~~FINAL~~ DRAFT

She was pretty and smart and haunted. With two mysteries to her credit, Mercedes Lambert was among the city's most celebrated young writers in the 1990s. But after her publisher rejected her third novel, Lambert's life turned to ash. Now her friend is left puzzling over her early demise

BY **LUCAS CROWN**

IN THE **LAST** CENTURY

the Alexandria Hotel, at 5th and Spring streets downtown, has gone from being the hangout of DeMille, Chaplin, and Valentino to being one of Los Angeles's worst drug-trafficking spots to its current existence as a welfare flop. I have chosen to make this my home for the next five days. Divesting myself of everything bright and reassuring—laptop, PDA, cell phone—I have come to exhume what I have been unable to face in my comfortable house 30 miles to the east. An overstuffed duffel bag lies on the bed of my cramped room like a small body. In it are journals, photographs, manuscripts, and correspondence. ¶ This is my inheritance and my obligation: to try to understand the mysteries of my friend Mercedes Lambert, once considered among L.A.'s most promising contemporary writers. How did a successful lawyer, teacher, and novelist end up here at the Alexandria, and later homeless on the streets of Los Angeles, before dying at the age of 55?

MERCEDES LAMBERT'S real name was Douglas Anne Munson. Her father, a newspaperman, was counting on having a boy so he could name him after his dead brother, but the name stuck when she was born in Crossville, Tennessee, in 1948. Her family moved frequently, settling finally in Southern California, where her father wrote industrial films until he died in the 1970s.

I met Douglas in the early '80s in a UCLA Extension writer's workshop taught by the author John Rechy. Before the semester began, she had mailed her classmates the first 20 pages of a novel she was working on called *Glass Candles*. The writing had an edgy luster that made me want to know the author. She walked into class that first night wearing jeans and a leather motorcycle jacket. In her midthirties, with sandy blond hair, she was stunning.

Douglas had wanted to be a writer from the start. Her father told her she didn't have what it took. Her mother threw a pot of coffee at her when, instead of filling out college applications, she said she wanted to go on the road like Kerouac and write about it. Douglas did attend college, the University of New Mexico, and majored in Latin American studies before moving to Quito, Ecuador, where she organized hot dog vendors into a union. When someone suggested law school, she applied to UCLA.

As a lawyer, she worked briefly for an insurance company in the Valley. Douglas hated everything about that job, except happy hour at the bars along Ventura Boulevard. By the time I met her, she was an attorney with the Los Angeles County Juvenile Dependency Court, handling an ever-increasing caseload that involved abused, neglected, and abandoned children.

Douglas was possessed by a grim and troubled history. As we became friends, I learned where not to venture, gathering clues from her writing. The self-destructive main character of the book she'd been working on, attorney Sandy Walker, abused as a child, must defend parents accused of the same abuses. Like Douglas, Sandy resorted to substance abuse and serial relationships with dangerous men to cope with the pain. After Douglas was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a successful lumpectomy in 1987, she quit drinking and poured herself into writing.

AT THE ALEXANDRIA, I am caught up in opposing currents of opulence and neglect, good intentions and bad ends. Without air-conditioning, the room is suffocating. I arrange the materials in careful piles, then, appalled by the artificial neatness, scatter everything. Her life was chaos, after all.

I think: The photographs will be easiest. Then I dive in. Here she is a little girl reaching up to touch the spine of a book. Here she is graduating from high school in her cap and gown. Here she is sitting in a yellow sweater on a cliff at Machu Picchu.

When Douglas thought she was dying of cancer, she paid for a series of black-and-white photographs. She posed in cocktail lounges, in beauty shop doorways, against graffiti-covered walls. Her beauty is discomforting and irresistible, the embodiment of noir. There is one snapshot I keep returning to: She is rising from a pond. Water ripples from her in widening circles as she looks into the camera and smiles. She is completely off guard in this photograph. She is completely happy. I feel, in a petty way, jealous. Who was she looking at behind the camera? I wish I had known her then. But mostly what saddens me is how out of place this photograph is, how brief that happiness must have been.

