The Whale is an allegorical poem in Old English, concerning the potential for the reader to unwittingly fall into sin. Read literally, it concerns the mistaking of a whale, by sailors, for an island. The fragments of the poem in my version focus on the whale’s treatment; on the indignity of having a tent pitched on one’s back and then being set on fire, before finally protesting. Musically, this piece also focuses on what cannot be seen: the part of the whale that is there, but under the water; the places that are known to the whale but are unknown to the reader or listener. The materials for the piece comprise a graphic score outlining the structure and text of the piece, and images that are derived from medieval manuscripts that depict whales, as well as a set of recorded fragments that are made entirely from my reading and speaking the fragments of the poem that appear in the score and the performance. In preparing this version of the piece I also created notated fragments that the musicians may choose to consult in their interpretation: these also reflect an act of listening to the whale underwater in their register and character. The piece should not be considered a setting of the text of The Whale, but rather a reflection on its materials as the sailors might reflect on the image of the whale under the water.

First performance:
Scheduled for 17th April 2020 by Ensemble Proton (CH) at INMM Darmstadt (delayed due to coronavirus)
the whale
lauren redhead
2019
The following materials are provided for performance:
• A ‘practice’ stereo recording with the poem, electronic sounds, and pauses measured out
• 18 performance electronic fragments with the poem superimposed
• Graphic score of 18 fragments
• ‘Realisation’ score for trio

The 18 fragments of the poem should be heard in the performance. They can be sounded as part of the electronics, or they may be read by a speaker or one of the instrumentalists. In the latter case, fragments with the poem removed can be provided.

The electronic fragments should be cued in performance to coincide with the poem/score fragments. The level of these should be monitored so that they sound roughly at the same dynamic as the ensemble and not above or below it; this will require adjustment for each fragment.
In addition, the electronic fragments may be filtered or spatialised at will. The poem fragments should not be filtered.

The score realisation provides a guide to some possible sound and texture interpretations of the graphic fragments. If realised in performance, the duration of the fragments should be prioritised over completing the fragments or exact interlocking of parts. In all cases distortion of the sound via instrumental technique or improvisation is welcomed.

As a further guide, listening to sound below water from above the water could be imagined.
graphic score fragments
I wish to reveal a song
about a certain kind of fish

concerning the great whale
without them looking, he is often encountered, perilous and fatally grim, by sailors

every one human
to him a name is conceived, that floater in the ancient ocean

his aspect is like a leprous stone
like those that crumble over by the water, surrounded by sandy hills, a mighty reef

so that sailors believe that they might be upon some island
then, tether to that non-land

their swimming at an end,
and go up onto that island
then make camp, awakening a fire, kindling large flames.

when he perceives those who have come upon him, he turns downward into the salty waves.
this ghost, seeking the bottom, affixing that ship, drowned

that phantom, the great whale
he has another aspect,

the watery whale

when hunger troubles him in the ocean
XVII:35 then the warden of the deeps opens up his mouth, an enticement to other kinds of sea-fish.

XVIII:37 they venture inside.