyze me and figure me out. None of them can fix me, so I usually ignore them and act like the retarded person they think I am. I paste on a blank look, focus on one wall, and pretend their questions are too hard for me to understand. It's sort of what they expect anyway.

When I turned five, it was time to think about enrolling me in school. So my mother took me to a doctor whose job it was to figure out how smart I was. She wheeled me in, locked the brake so my wheelchair would not roll, and made sure the lap strap was fastened. When my seat belt comes undone—and it does every once in a while—I slide out of that wheelchair like a piece of wet spaghetti.

"My name is Dr. Hugely," he said in a booming voice.

"We're going to play a game today, okay? I'll ask you some questions, and you get to play with the toys here. Won't that be fun?"

I knew it would be a long, long hour.

He brought out a stack of well-used, hopefully not lead-tainted, wood blocks, then leaned in so close to me, I could see the pores in his face. Gross! "Can you stack these in order according to size?" he said loudly and slowly, as if I were hard of hearing and really stupid.

But who was being stupid? Didn't he know I couldn't grab the blocks? Of course I knew which block was bigger than the other. But I couldn't stack them if he paid me money! So I just took my arm and swept them all to the floor. They fell with a wooden clatter. I tried not to laugh as he picked them up. He breathed really hard as he reached for them.

Next, he held up glossy eight-by-ten cards with different colors painted on each one. "Tell me when you see the color blue, Melody," he said in that voice that told me he thought this was all a waste of time.

When the blue card showed up, I pointed to it and made a noise. "Buh!" I said.

"Marvelous! Tremendous! Stupendous!" he shouted. He praised me like I had just passed the test to get into college. If I could have rolled my eyes, I would have.

Then he showed me green, so I kicked and made a noise, but my mouth can't make the G sound. The doctor looked disappointed.

He scribbled something on his clipboard, pulled out another stack of cards, then said, loudly, "I'm going to ask you some questions now, Melody. These might be hard, but do your best, okay?"

I just looked at him and waited while he placed the first set of cards in front of me.

"Number one. Which one of these is not like the others?"

Did he get this stuff from Sesame Street?

He showed me pictures of a tomato, a cherry, a round red balloon, and a banana. I know he was probably looking for the balloon as the answer, but that just seemed too easy. So I pointed to the banana because the first three were round and red, and the banana was not.

Dr. Hugely sighed and scribbled more notes. "Number two," he said. He showed me four more cards. This time there were pictures of a cow, a whale, a camel, and an elephant. "Which animal gives birth to a calf?"

Now, I watch Animal Planet all the time. I know for a fact that all the animals he had pictured there had babies called a "calf." I thought doctors were supposed to be smart. What to do? I hit each picture slowly and carefully, then did it once more just to make sure he understood. I don't think he did.

I heard him mumble "cow" as he wrote more notes. It was clear he was giving up on me.

Dr. Hugely, even though he had been to college for like, a million years, would never be smart enough to see inside of me.

I'm always amazed at how adults assume I can't hear. They talk about me as if I'm invisible, figuring I'm too retarded to understand their conversation. I learn quite a bit this way. But this conversation was really awful.

"Mrs. Brooks," he then said, "it is my opinion that Melody is severely brain-damaged and profoundly retarded."

My mom gasped, then said nothing for a full minute. Finally, she took a deep breath and protested quietly, "But I know she's bright. I can see it in her eyes."

"You love her. It's only normal to have wishful thinking," Dr. Hugely told her gently.

"No, she has a spark. More than that—a flame of real intelligence. I just know it," my mother insisted, sounding a little stronger.

"It takes time to accept the limitations of a beloved child. She has **cerebral palsy**, Mrs. Brooks."

[remove for identification question]

"I know the name of her condition, Doctor," my mother said with ice in her voice. "But a person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart! Melody is able to figure out things, communicate, and manage in a world where nothing works right for her. She's the one with the true intelligence!"

Melody goes to primary school.

I was so excited when Mom first enrolled me here. I thought I'd learn new things every day, but mostly it was simply something to do that took up time and got me out of the house. In second and third grades I probably learned more from the Sci Fi or Discovery Channels than I ever learned at school. My teachers were nice, most of the time, but they would've needed X-ray vision like Superman to see what was in my head.