PAGE 143: PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS CROWN; COLORIZATION: JOHN RITTER. PAGE 145: PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS CROWN

IN AUGUST 1990, Viking published *Glass Candles* as *El Niño*. The *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "It's not to be missed by anyone who cares about what's happening to our society on the edge of the 21st century." But Douglas felt undeserving. When the *Los Angeles Times* ran a profile of her, she called me in a panic. "I'm a fraud," she said. "Everybody will find out. And the photo they used makes me look terrible."

She was already finishing a hard-boiled mystery featuring a pair of female detectives, Whitney Logan and Lupe Ramos. Her literary pace had become frenetic, like that of someone being pursued. As soon as she sent in the manuscript, Viking bought *Dogtown*, which Douglas would publish under the name Mercedes Lambert. With the nom de plume, she wanted to create distance between her more serious writing, like *El Niño*, and her mysteries.

"Who says an entertaining, charming, unpretentious detective story can't be...an authentic agent of social change?" novelist and critic Carolyn See asked in her review for the *Times*. "Without ever making a big deal of it, the author takes on dozens of issues that define our weird metropolis.... *Dogtown* is an

ON THE VERGE: Douglas Anne Munson, aka Mercedes Lambert, shortly before her first novel was published

excellent, fresh, indigenous thriller."

Once again Douglas's elation at having written a well-received novel gave way to doubt. Like Whitney Logan, she could never dispel the critical voice of her father. At 43, she believed she was losing her looks and feared her talent would evaporate. Men continued to come and go in her life. Trying to keep level, she entered therapy. Took antidepressants. Experimented with Chinese herbs. Bought a Pilates box. Went to AA meetings. Then she started a new book.

Erotomania, a story of sexual obsession that she planned to publish under her real name, was going to be her breakout novel, but Viking wanted her to write a sequel to *Dogtown*. "I know this book is going to become a standard for female (and male, for that matter!) sleuths," her editor wrote. "WE WANT MORE!!" Douglas set aside *Erotomania* and went to work on the next Whitney Logan mystery.

She began to experience long bouts of writer's block. Restless, she left the L.A.-based agent who had sold the first two books and went with a more well-known agent in New York. By now her day job had become unbearable. Every morning, on the long drive to the courthouse from her apartment in Marina del Rey, she would burst into tears. She needed a way out, but the books wouldn't pay enough for her to live in L.A. Douglas was teaching a class in creative writing at UCLA and leading a private workshop at her apartment. She liked teaching, but it would never replace the income she made as a lawyer. She couldn't live on less. She owed the IRS. Douglas began to tell coworkers, half jokingly, she was keeping a list of the best public bathrooms downtown to prepare for her "trajectory of downward mobility."

One afternoon she went to visit her mother in Santa Monica, only to find her on the floor of her apartment dying. Douglas would never be able to shake the sound of her death rattle or the sight—as she would later describe in a journal—of her "huge, obese head twisted to the right, yellow waxy face, foaming blood and something yellow running out of the right side of her mouth." As difficult as their relationship had been, this was her only link to flesh and blood in the world. There was nothing tying her to Los Angeles anymore.

Wrapping up the last revisions to *Soultown*, Douglas formulated an escape plan: She would go overseas, where she could live cheaply and focus on her writing. She enrolled in a program to earn an accreditation to teach English abroad.

In July 1996, four years after asking for a sequel, Viking published the second Whitney Logan mystery. It, too, was a critical success, and Douglas started a third Whitney Logan mystery, *Ghosttown*.

Douglas had friends who were living on Bainbridge Island in Washington State. They had a spare room where she could live while finishing the book. So she gave notice to the courts and cleared out her apartment. For spending money, she sold concert seats at the Seattle call center of a national ticket broker for $5 an hour. She studied for her language certification, but writing proved difficult. Migraines, exacerbated by the damp weather, slowed her down. "Working on *Ghosttown*," she wrote me. "Just need to finish it and send it out. Not brain surgery after all."

