Even if we have never read this poem below before:

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap —
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all —
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart —
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off —
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then — the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little — less — nothing! — and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.
even if we have never read any poem of Frost’s before, I venture to say that
this first reading of the poem will send a chill down the spine, for many of us.
After all, the topic — the transitoriness of life, the thinness of the veil that
separates the quick from the dead — is an eternal one. And while the death
of anyone touches us, the snuffing out of a child’s breath is all the more
tragic. So many years that could have been!
And death seems to come so casually to the boy. “No one believed” — we
can hardly believe, either. No one seems to get excited — the first thing the
boy utters is “a rueful laugh.” We are not told of others crying, running for
the doctor; or of the doctor rushing to try to save the boy’s life. The boy
knows that the doctor will come — and then the next that we hear is that the
doctor has already administered the anesthetic, (put in line 28 is in the past
tense). It is all so natural.
And yet imagine the difference in the way we would react to a newspaper
story describing roughly “the same events” — under the headline,

*Boy Dies in Saw Accident*

That would leave us no room, nothing to do but accept the finality of the
tragedy. But in the poem we are not presented with a *fait accompli*. Frost’s
art draws us into the event: we see the dreadful instant described lightly as a
“meeting” of saw and hand; the boy’s laugh and his desire to keep his hand
from the doctor, these are what we seize on to reassure ourselves that all will
be well, must end well, it will only be another brush with death, nothing
final.
We are the watcher at his pulse, we take fright. “No one believed” — here
the poet leaves out the *it* that we might expect in normal prose, as if saying
that *it* would reify death, would give death a chance to get its foot in the
door. We too listen at his heart, we hope against hope, our heart sinks as we
read the fateful sequence “Little — less — nothing!”
And then we hear the reaction to this tragedy: *and that ended it.* A
laconic comment about the years never to be lived through: *no more to build
on there.* And the word “dead” does not close the case forever until the last
line, where we hear how “they,” who served the saw with the boy, accept
such a routine fatality as a matter of course. And turn to their affairs — the
boy’s death has happened and is gone, it is no longer their affair.