I am in a special program with other children with what they call "disabilities."

Ashley, the youngest in our group, actually does puke quite a bit. She's nine, but she could pass for three. She has the smallest wheelchair I've ever seen. Her body is really stiff, and it's tough for her to reach or grab or hold anything. It's almost impossible for Ashley to communicate because her body is so tight. Her "talking board" has just two words on it—yes and no. She turned her head slightly to the left for no. I bet she wished she could knock the thing down.

Compared to Ashley, Carl is huge. Even though he's just nine, he's got a special wheelchair that's extra wide, and it takes two aides to lift him in and out of it. But he's good with his hands. He can move his own chair, and he can hold a pencil well enough to write his name. He can talk,

but only in very short sentences that usually have two parts. He has very strong opinions. “Snowman is dumb,” he’d yell. “Very, very dumb.”

Maria, who has Down syndrome, is ten. Maria talks all the time. Even though she has trouble figuring out complicated stuff, Maria understands people and how they feel.

Gloria is our rocker. She rocks for hours in the corner under one of the dumb smiling flowers. The teachers are always trying to coax her out, but she wraps her arms around herself like she’s cold and keeps on rocking. She’s autistic, I think. She can walk perfectly well, and she talks when she has something to say. It’s always worth listening to.

Willy Williams—yes, that’s his real name—is eleven. I’m not sure what his diagnosis is. He yodels, like one of those Swiss people in a mountain-climbing commercial. He makes other noises, too—whistles and grunts and shrieks. He’s never, ever quiet and never completely still. I sometimes wonder if he makes all those noises and movements in his sleep. Our first-grade teacher, Mr. Gross, liked to play guessing games. Willy just burbled if the questions were about butterflies or boats, but watch out if the question was about baseball. He’d screech out the right answer before the yelps and bellows took over.

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I have a large Plexiglas tray that fastens to the arms of my chair. It serves as a food tray as well as a communication board. When I was younger, Mom pasted dozens of words on it, but I was still limited to only a handful of common nouns, verbs, and adjectives, some names, and a bunch of smiley faces. There are also a few necessary phrases, like, I need to go to the bathroom, please and I’m hungry, but most people—even little kids—need to say more than that in a day. Duh!

I’ve got please and thank you, yes, no, and maybe close together on the right-hand side. On the left are the names of people in my family, kids in my class, and teachers.

There’s an alphabet strip at the top, so I can spell out words, and a row of numbers under that, so I can count or say how many or talk about time. But for the majority of my life, I’ve had the communication tools of a little kid on my board. It’s no wonder everybody thinks I’m retarded.

I hate that word, by the way. Retarded.

I like all the kids in room H-5, and I understand their situations better than anybody, but there’s nobody else like me. It’s like I live in a cage with no door and no key. And I have no way to tell someone how to get me out.

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I knew a lot of words, but I couldn’t read a book. I had a million thoughts in my head, but I couldn’t share them with anybody. Turns out Stephen Hawking has something called ALS, and he can’t walk or talk, and he’s probably the smartest man in the world, and everybody knows it! That is so cool.

“He’s like you, sort of, isn’t he?” Mrs. V asked.

I pointed to yes on my board, then pointed to no.

“I don’t follow you.” She scratched her head.

I pointed to need on my board, then to read. Need/read. Need/read.

“I know you can read lots of words, Melody,” Mrs. V said.

I pointed again. More. I could feel tears coming. More. More. More.

“Melody, if you had to choose, which would you rather be able to do—walk or talk?”

Talk. I pointed to my board. I hit the word again and again. Talk. Talk. Talk.

I have so much to say.

So Mrs. V made it her new mission to give me language. She ripped all the words off my communication board and started from scratch. She made the new words smaller, so more could fit. Every single space on my talking board got filled with names and pictures of people in my life, questions I might need to ask, and a big variety of nouns and verbs and adjectives, so I could actually compose something that looked like a sentence! I could ask, Where is my book bag? or say, Happy Birthday, Mom, just by pointing with my thumb.