» WHEN THE *L.A. TIMES* RAN A PROFILE OF HER, SHE CALLED ME IN A PANIC. "I'M A FRAUD," SHE SAID. "EVERYBODY WILL FIND OUT."

Weeks became months, and when she completed the final draft, her agent wasn't pleased. There were several problems, but mainly Whitney Logan was too tough and the ending didn't work. Douglas spent months on revisions.

In June 1997, Douglas sent a new draft to her agent. Within a month I received an e-mail, which began, "Let me dump my bad news now so we can then commingle our anxiety and depression. Viking rejected my book. They didn't like the story, they didn't like the writing, it had been too long between books, the other two books hadn't made any money and I, they say, refused to cooperate with promoting the last book. I am in a grief cycle. Think I'm still in shock with some overtones of denial (like they might call me and say it was a mistake)." Her agent added that the book couldn't be sold to anyone else since the publisher owned the characters.

Douglas worked to reconceive *Ghosttown*—rename the characters, change the settings—in the hopes of finding a different publisher. She felt she had overstayed her welcome in the Bainbridge house, but she had no money for a place of her own. Waiting for a job offer from overseas, she needed to start saving for airfare. But she was also in a panic: Irregularities had turned up in a routine mammogram, and the doctor recommended she consult a surgeon.

As much as she resisted the thought of returning, Los Angeles—where she still had many contacts, including physicians—was the only place she could go. Later that summer she slipped into the city, staying briefly with a friend from the courts, then at a communal house in one of the worst sections of Venice. Douglas couldn't fit back into the life she had known; she felt uncomfortable around her friends. After the mammogram proved to be a false alarm, she called and asked me to help her find a cheap apartment.

"Remember when you drove me around looking for a place to rent and we went to a building behind the Ambassador?" she recalled in an e-mail. "We walked into a courtyard which had some tall jacaranda type trees and the ground was littered with dirty diapers people had thrown out their windows. Those dirty white plastic diapers like doves turned out of paradise. I think we were too numb to comment on it."

When she called again, she asked me to come and see her at the Alexandria Hotel. "Have to be careful what you write," she said, standing in the doorway of her room. It took me a moment to realize, but a pivotal scene in *Ghosttown* unfolds in one of the rooms of the Alexandria. We went to Colima on Sunset, an old hangout from her dependency court days. We sat in a booth by the window, ate chips and guacamole, and made awkward conversation. She often complained about how infrequently we saw each other when we lived in the same city. Distance had drawn us closer than ever, but in one another's presence we had become like strangers. I took her back to the Alexandria. We stood facing each other at the curb. She kissed my cheek and vanished into the hotel. I never saw her again, though a former client of hers spotted her homeless and wandering the streets of Santa Monica.

I ROAM THE HALLWAYS of the Alexandria looking for the room she occupied, as though I might pass through time to relive that night. I am haunted by the silence of those moments, by our lack of ease in each other's company.

Back in my room, I reread our e-mails. She describes being homeless after leaving the Alexandria: "At the first shelter I was at in L.A. there would be strange food donations—like people bringing leftover wedding food at 11 at night and then groups of gangsters, guys into complex Kennedy conspiracy theories, Jesus freaks, all of us falling ravenously on Brie and brioche, shrimp quesadillas."

» "BEING HOMELESS CHANGED SOMETHING IN ME FOREVER," SHE WROTE IN AN E-MAIL. "ALL MY SELF-CONFIDENCE AND COURAGE HAVE GONE."

In another e-mail: "Yesterday on the bus I had a very vivid flash of a silver and onyx bracelet—Mexican, from the '30s—I bought in L.A. and brought my left arm in front of my face and really saw it there for an instant. I was surprised to feel a sharp pain of longing. I rarely ever think of what I used to own (except for my Montblanc pen which was stolen in a homeless shelter) and if I do think of them it's without attachment. The pen, well, the loss of it really cemented my loss of identity as a writer."

DOUGLAS RESURFACED in the Czech Republic in 1998, teaching English to soldiers, missionaries, and mink farmers. She settled in a city near Prague called Hradec Kralove. It was rare for a day to pass without an e-mail from her.

When I asked about writing, she ignored my question. I pressed: Would she consider going back to work on *Erotomania*?

"Being homeless changed something in me forever," she answered. "All my self-confidence and courage are gone and it feels like it will never come back. I guess it could be said that I am a broken woman. It changes everything to be unsafe, to have people in the street spit on you, to become afraid to go into supermarkets. If I don't write am I less valuable as a person? I imagine you would like me to be happy or serene and that you see writing as part of me fulfilling myself. My task is to try to re-form my broken self and put some type of skin around it. I can't say now what that will involve. It's not a 100% picnic living in a small town in the Czech Republic and I wouldn't be doing this if I had been able to think of something better to support myself. It's like trying to set one's own arm or having to do a tracheotomy on yourself."

Douglas remained silent for the next month. I knew not to mention writing again.

"This is a bad letter," she wrote in March 2001. "Things have changed and I can't stay here. I am going to live in CT.... Please, I ask you to help me. I don't want to drop a bundle of hysteria in your lap. This is the worst situation I have ever been in." She needed a ticket to New York and planned to stay with some people she knew near Norwalk, Connecticut. I suspected what she could not bring herself to say: that the cancer had returned. I wired her airfare.

Less than a week after arriving in Connecticut, Douglas learned she could not stay with her friends. She had downplayed her illness. It was more than the family could handle. "Now I am putting my things together," she e-mailed. "I will leave my things here except for a little day pack and what money I have. Am going to wash my hair, look for some paperback books to take with me, and ask them to drive me to an emergency shelter when they return."

Douglas was homeless again. She had tapped out her retirement accounts for bus fare, junk food, and coffee. After further tests, she told me her doctors had given her less than six months to live. Norwalk's homeless shelter was in a war zone. Douglas filled her days with medical appointments and chemo treatments. Later, she moved to a nicer shelter in Westport, then to an apartment where she could watch the Saugatuck River through her window.

In December 2003, Douglas complained of feeling ill. That was the final e-mail I received. She was taken to the Norwalk ER, where she died a week later.

A YEAR BEFORE she died, Douglas had me promise to do two things: scatter her ashes in the waters off Marina del Rey, and do everything I could to get *Ghosttown* published.

Several weeks after her death, a package containing her ashes arrived. I walked the slips of Marina del Rey, as she had done with her mother's ashes, and found a skipper with a 42-foot ketch willing to take me three miles offshore. On February 24, 2004, I spread her ashes in the sea.

For the next three years, getting *Ghosttown* published consumed me. I wrote letters, sent e-mails, went to readings to ask for advice or endorsements. I had started corresponding by e-mail with the novelist Michael Connelly, who admired Douglas's work and promised to read the unpublished manuscript. "I still think *Ghosttown* should be published and the author and her characters not forgotten," he said. When Five Star accepted the novel in February 2006, he agreed to provide an introduction.

Mystery writer Jonathan Kellerman answered my request to consider an endorsement. "I had the great pleasure of reading *Ghosttown* this weekend," he wrote me a month after I forwarded the manuscript. "Brilliant; I can't believe this author's books have eluded me until now. *Ghosttown* is a noir masterpiece. One of the most evocative L.A. crime novels ever written."

That's when I headed for the Alexandria. It was the last place I saw her alive, and I believed that it might hold some residual clues about her life. I rationalized that going was part of my duties as executor—to make sure nothing was overlooked. What I did not acknowledge was my own unexpurgated sorrow. I had been so busy finding a publisher for *Ghosttown*, then trying to bring interest to her story, that I had become inured to the most central fact of all: She was gone. This stale room in the ghost hotel has allowed me to grieve.