I have magic thumbs, by the way. They work perfectly. The rest of my body is sort of like a coat with the buttons done up in the wrong holes. But my thumbs came out with no flaws, no glitches. Just my thumbs. Go figure.

Every time Mrs. V would add new words, I learned them quickly, used them in sentences, and was hungry for more. I wanted to READ!

So she made flash cards.

Pink for nouns.

Blue for verbs.

Green for adjectives.

Piles and piles of words I learned to read.

And then she would stretch out the cards on the floor, position me on a big pillow so I could reach them, and I’d push the cards into sentences with my fists. It was like stringing the beads of a necklace together to make something really cool.

I liked to make her laugh, so I’d put the words into wacky order sometimes.

The blue fish will run away. He does not want to be dinner.

For my tenth birthday I got a whole book of Garfield cartoons—now, that’s what’s up! I made Dad read it to me over and over. Garfield is a cat who has a lot to say, but all his words are written in little circles above his head. He can’t really talk, of course—he’s a cat!

But sometimes that’s how I feel—like wouldn’t it be cool if I had somebody to write the words over my head so people would know what I’m thinking? I could live with that—large floating bubbles above me, speaking for me.

Wouldn’t it be cool if somebody could invent a bubble-talking machine before fifth grade starts in a couple of weeks? Hah!

When I try to talk, the words are exploding in my brain, but all that comes out are meaningless sounds and squeaks. Penny can say lots of words and pieces of words. But my lips won't come together to make even simple sounds like that, so most of my noises are vowels. I can say "uh" and "ah" pretty clearly, and, if I concentrate, sometimes I can squeeze out a "buh" or a "huh." But that's it.

Catherine and I research all kinds of electronic talking and communication devices that have been designed for people like me. Lots of them seem as clunky and awkward as our room computer. Some look really complicated. All of them are expensive. Crazy expensive. Some of the websites don't even list the prices—like they're afraid to specify how much the things cost.

The devices that use standard computer keyboards wouldn't work. I'd have no way to hit the individual keys. I need something that would work with just my thumbs.

We find adapted computers, talking boards that speak the words, push-button systems, and even devices that work with blinks or head nods. Finally, we find something called a Medi-Talker that looks like a possibility. It has spaces big enough for my thumbs to get into and millions of words and phrases built into it!

Finally, finally, finally, on the Wednesday before Christmas, the Medi-Talker arrives. I need no other gift. Then, under about a mile of bubble wrap, there it is. The Medi-Talker. Smaller than I expected, it's only the size of my wheelchair tray, but it's sleek and shiny and cool to the touch. It is like a butterfly ready to unfold its wings.

So I take my right thumb and push the on button. The board whirs and glows, and then a welcome message appears on the screen.

I push another button, and a voice that sounds like an Englishman with a really bad head cold blurts out, "Welcome to Medi-Talker!"

We quickly discover that the Medi-Talker has more than a dozen levels, all easily reached with just one button. So on level one we program in the names of everyone I know—my name, all the members of my family, kids and teachers at school, my doctors, the neighbors, my parents' friends, and, of course, Mrs. V. On the second level she insists we add all the vocabulary words we've been collecting on our multicolored three-by-five-inch flash cards.

Nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives—thousands of them—as well as a cool sentence-maker that is located on another level. We can prepare hundreds of phrases and sentences and get to them with just a touch. Ordinary words. Normal conversation. I've never had that. Awesome.

Another level is for numbers and even computation—I'll be able to do math now. Maybe I won't tell the teachers about that one.

One of the first changes I want to make is the hello message and the voice that speaks it. The computer-produced greeting sounds really fake. But the machine offers several female voices to choose from, as well as a bunch of different languages.

When Dad and Mom come in to pick us up, Dad is ready with his camcorder. His hands are shaking a little. "Show us how it works, honey," he says.

I can’t believe Dad is making a video of me saying my first words. It’s almost like when he filmed my little sister Penny’s first words—well, not really.

I type very carefully and push the button to make the machine speak.

“Hi, Dad. Hi, Mom. I am so happy.”