Packing my duffel bag for home the morning of my fifth day at the Alexandria, I come across a flurry of e-mails I had exchanged with the author Kate Braverman after Douglas's death. There had been a falling-out between the two, who had regarded each other as blood sisters through the '70s and '80s. Kate had based several characters in her books on Douglas. It's her words, written in an e-mail, that haunt me almost as much as the Alexandria. "douglas wasn't someone you could possess," she wrote, "nor can you forget or shed. to know douglas is to carry a permanent knife scar." ■

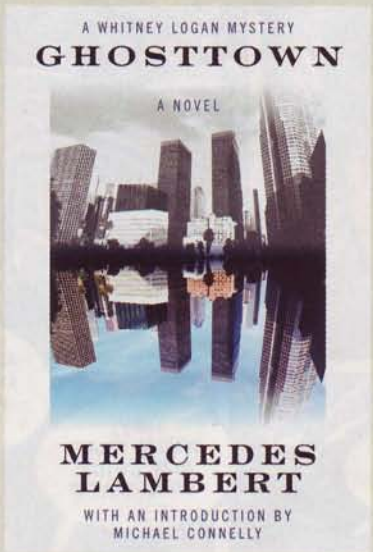
HARD LUCK **TOWN**

Mercedes Lambert's long-lost masterpiece by Ariel Swartley

VIKING'S DECISION not to publish Mercedes Lambert's *Ghosttown* (Five Star Publishing, 257 pages, $25.95) now looks dreadful. In this, her third Whitney Logan mystery, Lambert was just hitting her stride with a high-heeled flourish—and at the same time was kicking, elegantly, potently, at the genre's limitations. *Ghosttown* is the best book in the series. It shouldn't have been her last.

Lambert's heroines, Los Angeles attorney Logan—whose Waspy demeanor hides a yearning *corazón*—and her assistant, the prostitute turned paralegal Lupe Ramos, are opposites attracted by a common outrage: people who underestimate their intelligence. In Lambert's L.A. there's no shortage of those. By *Ghosttown* the women have established a working relationship based on constant sarcasm and well-concealed vulnerability, though they can still surprise each other with their wildly differing ideas of appropriate dress and behavior.

Lambert uses the practice of law to plunge us into Los Angeles's surface-street subcultures. In *Ghosttown*, a drunk and disorderly client shifts Logan's attention to the city's scattered community of Native Americans, drawn from tribes across the West. Lambert's research is impressive, but more stunning is her mastery of high drama—seen here as Logan interviews a tribal elder in the faded Alexandria Hotel. The encounter starts innocuously over a cup of tea but becomes an explosive exposure of unchallenged assumptions, not only about motive and identity—the nuts and bolts of fictional detection—but about reality itself. With its implications of shape shifting, actual and metaphorical, the scene is pivotal both for *Ghosttown*'s plot and for Lambert's ambitions.



Of course, it's that plot and its gradual blurring of the line between science and the supernatural that gave Viking fits. You can understand the company's fear. One of the delights of genre fiction is the interplay between long-established rules and slight individual variation. A mystery worthy of the name ends with answers, not questions, and especially not with an investigator who may or may not have hallucinated the conclusion to her case.

Yet few other novels have caught L.A.'s bipolar essence so well. Logan and her client, Tony Red Wolf—who she hopes, in the nicest lawyerly way, will be accused of murder, thereby enhancing her courtroom experience—are worlds apart but inhabit the same emotional neighborhood. Their Los Angeles is at once a melting pot promising exciting new connections and an uncharted expanse where the vast possibilities for self-absorption make connecting illusory.

The city's moral landscape, which the dicks of the hard-boiled decades imagined as a flickering filmstrip, alternating sunshine and noir, becomes in *Ghosttown* a figure-ground trick of perception. Where you stand is important—within a tradition, a community, or outside it. Actions, according to Lambert, may not be relative, but identity is. How we see ourselves—culturally, sexually, professionally—will shape and shift the stories we draw from the facts fragmenting around us.

For all the questions *Ghosttown* leaves hanging, there's one it emphatically answers: what it means to live in contemporary L.A. In Lambert's multifaceted and lovingly evoked city, we are given the unparalleled opportunity to come face-to-face with strangers, to be changed by those encounters, and if we are especially lucky, to confront the stranger we fear in ourselves.